University of Alberta

On The Road With Anna Deavere Smith

by

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Abstract

This thesis examines Anna Deavere Smith's contribution to American theatre with regard to her life and artistic practice. The first chapter examines Smith's development of her theatrical project, *On The Road: The Search for American Character* with its approach to acting that emphasizes empathetic listening to the speech patterns, rhythm, cadence and physicality of the "other" in order to identify with them. Chapter two offers a close reading of *Fires in the Mirror* as a theatrical presentation that examines racialized identities as process-orientated and intensified by tragic incidents. Chapter three looks at Smith's next success, *Twilight, Los Angeles, 1992* and focuses on tensions and differences between racially opposed characters in an effort to open up a democratizing space in the midst of the race riots. Chapter four considers Smith's latest play *Let Me Down Easy* as a departure from her previous work on race relations, but shows how she continues to deal with the struggle of human beings to perform their identities around issues of access to universal healthcare.

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Chapter 1: "Getting Hung Up on Race Relations."

In many ways, actress and playwright Anna Deavere Smith is an unlikely theatre artist. Unlikely, because it was never her intention to pursue acting. After earning her B.A. from Beaver College, Pennsylvania in 1971, Smith set out to San Francisco looking to become either a linguist, a social activist, or both. She had never considered acting, let alone taken any acting classes. Yet, as unexpected as Smith's path was to becoming an actor, she has managed to develop a unique kind of theatre and approach to acting. It is her distinct approach to theatre and critical investigation into the notion of American identity, that I will investigate within this thesis. Primarily, my area of concentration will be Anna Deavere Smith's specific contribution to American theatre, as well as the aesthetic, ethical, and philosophical achievements that her unique approach to theatre has yielded over her thirty-year career.

Generally, I hope to unearth how Anna Deavere Smith uses her unique brand of 'democratic' theatre to question given presuppositions on what it means to be human, and how those presuppositions can restrict and damage our humanity. With this chapter, I will examine the methodological, ethical and aesthetic underpinnings of Smith's work. Through presenting her influences as well as her professional goals, I hope to contextualize Smith within her artistic and academic milieu, in order to begin an informed discussion about her life-long theatrical project, *On the Road: The Search for American Character.* Finally, in this chapter I would also like to introduce what Smith has hoped to contribute to American theatre in order to gain insight into her artistic and aesthetic motivations. Once asked her opinion on the state of American theatre, Smith reflects:

> I've been trying to contribute something about variety, that I had hoped, and I haven't succeeded. That I hoped would change the very nature of they way theatre is produced

> and who comes to the theatre. Cause, you know, the theatre is a very segregated place. Most of the people who run theatres in this country are white people. My generation had many promising directors, and producers and writers, and they're not around. And they're not making theatre. And it breaks my heart. And I feel in some ways that I haven't contributed nearly enough in terms of what my thought about that was when I first started studying acting in a theatre where everybody on the stage was white and everybody in the audience was white [...] I thought maybe if I could figure out a way to bring more colours of people on to the stage, more colours of people would come to the audience. That hasn't happened. (*Big Think,* 2007)

Taking Smith's lament into account, I will review her body of work to date with Smith's personal mandate in mind, not to determine whether or not she has succeeded in this effort, but rather, to examine Smith's plays by their relevancy and insight into race relations in America.

Smith was born September 18th, 1950 in what was then a segregated Baltimore, Maryland. Her mother, Anna Young, was an elementary school teacher turned principal; her father, Deavere Smith, was a coffee and tea business owner. Smith was the eldest of five children and her parents provided her with a middle-class upbringing within the black community of Baltimore. Smith was born in an all black hospital, and her mother Anna was in labour with her for five days until Smith finally expressed interest in coming out: "I sort of came down the birth canal and then turned back up and so I have always had the feeling I saw something that I would just, [heh] take a little bit longer coming along" (*Big Think*, 2007).

When reminiscing about her childhood in Baltimore, Smith often cites two major influences that have inextricably defined her character: growing up black in the moment of integration and her love of story-telling. Integration happened as Smith was readying for middle school. She had attended

an all-black elementary school and then found herself at a predominately Jewish middle school. This was disorienting as her life up until that point had been lived almost exclusively within the black community. Being a part of this 'experiment' of integration exposed Smith to the acute differences between the lines of class and race. Her passion for understanding the perspective of others who were unlike her and unfamiliar to her began at this pivotal moment in American History. Initially, Smith's need to understand the perspective of others was motivated by an anxious curiosity rather than altruism:

> I have always been since I was a little girl interested in how that person, across the town, across the street, how do *they* think. And understanding, I could never think like they think. But wanting to try and do something about that gap. Not even in a humanistic way! It was really something that bothered me. It was really something I worried about. (*Think Big*, 2007)

This gap between different identities and perspectives both fascinated and troubled the young Smith and would eventually serve as the defining question which she would dedicate most of her life to investigating: “what is the relationship between language and identity?” (Smith, *Talk to Me: Travels in Media and Politics*) This question would form the basis of her approach to acting, play-writing, and theatre but she would not stumble upon this until many years later.

Another major influence on Smith was her neighbour, Mrs. Johnson (*Bill Moyers Journal,* 2009). Mrs. Johnson was a very large women, who, according to Smith, weighed nearly four hundred pounds. She would sit endlessly with the little girl and tell her stories when all the other kids in the neighbourhood would be out in the alley playing stick ball. Smith had little interest in stick ball but had a desperate hunger for stories. Often, Smith recounts, she would ask Mrs. Johnson to tell her stories that she had heard many times before, just for the sheer joy of listening over and over. It was also

around this time that Smith's paternal Grandfather told her something about the nature of language which would resonate with Smith in later years as a graduate student in acting. Her grandfather told her that "if you say a word often enough, it *becomes* you" (*Fires in the Mirror,* xxiv). Smith thought her grandfather's saying was important at that time, even if she didn't know why. She recorded it in her journal, only to revisit his words in her mid twenties when she began learning how to perform Shakespeare in acting school.

Growing up in segregated Baltimore, Smith had a profound sense of the inequities black people faced in juxtaposition to the white populace. She was well aware of race and the discrepancies between black and white well before she attended the predominately white Western High. On being African-American, at that time, Smith later said: "You know, the message to us was that it was, you know, something that wasn't necessarily that great and so you had to count on the people in your family and your church and the people who where closer to you to try to, um, make sense of that" (*Think Big,* 2007).

Partially due to growing up African-American at this fraught time in America, Smith grew up to develop a life-long pursuit and passion for justice and equality. Notably, it was clear from a young age that Smith possessed a profound ability to empathize and expressed an interest in becoming a psychologist. Her mother discouraged this idea telling the young Anna that she was far too sensitive for such a vocation "a movie like, *West Side Story,* would make me cry for days" (qtd. in *Oxford Companion to American Theatre Online*). Eventually she would credit acting as a way for her to productively channel her acute empathy and compassion.

Despite her exceptional ability to empathize, Smith was not politicized as an adolescent (self-described as "a nice negro girl"); it wasn't until she embarked on a liberal arts degree at Beaver College; that she became committed to social change movements. It was in college that her political

consciousness was raised and she began to see America through a more discerning lens, in not only its promise, but for its ideological pitfalls as well. Dr. Martin Luther King was assassinated while Smith was in her sophomore year at college, an event which served to concretize Smith's commitment to social change.

Upon graduating from Beaver College, Smith decided she would go West to San Francisco to "follow the Revolution" (*Talk to Me,* 6). Excited by the prospect of being part of the social change movement which dominated the sixties, Smith went to California with the intention of becoming a social activist and linguist. She saw an opportunity to effect social change through language; she understood the struggle of human beings against each other to be symptomatic of an inability or refusal to communicate with one another: "when I was a younger woman, you know, for example, I wanted to be a linguist. And I thought there would be some sort of job I could have, ultimately that would have to do with learning many languages, and doing something about [...] how people don't get on very well" (*Big Think,* 2007). She felt that language played a part in "tribalism," or "discord between groups;" Smith wanted to work among different communities within America as a kind of mediator, causing peace through communication across different groups, "I thought that being able to talk to one another, as trivial as that sounds, I think I really believed in that possibility as a young woman" (*Big Think,* 2007). However, upon arriving in California in 1971, she realized the big social change movement of the sixties was dying out. The 1970s had ushered in a preoccupation with wealth and glamour, hammering the last nail into the coffin of 1960s ideologies of peace and love. Smith now sees this as a period of transition, a time where the baby boomers put away their bell bottoms and love beads in exchange for the power suits and shoulder pads of 1980s yuppies.

It was clear to Smith that she had missed the revolution. Regardless, she stayed on in California and "fell" into an acting class, "somewhat accidentally," she says (*Talk to Me,* 7). What Smith began to

observe in these classes was the ability of the actor to invoke change: “I thought, my god, everyone's changing. I thought, this would be a great laboratory to study change” (*Big Think*, 2007). In only three years, Smith's life went in an entirely new direction as she entered the American Theatre Conservatory in 1971, with the goal of becoming an actor.

It was not so much acting itself that enamoured Smith, rather it was the process of acting. In this sense, she differed from her acting peers; they made fun, in good humour, of the fact that she would obsessively take notes on all the different acting methodologies. She inhaled all of the various acting techniques, wanting to learn everything she could about all the different ways into a character. She appreciated acting as a creative process, and was less concerned with finding in it a means to an end. Being exposed to different acting methodologies allowed Smith to become critical of certain approaches to acting. It was during her time at the American Theatre Conservatory that she became quite critical of one acting institution: the teachings of Constantine Stanislavski.

The Stanislavski acting method, created by Constantine Stanislavski (1863-1938), was a reaction against the very melodramatic, heightened acting style of the romantic age that dominated the theatres across Europe. Stanislavsky wanted to create a kind of acting that would portray a realistic portrait of the human being, a portrait that was subtle and supposedly grounded in the ways human beings actually live and expressed themselves. In countering the bombastic acting style of the nineteenth century, Stanislavski strove to create a theatre of naturalism, influenced by the inner psychology of the human being that explores the tension between what a character says they want and what motivates them subconsciously or psychologically. Sometimes those objectives are unified in purpose, and sometimes they are at odds. The influence of Stanislavski's method still dominates western acting methodology and pedagogy.

Smith grew increasingly critical of Stanislavski's acting methodology, calling it “a spiritual dead

end"(*Talk to Me,*53). The problem with the Stanislavskian technique, as Smith sees it, is two fold. First, the obsession with human beings behaving as 'real' meant that the definition of real becomes codified. There emerges a set of specific ways a human is expected to act. The way an actor choses to play a character must fit into categories of what a human being is and how that human behaves in the world based on dominant notions of reality; otherwise, that character cannot be recognized as real. Second, the actor is encouraged to base that character on themselves and their own real life experiences and feelings in order to make that character as 'real' as possible. According to Smith, this dampens the spirit of acting, as it is a more self-centred, less imaginative, and less empathetic approach:

> I want to find other ways of getting to the inside of a person. I don't think I should base my idea of another person all on my own feelings, which is what Stanislavsky was after. Ultimately, I was to believe that the Stanislavsky technique, for all its undeniable success, was a spiritual dead end. (*Talk to Me* 53)

Tangentially, it is important to note that Smith's criticism of Stanislavski is constructed and informed through the lens of an very American understanding of Stanislavki's psychological realism methodology. The method, as crafted by American Lee Strasberg which infiltrated the American acting conservatories in the 1950s, is based on Stanislavki's system, but puts the emphasis on the actor deriving the character from the actor's own experiences and inner emotional life. Thus, Stanislavski's methodology produces a form of bourgeois individualism for the stage.

Perhaps even more disturbing to Smith as a young theatre student was the lack of diversity in American theatre. Her observations that there were only white people on stage, white people as artistic directors, and white people in the audience, while outside the theatre on the streets of San Francisco lived vibrant diversity, was troubling to the young black actress. A correlation emerges then between Smith's distaste for Stanislavski and her criticism of the racially prejudiced theatre world which she

inherited. The Stanislavski approach remained closed off to the diversity of human expression, as it relied on given, formulaic modes of behaviour that cast individuals as 'types' of people and dampened idiosyncratic expressions of humanity. To reduce human expression to a series of unified objectives which are recognizable within dominant reality limits what human expression and identity can live on the stage. Similarly, what was being represented on the stage (and still is, Smith would argue) is a limited palate of human identity--one that is rooted in the dominant white culture, closing the theatre down to the diversity of human experience. Consequently, there was no place for Smith, a young black actress, in a psychological realist theatre in America. Reflecting on what she wishes to contribute to American theatre, Smith says the following:

> Aesthetically and artistically, what I've been trying to contribute, is something about details. That, you know, maybe there's a wider variety of human beings that we've thought about. And we can tell compelling stories without having to have those same stereotypes we've been thinking about over and over again. (*Big Think,* 2007)

At this juncture in her education, Smith became infatuated with Shakespeare - for the very reason that Shakespeare's understanding of character seemed to live in far more unpredictable, unstable, and liminal places of identity. This instability lent itself to a more diverse understanding of the human condition, as it opened up the possibility of all different kinds of expression.

Juanita Rice, Smith's Shakespeare teacher at The American Acting Conservatory, taught Smith about the way language betrays the emotional life of a character. Specifically, she pointed out that Shakespeare was attuned to listening for rhythm in speech patterns with iambic pentameter being the default everyday rhythm of a given mode of speech. Rice informed her students that when a character in Shakespeare inverted that iambic rhythm (the iambic rhythm meaning the syllables are unstressed/stressed), using trochees instead (stressed/unstressed), it was a clear sign that this character

was, “really losing it, psychologically. And this 'loss' made it possible for you to really know something about that character, if you wore his or her words” (Smith, *Talk to Me* 36). Rice's instruction to Smith was to pick any fourteen lines of Shakespearian text and say it over and over “until something happens” (*Talk to Me,* 37). In doing so, Smith experienced an epiphany which she describes in mystical terms. After staying up late into the night reciting the speech of Queen Margaret in *Richard III,* “That dog, that had his teeth before his eyes, / To worry lambs, and lap their gentle blood.../ Thy womb let loose, to chase us to our graves [Act 4, Sc. 4]. Smith describes how that the powerful language she uttered caused her to imaginatively conjure up a vision of Queen Margaret in the middle of her bedroom:

> I, in fact, “saw” Queen Margaret- she was a small vision, standing in my apartment. She came from the same place that the tooth fairy came from when I was a child. She came from my imagination. She was concocted somehow from words. Words, it seemed to me, from then on were truly magical, not only by their meaning but by the way we say them, how we manipulate them. (*Talk to Me,* 37)

Remembering her grandfather's saying, “if you say a word often enough, it *becomes* you,” Smith determined that the way to access the inner psychological state of another was through language, as words actually have the power to transform the consciousness and vision of an individual: “without language, there is no vision”(37). However, the full scope of Smith's question, “what is the relationship between language and identity?” did not fully materialize until several years after her mystical experience with Queen Margaret when Smith was an out-of-work actor living in New York City and she began to see a relationship to language and identity.

In her late twenties, Smith made a very risky move. She had earned a very comfortable, well-paid, tenured track position as a drama teacher at Carnegie Mellon directly after earning her MFA in

acting. But the politics and privilege of academia did not inspire Smith, and she found this very secure, stable but insular life to be at odds with her drive to create art. This lack of inspiration caused Smith to make a very bold move: she quit her tenured track position at Carnegie Mellon to move to New York City where she got a job walking dogs for a living while also trying to 'make it' as an actress. Unsurprisingly, Smith's family, along with the entire Drama faculty at Carnegie Mellon did not support her decision; their argument was that it was extremely difficult for anyone to get such an opportunity, let alone a black woman. But Smith had made up her mind-ignoring their protests, she set off to New York. It is notable that, early on in her career, Smith sought circumstances geared toward self-displacement. Smith, in listing off the various ideal circumstances for making art, concludes that the artist must willingly dwell in unsafe, insecure spaces. It is at this point in Smith's career when we begin to see her emergence as a performance artist: at the very moment that she decided to commit to living with a sense of insecurity.

After some minor success landing a few acting gigs, including a role on the soap opera *All My Children,* Smith was forced to work a series of temp jobs while auditioning and taking various acting classes to maintain her craft. The year was 1981, and Smith was not getting enough acting work to support herself financially. Then, as Smith describes it, she got her “big break.” She got mononucleosis. Having no health insurance and no money, Smith was justifiably terrified, and was forced to get a job with KLM airlines as a receptionist in the complaint department. Through Smith describes this period in her life as a very frightening, insecure time, there is also an air of excitement and pride in these memories; it is at this time that she developed her seminal theatre project: *On the Road: The Search for American Character.* Her job at KLM demanded that she sort through complaint letters all day long, and, because these letters were from people who had been wronged, who were emotional about some injustice the airline had done to them, the language of these letters presented a kind of unique lack of

inhibition that Smith found inspiring:

> I began to see that there was a theatre project in this. What exactly it was I didn't know. I wanted to know the relationship of character to language-and, to be even more specific about it, I wanted to know, What is the relationship of language to *identity?* What does language, the way we render language, tell us about who we are? What does it tell us on an individual level? What does it tell us on a societal level? (*Talk to Me* 49)

Smith saw the potential for language to prompt social change. Speech, in a dramatic context, causes action--again, something Smith understood from her training in Shakespeare. With Shakespearian language, the actor must think *on* the word, for the word is inseparable from the physical and emotional state of the character. The word and the breath are united in an effort to communicate something--this is the catalyst for action in Shakespeare. Smith began to see that it was possible to extrapolate this idea into a contemporary social context, in order to see how dialogue could cause individual and social change: "How could I study speech as a design around identity? How could I study speech as a *betrayal?* When does it betray, when does it cooperate? When is it powerful enough to cause action? The wonderful thing about dramatic speech is that it is built to *cause action"* (*Talk to Me,* 50).

In an effort to unearth dramatic speech in real life, Smith decided to interview anyone who was willing, always with the promise that, "if you give a few minutes of your time, I'll invite you to see yourself performed" (*Talk to Me,* 50). As interviews progressed, Smith observed that the kind of speech that causes action and exposes character, was the kind that seemed to fail the speaker. Remembering Jaunita Rice's lesson about the tension between iambic pentameter, a more formal everyday speech rhythm, and the trochee, a rhythmic portrait of loss, Smith asserted that it was in these moments where an individual cannot express themselves adequately within rigid speaking conventions, that their

unique *character* emerges. In order to realize her project, she needed to find people in "verbal undress." Taking what she learned about speech from Rice's Shakespeare class, Smith used the rhythmic betrayal of the trochee as a model for her search for modern day trochees in actual speech.

A fortuitous meeting with a linguist at a party gave Smith the tools she needed to "break the [rhythm] pattern while they're talking to me" (*Talk to Me,* 51). The linguist gave Smith three questions which would ensure that the speaking subject would experience a "betrayal" in their language; whatever it was they were talking about, these questions would cause their regular rhythm pattern to undo itself, and change into something more irregular, less coherent and articulate. Smith asserts that she is much less interested in what an individual is talking about and more concerned with the *way* they talk. It is her preoccupation with the *way* of talking ("singing" as she calls it) that positions Smith in the liminal space between artist and journalist. Smith spent the better part of the dinner party convincing the linguist of her alternative approach to character and other oriented acting philosophy: "The traditional acting technique wants to know who I am in the character. Perhaps it's based on the very humanitarian assumption that we are all the same underneath. I don't believe that. I'm interested in difference. I want to know who the character is, not who I am" (*Talk to Me,57*).

Smith went on to explain to the linguist that if she could capture the moment where someone loses their speech, then she could access their character in that moment of linguistic breakdown and portray that character through repeating their words. The moment where the character of an individual emerges is a moment of action, just as dramatic text is designed: "I believe identity is a process and that we are every moment making an adjustment, and sometimes those moments happen while we're talking- I mean, people use language to get married, to come to the realization that they're dying. I mean it happens-right-there in the words" (*Talk to Me* 52).

Smith's post-modern view of character and identity-- that it is an in-motion, a *becoming,* rather

than a *being*--intrigued the linguist and she gave Smith her pivotal three questions: “Have you ever come close to death? Do you know the circumstances of your birth? Have you ever been accused of something you didn't do?” (*Talk to Me 54).* These three questions would prove invaluable to Smith as she developed her technique of heightened listening for rhythmic and syntactical disturbances. Although she rarely employs these questions anymore and has developed other questions to get people to talk to her*,* she does recount one moment much later in her career where one of these three foundational questions made itself indispensable yet again. At a pivotal moment in her career, Smith was given the opportunity to interview President Clinton. The interview took place just before the Monica Lewinsky scandal broke (and so Smith was unaware of the Lewinsky-Clinton debacle during her interview). Smith was given only ten minutes to interview Clinton, and she knew she needed to get him “in verbal undress” almost immediately in order to have any useful material. Clinton, no stranger to undressing in his office, spoke passionately for thirty minutes: “The question I picked was a version of one of those three questions. And it was, “Mr. President, do you think you're being treated like a common criminal?” Which is a version of, “have you ever been accused of something you didn't do?” He spoke for thirty-five minutes” *(Big Think,* 2007).

The success of Smith's questions, and her ability to cause her speaking subject to “break down” their language, and expose their inner character, has also become the source of some scrutiny. Some critics have accused Smith of appropriating people’s words for her personal gain and treading on ground where she does not belong. Smith herself is very aware of this criticism and mostly addresses these concerns. Ultimately though, she is less interested in what the critics say with regard to her methodology than of the people she directly works with: (potential) interview subjects, oppressed individuals, and fellow artists. Some of her Los Angeles colleagues expressed concern over Smith's coverage of the Los Angeles race riots of 1992 because, as Smith was not a resident of L.A., they

believed that it was their story, and not hers to tell:

> Additional friction came from some local artists, who considered Smith an outsider. "They said, 'What, you're bringing this success from New York to tell our story? She doesn't know s-t. This punk doesn't belong here," she confided in *Newsweek.* "It made me sad and scared the living daylights out of me. But I understood it and respected it." (*Oxford Encyclopedia of American Theatre Online*)

Responding to the criticism that she inhabits places and circumstances where she does not belong, Smith makes it clear that this "not belonging" is at the essence of the kind of theatre she strives to make. Part of Smith's methodology demands that she, as the listener, must suspend her identity in order to take in another's. The suspension of her own identity (though never with the notion that it is completely forgotten) is a practice that Smith calls "leaving the safe house of identity" (*Talk to Me* 24). She observes that one of reasons we do not listen to each other in society is because we are all interested in protecting and defending our own perceived identities. Identity, as a mode of becoming, is ultimately a fragile construction; thus putting a premium on the importance of maintaining one's own identity can lead to a kind of tribalism where individuals are interested in associating only with the familiar. On the continual practice of leaving her "safe house of identity," Smith says: "I've developed a lot of stamina for being where I don't belong" (*Talk to Me* 24).

Smith has made it her life long objective to "live in difference." The line between Smith's artistic work and the way in which she lives her life are closely aligned; she has committed herself to continually stepping out of her "safe house of identity." To live in this liminal state, between her own identity and all of the identities she takes on, means that Smith is always moving and allowing her self to *be moved* by others. Smith lives the life of a subject, always becoming itself both on stage and off the stage, thus her life is lived in total service of her work:

> I am constantly in a state of being, to borrow a phrase from the cultural theorist Homi Bhabha, "almost but not quite." It is actually not a bad state to be in. It might just be the best state in which to find oneself during the twenty-first century, as our culture wars continue and identity politics moves into its next phase. At such a time as this, it would be useful, I think, to have at least a cadre of people who were willing to move between cultural lines and across social strata. Globalism will require it, so we may as well practice our moves. (*Talk to Me* 23)

With her art, Smith does not only challenge audiences to see and hear other and different perspectives, but she hopes to show that it is possible to embrace difference both politically and personally through the way we live our lives, in proving herself an active example of someone who lives outside her "safe house of identity."

In order to find this liminal space of living outside the "safe house of identity," Smith accesses the speech pattern of the other at the expense of her own. With regard to Smith's technique, it is based in the art of mimicry, but she makes it clear that her mimicry is not to be confused with impersonation, which she considers to be stereotyping:

> I think a professional mimic or an impressionist would pick the thing they do the most, because that's what the audience could identify as that person. So, an impressionist doing George Bush is gonna try to find the gestures and the, um, the intonations that he keeps using over and over again. But if I were to study him, and I haven't really, um, I'd look for him to do something that wasn't what we've seen. (*Big Think* 2007)

What Smith is listening for is the irregularity in a person's speech, the moments where something unexpected emerges. She is not interested in what she refers to as "the language of the status quo" (*Talk to Me* 41) for this language does not display the diversity and uniqueness of human thought

and expression. The diversity of human thought and expression is what Smith is seeking both in terms of the personal manifestation of her interview subjects, but also on a artistic and political level with regard to who is being represented on stage in the theatre, and who is being considered in the political sphere when talking about "we the people." With her technique of listening for diversity in speaking, with her representations of people who may not normally be represented on stage, and finally, with her presence as a black actress and academic, Smith wants to assert that the "We" in "We the people" must include the diverse range of human identity and experience. With her work, both in technique and in theory, Smith sets out to challenge the monolithic, Eurocentric, white/patriarchal norms of dominant power which occurs in theatrical institutions, in politics, and of course, in life. Thus, Smith has found a way to engage as an artist through the lens of the cultural critic. The cultural critic, as defined by theorist Judith Butler in her book *Precarious Life*, shows the failing of ideological constructions of truth claims. In part, Butler is interested in questioning dominant social norms prevalent to the human: what kind of life is considered human, and thus included and protected in the various political and judicial structures and legislation? What kind of life is not human, and is therefore left out of institutionalized recognition and protection? This critical approach to comprehending society is based on a mandate to offer diverse and alternative possibilities of "becoming" in the world. Through questioning dominant ideologies, the cultural critic is able to see all that is being strategically or ignorantly left out of the equation of representation. In seeing what is left out, the cultural critic, with the help of fantasy and imagination, can then point to other or different modes of being which are as viable as socially recognized modes of being. Smith strives to do just this and so can be seen in part as a cultural critic, successfully bridging the gap between academia and practice.

According to Smith, the role of the actor, is to examine and present the world from an alternative perspective, similar to the 'topsy turvey' carnival world of the middle ages, or the traditional

'fool' so prevalent in Shakespeare. The actor must remain critical and stand slightly outside of society in order to offer alternative vantage points and possibilities on the ways in which society constructs the world. Smith is discouraged because the notion of the actor as fool is no longer the popular conception of the actor's role in society. Today, the actor's role has become all too commercial and therefore in support of the status quo and dominant capitalist ideologies:

> Jean-Paul Sartre, in an essay on actors, gives the following picture: An actor is on the bus reading the financial pages. If you look closely, you see that the pages are upside down. We should see that the pages could work just as well for the study of humanity if they were upside down. But actors today are more likely to have the financial pages right side up. (Smith, *Letters to a Young Artist* 48)

Smith's critique of the way in which the actor's role in society has become distorted is based on her zealous approach to acting as a process of bridging the gap between the self and other. The key ingredient to acting, according to Smith, is the development of empathy which allows for non-judgemental listening to and understanding of another's point of view as if it were your own, (albeit momentarily). Smith's technique of "walking in the words of another"(*Fires in the Mirror* xxvii) is to enable the actor to be *moved* from their frame of reference, or in Smith's words, "safe house of identity," and touch upon different ways of being and perceiving: " the spirit of acting is the *travel* from the self to the other. This "self-based" method seemed to come to a spiritual halt" (*Fires in the Mirror* xxvi). When Smith is performing, the gap is bridged through the continual repetition of the language and vocal rhythm of another. For Smith, this is where our personal unique character lives. Drawing upon post modern and gender theories of identity as performative, Smith asserts that the act of *repetition* of another's speech allows for the possibility to experience the other's identity. Repetition as a way into identity formation is one of the foundational tenets of gender theory and the performance of

identity. Within this context, identity is constructed out of a series of habits from various sources, which are repeated over and over until they seem 'natural.' Smith takes this critical/theoretical approach to identity formation and applies it directly to acting, asserting that it is possible to apprehend another's perspective due to the fact that identity is constructed from a series of learned actions which are then repeated over and over, giving us the illusion of an immutable self:

> You listen to some of the characters and you begin to identify with them. Because I'm saying this stuff over and over again every night, part of me is becoming them through repetition- by doing their performance of themselves that they do. I become the "them" that they present to the world. For all of us, the performance of ourselves has very much to do with the self of ourselves. That's what we're articulating in language and in flesh- something we feel inside as we develop an identity. (qtd. in Martin, 57)

The desire to repeat and perform the identity of another is based on a willingness to understand other perspectives, cultivated through empathy. According to Smith, empathy is what is lacking in the theatrical world today for no one is willing to play the fool, to stand in opposition to what is popular with the best intentions for the people at heart. Actors, like most "regular folk," are not willing to step out of their "safe house of identity" in order to empathize with the other and critique and comment on society, as this demands a willingness to separate themselves from their ego. Some actors remain narcissistic and short-sighted because of this lack of willingness to suspend their identity with the intention of understanding and representing something *unfamiliar.* As Sarah Henry relates, in her exposition on Smith shortly after *Fires in the Mirror* came out:

> Smith's *On the Road* series was conceived out of the frustration the actor had with what she refers to as the "unfortunate narcissism and short-sightedness" that plague the US acting scene, which is often infatuated with itself. "Our little lives are really not that

> interesting. I mean as actors."She ventures. "I feel we're here to serve, we're here to absorb and give back." (qtd. in Henry, *A Compelling Performance* 6)

Smith has taken this "unfortunate narcissism" (6) of the US acting scene to task in her academic writing over the years. Ultimately, her other-orientated approach has to do with the desire to validate and take up diverse and different modes of being, modes which possibly differ from our own frame of reference: " Does the inability to empathize start with an inhibition, or reluctance to see? Do racism and prejudice instruct those inhibitions?" (*Fires in the Mirror* xxviii). Here Smith is examining and critiquing social tribalism in its most basic form, drawing upon the metaphor of where we reside in terms of identity; our safe house of identity involves a desire to inhabit that which is familiar and to reject difference.

Smith claims that she is "prepared for difference, live in difference. My pursuit of American character is, basically, a pursuit of difference" (*Talk to Me* 23). Her dedicated commitment to live in unfamiliar territory was put to the test when Smith was hired as a special correspondent for *Newsweek* to cover the 1996 Democratic and Republican primary elections. This experience resulted in a five year long research trip to Washington, with the intention of understanding the people behind the politics and the impact of various presidents, past and present. This work eventually yielded her next major play in the *On the Road* series, following the successes of *Fires in the Mirror and Twilight, Los Angeles, 1992.* The play, *House Arrest,* is a collage of some of the 425 people interviewed by Smith during her time in Washington.

Upon arriving in Washington in 1995, Smith experienced first-hand some of the prejudice her interview subjects confess to in her shows. This was not new to Smith, who as an African-American woman had "some pretty rocky experiences that were about being black" in academia, prior to landing a tenure track position at Stanford in the early nineties (Henry, *A Compelling Performance* 6). Still,

Smith was shocked at the prejudice she found in Washington, and alludes to certain instances where she was not granted an interview with a politician due to racist sentiment: "Yet the promise and the disillusion in academia, the complex loyalties, and the quiet brutalities that sometimes appeared, did not prepare me for what I saw in Washington." (*Talk to Me* 28). Another very challenging reality Smith faced was that it was very rare to catch any of the Washington political elites in "verbal undress." This proved quite difficult in terms of getting material for the formation of *House Arrest.* What was most disturbing to Smith, however, was this said about the relationship between power and invulnerability, and therefore a willing disconnection to telling the truth:

> The language of Washington is in disrepair. Americans don't believe the language that comes out of there. It is because that credibility gap born nearly forty years ago has never been repaired? To repair it would take more than the patriarchal voice. Perhaps the repair could be helped along by the diversity that we have, by the new canons that we have been built, by the stronger, more literate, more articulate populace that we have. (*Talk to Me* 30)

House Arrest which, premiered at the Arena Stage in Washington, 1997, was directed by Mark Rucker. Instead of Smith playing all of the roles herself, she employed a cast of fifteen actors, all trained in her methodology of listening and repeating the words of the interview subjects. Though this production of *House Arrest* was only a work in progress, the critics were less than patient with the results. As Sarah Henry documents: "because so many of the personalities included in the show were recognizable public figures (Clinton, George H.W. Bush, Ann Richards, Ed Bradley, George Stephanopoulos), critics felt the actors' interpretations fell flat. They missed the unifying presence of Smith herself and felt that the piece was too long and unfocused" (*A Compelling Performance,* 6).

This criticism invariably raised the question, is the success of Smith's work reliant on her as the

only performer of it? And, if this is the case, what does this mean for Smith's methodology? Is it transferable or has she created a method that like many performance artists, is deeply personal and inseparable from her presence? Moreover, is Smith's relevancy contingent upon her work in a crisis situation where Smith can create a “meeting pool” for dissonant voices and personalities who might never associate otherwise?

I would also like to consider Smith's position as a feminist and how feminism informs her work. Smith makes it clear that she is no stranger to the experience of being shut out from mainstream theatre as she found, particularly in her early years as a struggling actress, there were simply no roles for black women. Especially black women who, like Smith, don't resemble 'typical' blackness; Smith, for instance, is considered to be “light-skinned black.” The ambiguity of her features opened up Smith to all kinds of racist bigotry; one casting agent told Smith that she couldn't cast her in anything because, “she didn't look like anything” and that this would “antagonize her clients.” Informed by her experiences as a black woman within the theatre world which is patriarchal and white dominant, Smith's theatre is an act of resistance to dominant ways of seeing and being seen. Smith challenges her audience to see in a different way (that is, to challenge traditional modes of spectatorship) through her identification not with what is similar to her, but to subjects that are obviously different. This challenges status quo modes of identification because, as bell-hooks suggests, identification manifests under conditions of similarity as opposed to difference: In Anne Friedberg's essay, “A Denial of Difference: Theories of Cinematic Identification,” she quotes bell-hooks who stresses that “identification can only be made through recognition, and all recognition is itself an implicit confirmation of the ideology of the status quo” (*Black Looks, 117*). Thus, not only does identification take place through allegiances of what is similar to you, but this recognition, in terms of representation, will inevitably serve dominant ideological/normative modes of being because of the need to identify

with that which is similar and oppose that which is different. In other words, the dominant culture will perpetuate itself as the only legitimate mode of representation because it will continue to identify only with that which is similar to it and use all other modes of being as a foil against it. Again, George C. Wolfe's words in *Fires,* speaks to the heart of this very issue: "My blackness does not resis- ex-re-/ *exist* in relationship to your whiteness" (10).

Through active identification of those who are different both from Smith and from each other, Smith resists the dominant 'tribalist' structure of identification. I am arguing that this kind of resistance and cultural critique comes not from simply Smith's positionality as a woman, but rather from her positionality as a *Black* woman. Smith's position as a feminist and the way in which this informs her work, is through her experience as a black woman. Smith's feminism is implicit within the structure of her plays; however it is determined through a racialized lens, as opposed to feminism which has historically been white-dominant.

The success of *Fires in the Mirror* and *Twilight, Los Angeles, 1992,* both plays that cover racially charged crises situations, seems to suggest this likelihood. Perhaps the success of *Fires* and *Twilight* is their inherent populist sensitivity, as they reflect "average" American citizens embroiled in extraordinary circumstances. *Let Me Down Easy,* Smith's newest piece on the fragility of the human body and the American health care debate (2010), is less direct and focused on a specific event, and come across as less clear in purpose than her earlier work.

In many ways, Smith is the harshest critic of her work. She makes it very clear what her goal has been in terms of her career in American theatre. Smith, along with pursuing her central question, "what is the relationship of language to identity?" hopes to create a theatre that acknowledges, uncovers, and exposes the diversity of human identity and experience in America. In doing so, Smith has always looked to change the white face of American theatre. Perhaps Smith's attempt at inciting

change in the American theatre, and her body of work in general, can best be looked at with consideration of what Cornel West says in his interview with Smith in *Twilight, Los Angeles, 1992.* The following is an excerpt from a larger speech by West, where he speaks on the depressing state of race relations in America, and how, despite the grim reality, he is able to continue his work as a champion of social justice:

> To use the language of decline/decay and despair/Rather than doom gloom and/no possibility/Because I think any talk about/despair is not where you end but where you start/and *then* the courage and the sacrifice/come in/and *at the level of hope* not optimism./Hope and optimism are different./Optimism tends to be based on the notion that there's enough/evidence out there that /allows us to think things are going to be better/much more rational/deeply secular/(*No breaths in the following fifteen lines: nonstop)/*whereas *hope/*looks at the evidence and says/it doesn't look good at *all!* And says/it it doesn't look good at all/We gonna make a leap of faith *beyond* the evidence/to attempt to create/new possibilities based/on visions that become contagious so people can engage in heroic/actions always against the odds, no guarantee whatso*ever./*That's hope!/I'm a prisoner of hope though./I'm on die a prisoner of hope. (107)

In chapter two I will explore in detail Smith's first breakaway hit show, *Fires in the Mirror.* This play explores the accidental murder of an African-American boy by a Lubavitcher Jew in the racially charged Crown Heights, Brooklyn and the ensuing race riots in 1991. Chapter three will explore her next success, *Twilight, Los Angeles, 1992,* Smith's play about the Rodney King verdict and L.A. race riots. This play would go on to win Smith the MacArther Genius Award, as well as a Pulitzer nomination. Finally, Chapter four will reflect on her latest attempt, *Let Me Down Easy,* which I was

fortunate to attend when it played in New York at *The Public Theatre* in 2010. I will examine this play within the context of Smith's entire body of work, what it says about Smith's evolution as a playwright, actor, academic and performance artist, and finally, how it speaks to her specific contribution to American theatre to date.

Chapter 2: “There Is A Crack In Everything, That's How the Light Gets In.”

Anna Deavere Smith has made her life's work about finding the moment where speech patterns break down and betray the “unique character” of an individual. In order to find this 'liminal' moment, where a person ceases to speak conventionally and must struggle to express themselves, using the three questions mentioned on page 14, allowed Smith to engage with her experimental project, *On the Road: The Search for American Character.* The specific question Smith hoped to answer with this project is, What is the relationship between language and identity? Smith's experiment centred around the notion that if she could repeat the unique voice pattern of another, then she could access their character, and therefore act as them: “If we were to inhabit the speech pattern of another, and walk in the speech pattern of another, we could find the individuality of the other and experience that individuality viscerally” (*Fires in the Mirror* xxvii). The significance of such an experiment would mean that Smith was forging an alternative acting methodology and pedagogy to that which is taught in acting conservatories. Moreover, it is a methodology that places emphasis on understanding the other, rather than on self-exploration. After eleven distinct shows by Smith as part of her *On the Road* series exploring this initial question, she found an incident that launched her career to a national level of recognition by theatre audiences, critics, politicians, and concerned citizens alike.

In the morning of August 19th, 1991, in Crown Heights, Brooklyn, Gavin Cato, a seven- year-old Guyanese boy was struck and killed by a car carrying a spiritual leader, the Lubavitcher Hasidic rebbe. The rebbe's car was one of three cars that were part of a religious procession, and the driver of the rebbe's car, running a red light, consequently hit another car and swerved onto the sidewalk where he hit and killed Gavin Cato and seriously wounded his cousin Angela. A Hasidic-run ambulance arrived on the scene; rumours would quickly spread that the driver of the ambulance helped only the

Hasidic passengers and left the children to bleed in the street. Several hours later in the same neighbourhood, a group of African American men stabbed and killed Yankel Rosenbaum, 29, a Hasidic scholar visiting from Australia. It was an act of retaliation, though Rosenbaum was not involved in the events that morning. The following three days saw rioting and violence on the streets of Crown Heights between African Americans and Lubavitcher Jews. As Smith notes in her introduction, the rioting and violence which erupted between the Blacks and the Jews was symptomatic of a deeper, more insidious hostility: *"*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 communities" (xliii).

The pain and oppression Smith alludes to is the enforced marginality both groups have historically experienced at the hand of white privilege and supremacy. Racism seems to be at the heart of the issue as Smith has framed it, relating that black leaders accuse the Lubavitchers of experiencing "preferential treatment" from police and other municipal organizations. These accusations also expand into territorial disputes, as blacks claim that the Lubavitchers "have threatened and harassed them when buying area buildings for the expanding Lubavitcher community" (Smith, xliv).

The Lubavitcher community cites black anti-Semitism as a founding issue in the violent outburst of August, 1991: "In addition to reporting that they are 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" (Smith, xliv).

Racially fueled stereotyping was propagated by both minorities, only igniting and further entrenching hatred and misunderstanding between the two groups. In her explanation of the issues surrounding, Smith makes it clear that ultimately the Black youth who took to the streets of Crown Heights to riot were more concerned with fighting the police than combating the Jews. Smith explains

that the Blacks “regard [the police] as an occupying army,” perhaps only further fulled by the arrest of between 150 to 300 young blacks as a ““preventative measure” in what witnesses described as indiscriminate “sweeps”” (Smith, *Fires* xiv). Furthermore, Smith relates that the Lubavitcher community felt equally victimized by the legal system, citing the acquittal of Yankel Rosenbaum's accused murderer as an an egregious example of their inequitable treatment. Equally disturbing was the media's coverage of the events prompting even more racially charged prejudice and hatred through further polarizing the two groups on the grounds of racial stereotyping. In performing diverse people involved in the Crown Heights conflict, all with differing perspectives, Smith makes it clear that she is trying to give voice to issues surrounding the crises which the media actively failed to represent: “The 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”(*Fires* xiv).

The issues surrounding the events leading up to the Crown Heights rioting are not clear-cut in the sense that it is nearly impossible to pick one side, one point of view. Such ambiguity is where Smith thrives in her work, for this is where she finds her speakers: “at the cross roads of ambiguity.” Smith is adamant that she maintain this ambiguity throughout the show; she is not interested in offering answers to these issues, but rather is more concerned about asking questions. Smith is also quick to point out that it was not difficult to preserve a non-partisan alliance: “Everybody congratulated me for not taking a side. But the fact is, Crown Heights is a very organically ambivalent story” (Henry, 1). What I hope to examine in this chapter with regard to *Fires in the Mirror,* is how Smith sets up a theatre piece which is designed to move people out of their safe house of identity through the empathetic presentation of diverse points of view and ambivalent characters. In presenting moments where the vocabulary and rhythm of her characters breaks open, she, I argue, is trying to break open conventionally held ideas about racial stereotypes. Through the exploration of diversity on stage, Smith shows us that the world

we inhabit as one that is ambivalent, where there is no final answer; thereby placing the demand on her audience to become more flexible, considerate, and compassionate with regard to the other.

Though Smith is careful to preserve the ambivalence of the Crown Heights conflict, she does frame the play from the point of view of her African American community. Scholar and head of African -American studies at Princeton University, Cornel West, provides the foreward to *Fires in the Mirror*. As an outspoken activist for African-American rights, West gives an analysis of the Crown Heights events, framing the play from an African-American perspective (of course, in its play text form and not as a staged piece of theatre). As an insider to the Black-Jewish conflict by virtue his African-American background, he offers insight into the ambiguous and complex Crown Heights conflict, exposing how White supremacy and corporate elites, 'invisible' bureaucrats and CEO's, are the real source behind the issue of black and Jewish tribalism:

> In this scenario, WASP corporate and bank elites receive little attention regarding how they promote policies and programs that contribute to Black poverty, and covert anti-Semitic elites get off relatively scot-free in regard to maintaining impediments to Jewish mobility. And since the public sphere is racialized, any entry of Black people in a public dialogue often means that they-we- are on the defensive. (*Fires* xxi)

The “we” implicitly aligns Smith to Cornel West's perspective on the Black-Jewish conflict from a black perspective. How does Smith then negotiate the claim that she does “not take sides” in this artistic rendering of events? She frames her work from the perspective of the black activist/academic community, while not offering a parallel account from a leading Jewish scholar on the same issues. While it is possible to argue that Smith is actually “taking sides” in offering a perspective from her own community as the reasoning voice that frames the conflict which the play investigates, she also places it within her specific hermeneutic.

In viewing *Fires in the Mirror* through the perspective of her own African-American community, Smith is taking responsibility for the lens through which she experiences the world, and specifically in this case, the Crown Heights conflict. It is in this way that Smith identifies and de-mystifies her own authorial voice within a polyvocal, post modern work. When Smith says, "I am not the other and can never be the other" (*Talk to Me* 53), she is respecting the very real difference and distance between human subjects as well as the integral call to acknowledge one's own hermeneutic. To claim to be perfectly unbiased, without a specific grounding in a community and point of view, is to shirk humility to say the least. That kind of attitude is one that prizes, as Smith calls it, "the white male as great explainer" (*Talk to Me* 29). In short, it breeds a monolithic, authoritarian voice, the very voice that Smith wishes to deconstruct with her work. Through implicitly identifying her perspective through the thoughtful analysis of Cornel West, Smith takes responsibility for her place and her voice in the drama which is about to unfold: "I think it's very hard, in fact, not to see reality through the lens of your own experience. And I also think it's difficult to put past experiences behind us. Umm, past experiences that become that lens. It's very had to change that lens, and we don't have a version of surgery to help us do that" (*Big Think* 2007).

Smith has to walk a very difficult line. She must acknowledge her hermeneutic and give credence to her own African-American community, while maintaining a more objective stance with *Fires in the Mirror,* in order to do justice to her speaking subjects. As Kimberly Rae Connor argues in her article, *Negotiating the Differences,* Smith suspends her judgement while honouring her African-American heritage through conceiving her art through "several African American aesthetic traditions" (181). Such traditions include ecclesiastic "call and answer" aesthetics of many African-American church experiences of Smith's childhood, as an "occasion to evoke a spirit" (Martin, qtd. in Connor 175) as well as a "folk artist" approach, specifically including "oral traditions." As Connor observes,

Smith, “like a folk artist, creates out of what is available, using “found objects” such as dialogue culled from interviews or basic elements of wardrobe. She animates the subjects that are too often perceived as objects and reveals the spirits within. She takes the lives that society would throw away or ignore and invests them with value” (181).

Whether Smith would agree with Connor's assessment, that her work mirrors that of a “folk artist,” Smith is certainly cognisant of an African American aesthetic tradition which has in part provided a blueprint for her work:

> I came across a graph of the objectives of the Stanislavsky technique. Super objective. Little objective. It was straight lines with arrows. Quite soon after that I was reading a book about African philosophical systems and saw a picture of a wheel that had all these little spokes with arrows pointing towards the centre. I knew then that I wanted to try to find a way of thinking or a structure more like that. (qtd. in Martin 51)

Smith's conception, then, of identity, including and most specifically her own, is an experience of identity as struggle. It is, in part, the struggle part of identity which is most familiar: race, social class, cultural background, etc, and the unexpected, unfamiliar experiences that affect our conception of who we are: “I believe identity is a process that we are every moment making an adjustment, and sometimes those moments happen while we're talking-I mean, people use language to get married, to come to the realization that they're dying. I mean it happens-right-in the words” (*Talk to Me 52).*

Smith, as someone who religiously practices leaving her “safe house of identity” is very precise about how she maintains her own identity while offering herself up as an “empty vessel” (*Fires* xxv) for other people's identities to flourish.

Angela Davis, prominent social activist and Professor at the University of California, Santa Cruz, is one of Smith's “characters” in *Fires in the Mirror.* Davis uses a metaphor of needing “enough

rope" in order to allow one's self to expand into other communities and experience different ways of perceiving. Davis' metaphor can be seen as a perfect example for Smith's practice (Modleski, *Doing Justice to Subjects* 68). Smith herself has cited Davis' metaphor as a model for her work and what she is attempting to do with *Fires in the Mirror:* "I feel very anchored in/ my various communities. / But I think that,/ to use the metaphor, 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" (*Fires in the Mirror* 31).

Davis' words capture Smith's exact methodology in terms of leaving her "safe house of identity," cementing Smith's approach to theatre in social activism. In a further attempt to take responsibility for her hermeneutical lens, Smith opens with African-American playwright and poet Ntozake Shange, whose words implicitly echo Smith's point of view with regard to her approach to character. Shange opens the play with a musing on what identity is, ultimately warning against the appropriation of another's identity. Smith takes Shange's warning very seriously especially considering that in her own work she "captures" and "repeats" other people's words in an effort to seem like them. In a sense, Shange offers a poetic disclaimer for Smith's *Fires,* before we see Smith inhabit all different kinds of identities on stage:

> Hummm./ identity-/ it, is, uh...in a way it's, um...it's sort of, its uh.../it's a psychic sense of place/ it's knowing I'm not a rock or that tree?/I'm this other living creature over here?/ And it's a way of knowing that no matter where I put / myself/ that I am not necessarily/ what's around me. [...] we are part of the desert,/ and when we go home/we take with us that part of the desert that the desert gave us,/ but we're still not the desert./ it's an important differentiation to make because you/ don't know/ what you're giving if

> you don't know what you have and/ you don't/ know what you're taking if you don't know what's yours/ and what's/ somebody else's. (4)

It is also possible to read Shange's notion of the function of identity as an idea which stands in direct conflict with what Smith is trying to do in living an "almost, but not quite" (*Talk to Me* 23) state of being. The function of identity, as it is presented in the opening of the play, is to preserve and conserve a given order. Understanding what one's identity is, as Shange has defined it, is about understanding one's place in the world and what one has ownership over in terms of propriety. Contemporary notions of identity, then, are partly conceived out of a capitalist ideology which propagates the notion of the rugged individual, who is defined by specific borders (identity as modelled on the sovereign state) and must defend those borders at the expense of becoming usurped by another identity.

Smith, who is actively seeking the usurpation of her own identity for the identity of her 'characters,' presents an alternative to this capitalist conception of identity as one without fixed borders, and sanctified individuality. She instead opts for a notion of identity that is to an extent in conflict with Shange's musing, as Smith's identity is fluid. To be clear, Smith is not borderless in terms of identity, but her borders are never fixed. Smith promotes a communal approach to identity, rather than an individualist approach, which is distinctly un-American of her, in the mainstream, White, patriarchal/nationalistic sense of the term:"I try to close the gap between us, but I applaud the gap between us. I am willing to display my own *unlikeness*" (*Fires,* xxxviii).

Fires in the Mirror is organized and performed according to chapter headings created by Smith. All of the headings can be interpreted as aspects of or conceptions through which identity is constructed. Only the first heading, however, bears the name "Identity;" it is comprised of interviews with Ntozake Shange, an Anonymous Lubavitcher Woman, and George C. Wolfe (who is the director

of *Fires*). The other headings are as follows: *Mirrors, Hair, Race, Rhythm, Seven Verses,* and finally, *Crown Heights, Brooklyn, August 1991*. I will examine the content of each chapter heading in the order which they appear, with the purpose of exploring how each section contributes to Smith's understanding of identity as a liminal state.

Fires in the Mirror pivots between the public sphere and private sphere in complex and delicate ways, often inverting the two distinctions. With *Fires,* the audience sees and hears the private reflections, memories and feelings from public figures, while also bearing witness to private expressions from individuals brought to the public arena by Smith. One private sphere entered by Smith is the story from "Anonymous Lubavitcher Woman" in the *Identity* section of the play.

Smith positions "Anonymous Lubavitcher Woman" next to Ntozake Shange in the opening moments of the play to create a significant and rare cultural exchange between a Lubavitcher Jew and an African-American. The "Anonymous Lubavitcher Women," tells a story about how on one Shabbas evening, her baby had been playing with the knobs of her stereo and accidently turned them on. Being Shabbas, she could not turn the radio off herself. The music, turned very loud, was "sort of like a half station/ of polka music" (5). Finally, she had to ask a young black boy on the street if he would turn off her radio, although she could not explicitly ask for this favour as it is against the Torah. Pretending she did not know how to turn off her radio, the boy had to show her: "And I just sort of stood there looking kind of dumb/and then he went and pushed it,/and we laughed that he probably thought:/And people say Jewish people are really smart and they/ don't know/ how to turn off their radios" (8).

This story sets the stage on a number of levels. For one, it highlights the profound cultural differences between the Lubavitcher community and the African-American community with one simple exchange. Moreover, while the exchange could not be fully explained to one boy in the privacy of the Lubavitcher woman's home because of specific customs, when Smith shares this moment with her

audience, it is explained in full: a cultural difference is for a moment bridged as Smith makes private affairs public.

Smith titles all of her character's stories because she thinks people "speak in organic poems." The "Anonymous Lubavitcher Woman's" poem is entitled "Static." This title is particularly revealing for the section of *Fires* labelled "Identity" as it points to Smith's observation that, "the most comfortable place to live is inside of what I call one's safe house of identity. I have observed that is where most people live" (*Talk to Me* 23). The strict delineation of identity is concretized in George C. Wolfe' speech, "101 Dalmatians." Following the Anonymous Lubavitcher Woman in the show, Wolfe meditates on the divide between black and white neighbourhoods. Through idiosyncratic syntax, he talks about how he was unable to "go see *101 Dalmatians* at the Capital Theatre" when he was a child because of segregation. Naming his piece "101 Dalmatians" conjures an image of the colours black and White existing in remarkable contrast to each other. In speaking about his identity as a black man growing up during segregation Wolfe says, "But I am- not- going- to place myself (*pause*)/ in relationship to your whiteness" (10). Wolfe is asserting that his identity as a black person is complete and is not defined by his status as "other" to white.

Most of Wolfe's speech is about the divide between black and white identity as he remembers what it means to grow up black in segregated America. At the end of his speech, Wolfe expresses that there is an inevitable point where these two unmistakably different identities must meet:

> I come from-/ it's a very com*plex,*/con*fused,*/ *neu*-rotic,/ at times destructive/reality, but it is completely and totally a reality/ contained and, and,/ full unto itself. It's complex./ It's demonic./ It's ridiculous./ It's absurd./ It's evolved./It's all that stuff./ That's the way I grew up./ So that therefore-/ and then you're White-/(*Quick beat*) And then there's a point when,/ and then these two things come into contact. (12)

This is a point of departure for Smith as she is able to show how identity, for marginalized groups, is always in combat with a white supremacist notion that all other races are just that: other. Ultimately, this is what *Fires in the Mirror* is trying to stoke and reflect and it is embedded no more simply than in George C. Wolfe's assertion that his blackness is "not in relation to your whiteness." However separate and different these identities are, however, there is the issue of living together in that difference, again echoed in the final part of Wolfe's speech: "and there is a point where these two things come into contact" (12).

The section entitled *Mirrors* is comprised only of one character, Aaron M. Bernstein. Berstein illuminates for Smith how, from a standpoint of physics, if there are errors in the construction of a telescope, then what is viewed through it will become severely distorted, and perhaps even more significantly confused. Bernstein talks of "the circle of confusion" and distortion which occurs when the lens is not perfectly constructed. The circle of confusion blurs important details, causing the viewer to miss out on significant differences under observation:"So, you see, in physics it's very practical- if you wanna look up into the heavens/ and see the stars as well as you can/ without distortion. / If you're counting stars,for example,/ and two look like one,/ you've blown it"(15).

Bernstein's *Mirrors* functions as a perfect metaphor for the media's role in distorting and blurring the issues behind the rioting in Crown Heights. Bernstein's speech also comments on what Smith is trying to do aesthetically. In collecting differing points of view from various sides of the Crown Heights conflict, Smith uses her art to construct a lens for everyone to see with some sense of clarity and discernment so that "two stars" don't look like "one." Effectively Smith is pursuing her intention to contribute "something about detail," as part of her artistic mandate: "Aesthetically and artistically what I am trying to contribute is something about details. That, you know, maybe there's a wider variety of human beings than we've thought about. And we can tell compelling stories without

having to have those same stereotypes that we've been thinking about over and over again" (*Think Big* 2007).Through engaging in 'authentic' moments of human expression, particularly through a diverse range of identity, Smith strives to go beyond media stereotyping and sensationalism in order to move toward a shared understanding of the necessity of difference.

Smith continues to probe identity and difference in broader ways before she hits upon interviews pertaining to the Crown Heights riots. In "Hair," Smith juxtaposes Black and Jewish meditations on how they think of hair as a part of their identity. For example, Smith has Reverend Al Sharpton defending his decision to style his hair after James Brown in homage, as Brown was "like a father" to him. Following Sharpton's bombastic declaration of how his James Brown hairstyle is a "me and James' thing" Smith places a Lubavicher woman named Rivkah Sigal speaking on the topic of wigs. She finally confesses that wearing a wig (for religious reasons due to modesty) has been a very difficult duty to negotiate in terms of how it has affected her conception of her identity: "I mean, I've gone through a lot with wearing wigs and not/ wearing/ wigs. / It's been a big issue for me" (25).

"Rhythm" and "Race" are both sections that each feature only one speaker. It is also in these sections where *Fires* moves toward a feminist voice. "Rhythm" features the female rapper "Big Mo" Monique Mathews about the misogyny in the rap world. "Big Mo's" words are a clear reflection of what Cornel West asserts is a major issues within the framework of the "Black- Jewish dialogue," that is, the problem of a patriarchal agenda. On this problem, West writes, "Smith's deepening of this dialogue by *de-patriarchalizing* our conversation is a major contribution in this regard" (xix). Angela Davis' speech on "Race" also suggests an attempt to *de-patriarchalize,* in that she proposes an alternative to commonly held views on race which uphold a kind of 'tribalism.' In proposing that "we need to develop/ new ways of looking at community" (29), Davis critiques the hegemonic view of: "the old notion of coalition in which we anchor/ ourselves very solidly/ in our/ specific racialized

communities, /and simply voice/our/ solidarity with other people" (31).

To be clear, Davis is no proponent of simply severing ties with one's own community. However she is advocating for a flexible, mutable mode of being--a way of living that establishes community within larger terms and challenges patriarchal assertions of strict notions of kinship historically attached to property and propriety. The 'de-patriarchalization' of community articulated by West and exemplified by Davis is a distinctly important theme of *Fires in the Mirror*. Cornel West emphasizes the tremendous importance of Smith's inclusion of women in her cacophony of voices for *Fires:*

> For too long the Black-Jewish dialogue has been cast in masculine terms by principally male interlocutors. It is no accident that the major issues of contention- Affirmative Action and the security of the state of Israel- tend to highlight the power struggles of men in the public spaces of jobs and the military. Smith explodes this narrow framework by taking us into the private spheres of American society where complex discourses of women often take place in patriarchal America. (xviii)

There are several distinct themes which emerge in terms of how the Blacks and Jews articulate their experience as historically oppressed groups. As Smith moves closer to the events of "Crown Heights, Brooklyn, 1991," it becomes clear that a shared narrative of the two groups is the need to distinguish themselves as "The Chosen People." This belief is of course germane to Judaism but is nevertheless expressed by several of Smith's characters within the Black religious community, specifically the Black Muslim community. Minister Conrad Mohammed, whose speech is titled "Seven Verses", controversially asserts that "the Holocaust did not equal" the crime of Black enslavement by Whites. His reasoning being that, "we lost over a hundred/ and some say two hundred and fifty,/million/in the middle passage/coming from Africa/ to America. We were so thoroughly robbed./ We didn't just lose six million" (55). Minister Conrad Mohammed's heartbreaking and graphic speech

is ethically troubling in the end due to his anti-Semitic position: "*We* are those people/ that almighty God Allah/ has selected as his chosen,/and they are masquerading in our garment-/ the Jews" (58).

Following the Minister's speech is an equally heartbreaking and graphic story told by Letty Cottin Pogrebin on her uncle Isaac. Letty tells the story of her uncle who, because he "was blond and blue-eyed" had been selected by his town to to be the "designated survivor." The Nazis, suspecting that his Aryan papers were forgeries, forced him to prove his allegiance and had him massacre all of the Jews of his hometown: "Among those whom Isaac packed into the gas chambers/ that day/ dispassionately as if shoving a few more items into an/overstuffed/ closet/ were his wife/ and two children" (62).

Smith dramaturgically balances the devastation and dehumanization that both the Jews and the Blacks have survived in placing the Minister's and Letty Cottin Pogrebin's stories side-by-side. In placing Letty's story after the Minister's, she allows the audience to see that both holocausts are immeasurable in terms of the horror and brutality. If Smith had put Letty's story before the Minister's, it would be possible to interpret that Smith is saying that indeed, the enslavement of Blacks is quantifiably worse than the Jewish Holocaust, therefore engaging in the kind of tribalism she is so committed to dismantling. In placing Letty's story after the Minister's, Smith prevents the possibility for the Minister's story to overshadow Letty's, as it could if the play was constructed within a linear trajectory. Notably, what also serves to unite the Jews and the African Americans' in their status as "Chosen Peoples" are their respective holocausts: to endure incredible suffering is to necessarily claim an elevated and select status in order to explain and organize such catastrophe. The Minister Conrad's description of the treatment of black slaves is thoroughly horrific:

> Not only were we killed and murdered,/ not only were our women raped/in front of their own children./ Not only did the slave master stick/ at times,/daggers into a pregnant

> woman's stomach,/ slice the stomach open/push the baby out on the ground and crush the head of the/ baby/ to instill fear in the Massas of the plantation. [...] But the most significant crime-/because we could have recovered from all of that-/ but the fact that they cut off all knowledge from us, / told us that we were animals, / told us that we were subhuman [...] (57)

A few speeches earlier in the play, just before Minister Conrad Mohammed's speech, Letty Cottin Pogrebin appears for the first time with "Near Enough to Reach." Her thoughts on the issue of the Blacks and Jews scapegoating each other is articulated so profoundly and is so nuanced, that it speaks volumes about the systemic White supremacy and hegemony at the core of the frustration between the Blacks and the Jews: "I think it's about rank frustration and the old story/ that you can pick a scapegoat/ that's much more, I mean Jews and Blacks,/ that's manageable/because we're near,/ we're still near enough to each other to reach!" (50).

Pogrebin's speech implies that the 'who' which these two groups cannot reach, and are therefore bound to vent frustrations and rage at inequity onto one another, is the white supremacist system which keeps Blacks oppressed and Jews marginalized. Such a system privileges "WASP" families with middle to upper-middle class status. The oppression of Blacks in America has become so insidious and systemic that it becomes difficult for Blacks to name their oppressors. What occurs therefore, is a misdirected rage both inward facing and towards others who are marginalized but deemed 'better off':

> In Black America, this tribal mentality has often focused on those who are the public face of the larger system. The relatively invisible WASP corporate and bank elites are rarely targeted since they are so far removed from the everyday life of Black people. Instead, the most visible beneficiaries of Black consumption, e.g., shop owners and landlords in Black communities, or the most vociferous opponents of Black strategies

> for progress, e.g., conservative opponents of Affirmative Action, loom large as objects of Black rage. (*Fires,* xx-xxi)

The systemic oppression of blacks in America emerges as the major theme in *Fires in the Mirror*, and also sets the stage for *Twilight, Los Angeles, 1992*. Smith's interview with Richard Green complicates the situation for black youth in terms of the reasoning behind all of the rage and frustration vented during the Crown Heights rioting. Green, director of the Crown Heights Youth Project, gives a nuanced interpretation of why the black youth behaved so explosively towards the Lubavitcher community, and to a certain extent, his analysis agrees with Letty Cottin Pogrebin's "Near Enough to Reach." Green asserts that the black youth are not angry at the Lubavitcher community. They are angry, he says, indicating Smith, "at you and me,/ if it comes to that./ They have no role models, / no guidance (120).

While the various sources of black rage are explored during *Fires*, suggesting a complexity originating far beyond the tension between the blacks and the Lubavitchers, Smith is also careful to unearth the sources for the unease in the Jewish community as well. The historical oppression of the Jews leads to a sense of perpetual insecurity and vulnerability. This vulnerability is expressed most poignantly by Reuven Ostrov in his speech "Pogroms," where he tells the story of meeting a man in the Down State County King's Hospital (Ostrov is assistant chaplain there) the night Yankel Rosenbaum was stabbed. The man tells Ostrov that his mother, upon hearing the news of Rosenbaum's death and the ensuing race riots, jumped out of the third floor of her apartment to her death. The man's mother was from Russia and had left "because of the hardships over there" to come to America eleven years ago: "when this thing started to happen in Crown Heights./ It became painful/and it felt like, like there was no place to go./ It's like you're trapped,/everywhere you go there's Jew haters" (131).

Further solidifying the fear of the new pogrom were the chants by blacks to Jews, according to

Micheal S. Miller, another character in *Fires:* "There were cries of "kill the Jews" and "Hitler didn't finish the job" (86). Thus, the historically determined zeitgeist of oppression complexly weaves its way into the turmoil between the blacks and the Jews and Smith is careful to examine these historical variables in subtle detail. However, while Smith is committed to exploring both sides of the story, she does frame *Fires in the Mirror* from the perspective of African-American experience. It is unclear whether this is intentional or not. Choosing to open the published text of *Fires* with a foreword by Cornel West, without offering a critique by a Jewish scholar as well, inevitably suggests a vantage point from which to interpret the ensuing speeches and events presented. West outlines the circumstances behind the black distrust of Jews in America, stating very clearly that the situation is far worse for blacks than Jews:

> many Blacks are deeply suspicious- or even downright pessimistic-about entering a Black-Jewish dialogue. This is especially so for young Black people who are reluctant to engage with Jews who often perceive themselves as underdogs yet who usually are middle class Americans. [...] Needless to say, the Jewish experience in America is quite atypical in Jewish history. Yet, for many Black people, the Jewish experience in America is *the* Jewish experience that counts most in the present situation. And since the Black experience in America is much worse than the Jewish experience in America, the notion of two oppressed groups in America coming together for dialogue smacks of a dishonesty and even a diversion. (xx)

Perhaps even more telling is the fact that the play ends with a speech from Carmel Cato, the father of Gavin Cato, who was hit and killed by the Rebbe's motorcade. Cato's speech is the natural climax of the show because his presence is withheld right up until the final moments. Until this moment, the audience has heard from virtually everyone affected by the Crown Heights conflict except

for any member of the Cato family. One of the most remarkable aspects of Carmel Cato's speech, aside from the visceral sense of loss it manifests, is that Cato touches upon the original three questions that Smith learned from the linguist in order to elicit *authentic* expression. She remarks:

> 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 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 his son. Yes, he remembered the circumstances of his birth, he gives an account of them. (*Fires* xi)

Cato's speech is certainly one of the most powerful in *Fires;* however Smith did not originally use it as the finale of the show. The first incarnation of *Fires* had Cato in the "Crown Heights" section, with several other speeches following his. Smith changed the order when American theatre director and writer, JoAnne Akalaitis told her, "the speech ends with the father" after seeing the play performed in December of 1991 (Martin 52).

Just as Norman Rosenbaum reveals that his brother Yankel was the last person he thought of when his wife said he needed to come home because something bad had happened, so to does Carmel Cato express the same thinking: "I thought it was one of the other children- / the bigger boys/or the girl,/ because she worry me,/ she won't et-/ but Gavin 'ee was 'ealtee,/ and he don't cause no trouble./ That's what's devastating me now" (*Fires* 138).

These moments where two oppositional individuals respectively share a feeling, thought, or experience, are key to Smith's work and are often artfully arranged side-by-side, in order to realize the possibility of sharing, despite profound and at times even immutable difference. Thus, Smith's work is

continually reaching towards a heterotopic vision, where the audience can see a potential for understanding within dissonance. In presenting Carmel Cato and Danel Rosenburg's shared sentiment, Smith is able to show empathy at work. As Smith defines it, “empathy is the ability to identify with the other” (*Talk to Me* 70); thus, in her heterotopic world, Smith allows for Carmel Cato and Daniel Rosenburg, perhaps the two most diametrically opposed characters in the *Fires* drama, to empathize with one another. In doing so, the audience is invited to do the same:

> That empathy is proof of humanity, it is a proof that we don't all stop at the front and back doors, the floors and the ceilings of our physical selves. Empathy and the ability to identify with the other is proof that our colour, our gender, our height, our weight is only a frame of something else called the soul. And politically, of course, that proof is the very ingredient we need to get to “we,” to get to move from “me” to “us.” (*Talk to Me* 72)

Despite ending with Carmel Cato, Smith insists that there is no final word in the show, again, resisting the convention of one authorial voice delineating a beginning, middle and end. The ending of Cato's speech points to this lack of closure, as well as implicating Smith's presence in her own work both in her methodology, down to the “three questions,” and in her presence as both actor and character:

> I was born different. I'm a man born by my foot. I born by my foot. Anytime a baby comin' by the foot/they either cut the mother/ or the baby dies./ But I was born with my foot./ I'm one of the special./ There's no way they can overpower me./ No there's nothing to hide,/ you can repeat every word I say. (139)

The final words of Carmel Cato's speech provide a cyclicality and critical reflexivity to *Fires in the Mirror*. Tania Modleski comments that Smith's decision to end with Cato's speech allows for

critical response as opposed to being allowed a full catharsis:

> Yet even here, Cato's parting line (the final line of the play) in which, scorning the supposed power of the Jews to prevent his speaking out, he says, "No there's nothing to hide, you can repeat every word I say,"contains a reflexive turn that invites us to ponder the meaning of the strategy of repetition governing the work as a whole, rather than allowing us to rest in the illusion of transparency. (*Doing Justice to Subjects* 64)

Modelski argues that though Cato's speech enters so intensely into the emotional realm that it threatens catharsis (problematic in any political theatre that is interested in provoking change, as Smith's theatre is), the reflexivity of Cato's final line resists a full cathartic release. Cato inadvertently draws attention to the formal methodology that Smith uses (mimicry, repetition), and so allows an opportunity for the audience to have a moment of emotional distance from the play as they consider the implications of Smith's re-presentation of Cato's words and all that came before him. Specifically, Cato's final words give an aesthetic framework to Smith's artistic effort; meta-theatrically ending the show with Cato's permission that Smith can "repeat every word" he says produces a critical distance for both Smith and the audience that is Brechtian. It is in this moment that the audience must take a critical approach to what they have just witnessed, as the play doubles back on itself. The audience, in a Brecthian sense, must go back inside the play in order to make sense of it. Yet, this going back inside the play, as they are invited to do at the end, must be from a slightly removed perspective; the audience begins to function as a reader of the play, critically examining from all different points of view. There is no final 'telos' to *Fires in the Mirror,* only an invitation to re-examine intellectually and emotionally what has transpired, in order to probe new ways of understanding. Describing what Smith wanted the audience to take from *Fires,* Sarah Henry elucidates:

> And while Smith describes her plays as political, she is not, she says, trying to tell

> theatregoers how to think. “I would like people, in this work, to have a little of them touched- and I don't care where in the piece this happens,” she says of *Fires in the Mirror.* “But I think that if touching causes people to think about race in a different way, or shakes up the system they have, that's great, because all of us have the wrong system for race.” (*A Compelling Performance* 5)

When *Fires in the Mirror* debuted it was a box office hit. People, freshly interested in race relations and racial tension due to the recent L.A. race riots, wanted answers to the profound racial tensions in America. Though Smith didn't provide answers, she did provide an opportunity for her audiences to assess these current events with sensitivity, clarity and above all, a respect for differences:

> My sense is that the American character lives not in one place or the other, but in the gaps between the places, and in the struggle to be together in our differences. It lives not in what is 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. (*Fires* xli)

What Smith presents and celebrates in *Fires in the Mirror,* and in all of her *On the Road* series, for that matter, is not only an empathetic and discerning view of systemic race, gender and class struggles in contemporary American culture, but also a profound critique of capitalist ideology; an ideology that produces objectifying conditions and modes of seeing the human being in order to maintain domination by the elite over the masses. Smith's effort to re-define the human through challenging normative, white supremacist assumptions of what the “legitimate” human looks like, is shared by cultural critic and rhetorician Judith Butler (who is, coincidentally, friends with Smith and was played by Smith in her show, *House Arrest).* Both Smith and Butler call for a representation of the

human which is not bound by normative discursive functions which dictate the limits of intelligibility. To show the failure of one's attempt to have ownership over their identity, is to expose a basic vulnerability integral to the human experience, one which is actively suppressed by capitalism for the sake of objectifying and commodifying the human being. In order to 'order' the human, there can be no possibility for the inexplicable, the stutters, stammers and rhythmic irregularities: “For representation to convey the human, then, representation must not only fail, but it must *show* its failure. There is something unrepresentable that we nevertheless seek to represent, and that paradox must be retained in the representation we give” (Butler, Precarious *Life* 144).

Smith's exploration of identity cannot be contained by the oppressive confines of capitalism and racism. Similarly then, *Fires in the Mirror* is at odds with capitalistic notions of productivity, withholding any teleology outside the assertion that identity “lives in the cracks.” However, in Smith's effort to ask more questions than provide answers, *Fires in the Mirror* struck upon one major question of the status and treatment of black people in America. While Smith does not provide any one definitive answer to this enormous question--the play determines that by and large, black people in America are living in a country which actively seeks their negation and erasure. This is a fact which Letty Cottin Pogrebin understands as someone who is part of a minority group as well. Pogrebin relates to Smith that Jews understand what it is to live under the threat of negation and therefore can in fact relate to black people in America:

> Only *Jews* listen,/ only *Jews* take Blacks seriously,/only *Jews* view Blacks as full human beings that you/should *address/* in their rage/ and, um,/ people don't seem to notice that./ But Blacks, it's like a little child kicking up against Arnold /Schwarzenegger/ when they,/ when they have anything to say about the dominant culture/ nobody listens! Nobody reacts!/ To get a headline,/ to get on the evening news,/you have to attack a

Jew. (51)

Stark evidence of this insidious attempt of black negation through white supremacy was only around the corner in Smith's search for American character in the wake of the Rodney King riots of 1992. *Fires in the Mirror* launched Smith to a national level of success and was runner-up for the Pulitzer Prize in Drama for 1993. Smith was also awarded a Special Citation Obie, a Drama Desk, and a Lucille Lortel Award. Finally, *Fires* was produced at London's Royal Court Theatre, in 1993.

Immediately after closing *Fires in the Mirror,* Smith would make her way to Los Angeles where she interviewed two hundred people over the course of several months in order to create *Twilight, Los Angeles, 1992.* With *Twilight,* Smith would garner even more national critical and popular attention, acclaim and criticism. *Twilight, Los Angeles, 1992* would prove to be one of Smith's most important works to date.

Chapter 3: "Where Do I Find Justice?"

On April 29th, 1992, the night before *Fires in the Mirror* was slated to debut in New York City at The Public Theatre, Los Angeles erupted into riots. Due to the threat of unrest, the *Fires in the Mirror* debut was rescheduled to the following night and Smith went down to Times Square with Richard Green (who appears in *Fires*) to march in a peace rally (Rubino 341). After completing what became a very successful run of *Fires in the Mirror* in New York City, Smith made her way to Los Angeles to dive head first into research and interviews for the Rodney King incident and ensuing L.A. race riots. Over a period of only a few months, Smith interviewed over two hundred people, ranging from the likes of Rodney King's aunt, to Reginald Denny, a white truck driver who had been pulled from his truck and beaten by several Black men, to the Black men who beat Reginald Denny, to the very unpopular former L.A. Police commissioner, Daryl Gates (Rubino 341). In inhabiting such a diverse range of people involved in the L.A. riots, Smith hopes to prove that it is possible to empathize with different and at times, antagonistic points of view. Smith describes her intentions with *Twilight,* saying:

> I hope to show that being present as forty six people in *Twilight,* a play about the Los Angeles race riots, and playing a Korean woman whose store was burned to the ground by African-Americans, or playing one of the African American kids who beat up a white man, or playing Daryl Gates, the very unpopular Chief of Police, that it suggests to an audience that they don't have to sit in their one position. And, you know, by the way, when I come out at the end and take my curtain call, I'm still me. So, did I really lose anything? No. In fact, maybe I gained something (Think Big Interview 2007)

Focusing primarily on how Smith displays process-oriented identity, I will focus the discussion

of chapter 3 on moments in the play where various identities are in tension with one another due to differing points of view. This tension, while existing in real time, is also artfully curated by Smith as she pits dichotomous view points against one another. The result is not simply a display of democracy in process (although that is there), but the significance lies in the fact that Smith is present as these differing voices, "bridging the gap" between the self and other. The point of Smith's work then, is not simply in the documenting and showing of various communities in crises (although important nonetheless), but it is the demonstrative ability of Smith to live in continual flux as she embodies the tension experienced between people and individually. I begin my discussion of *Twilight,* with a look at the precursor to the Rodney King incident, "The Story of Latasha Harlins." as a way into Smith's specific mimetic approach to character. I also use feminist theorist, Elin Diamond to further illustrate the intricacies of what Smith is doing as a performer, and how Smith implicitly uses Brechtian theory to inform her approach. Next is an examination of "The Story of Rodney King" with a focus on the systemic police brutality toward the African-American community, following Smith's lead as that is how she frames that section. Following Smith's narrative construction, I examine the different reactions toward the rioting in the black and white communities. In addition, I focus on class divides as an emerging theme, and then on the violence between the Korean-American community and the African-American community, a theme introduced almost immediately in *Twilight* with "The Story of Latasha Harlins." My final analysis will rest with the speech given by gang truce organizer, Twilight Bey, who muses on the importance of living in a continual state of limbo.

The background to Smith's creation of *Twilight* is itself an ambivalent one. The artistic climate in Los Angeles at the time of the riots was not one that welcomed Smith's intention to create a show out of the riots. Many of her artistic peers in Los Angeles felt that Smith was appropriating an event the territory of which belonged to native Los Angeles artists to articulate and interpret. Smith's presence on

the scene seemed to cultivate feelings of frustration from many L.A. theatre artists: “Additional friction came from some local artists, who considered Smith an outsider. “They said, 'what? You're bringing this success from New York to tell our story? She doesn't know sh—t.” (*Oxford Companion to Theatre Online*). Smith acknowledged the resistance she encountered from the artistic community, adding that, “It made me sad and scared the living daylights out of me. But I understood it and respected it” (*Oxford Companion to Theatre,* “Anna Deavere Smith”). However, Smith went ahead with her plans to create her three hour one- woman show:

> My predominant concern about the creation of *Twilight* was that my own history, which is a history of race as a black and white struggle, would make the work narrower than it should be...I am a strong critic of the insularity of people in the theatre and our inability to shake up our traditions, particularly with regard to race and representation issues. (Smith, qtd. in Rubino 5)

In fact, *Twilight* paints a very racially complex picture, perhaps more so than *Fires.* However, what *Twilight* does share with *Fires* in terms of the roots of racial oppression, is that in both cases, there is a considerable backdrop of white privilege and supremacy which implicitly and consensually operates to ensure oppressed groups continue their own oppression through turning them against each other. Similarly to *Fires, Twilight* is organized into different segments, presented in a Brechtian way with projected place cards baring the title of each speech. *Twilight* is much longer than *Fires,* as Smith meticulously researched and represented the various narratives which lead to the catastrophe of the 1992 L.A. race riots. *Twilight* is broken up into two acts. Act one contains several narratives which feed the larger story of the instigation of the race riots. Act two is concerned with the aftermath of the violence, specifically focusing on how the Korean-American and black community interact since the riots.

The two main events that are meticulously researched and presented in act one are: “The Story of Rodney King” as expected, and “No Justice No Peace: The Story of Latasha Harlins.” Smith mandates that her kind of theatre operates under the auspice that actors performing her shows are informed, and nowhere is this need for an informed actor clearer than in the first act of *Twilight*. The story of Latasha Harlins specifically illustrates the precarious relations between Korean-American and African- American communities in Los Angeles. It occurred one year before the Rodney King trial, yet is a pivotal moment in Korean-Black relations, igniting latent racism particularly from the black community in L.A. In her description of the Latasha Harlins incident, Smith writes:

> *Note: For Dramaturg or Director: on the story of Latash Harlins. Latasha Harlins was a young black girl who was shot down by a Korean shop owner, Mrs. Soon Fa Du. The facts are contested by both communities. For those on the side of Mrs. Du, Latasha was stealing orange juice and beating Mrs. Du with a chair; for those on the side of Harlins,Du shot her in the back over a carton of orange juice which Latasha had no intention of stealing. The judge's sentence was very light and many interpret the violence against Korean Americans during the riot that followed the Rodney King trial- as a reaction to the Harlins case, which was on trial one year before the King case. The trial was covered in Los Angeles newspapers.* (39)

Latasha Harlins' story further complicates the backdrop of the race riots as it points to several realities: one, the deep-seated racism between the black and Korean community, and the other, the internal conflicts within the black community, a subject which emerges at several moments throughout *Twilight.* Arguably, these two themes, the warring between minority groups and the inner turmoil of the black community underline, the various narratives of *Twilight.* Charles Lloyd, the attorney for Soon Ja Du, is African-American, thus creating a considerable schism within the black community. Gina Rae,

an activist for the African-American community, follows Charles Lloyd's speech on the case regarding Latasha and Soon Ja Du. Gina Rae, otherwise known as Queen Malkah, makes no bones about her opinion of Charles Lloyd taking on the case of Soon Ja Du:

> We found it very unusual, that Charles Lloyd,/ the-top-black-attorney/ In-this-city,/ a millionaire,/ would-take-this-case./ But for Charles Lloyd/ To-defend-a-Korean-woman-/in the death of a black child.../ I guess he just/ sold his card./ He's not a card-carrying member/of our community or of us/ as-a-nation-of-people-any-longer./ He was a sellout./ I guess that's best way to put it. Because we all know, as we sit here/ as black people,/ if *any* of us had killt [sic] a Korean/ child,/ shot-them-in-the-back-of-the-head,/ and it was recorded on videotape,/we-would-not-be-sitting-here-today. (42)

Smith serves as the vessel for a dialogue in which the various people implicated in the Latasha Harlins story are made to talk to one another. Often Smith constructs the speeches *as though* different people are in dialogue with one another. In Latasha's story, it is implied that Charles Lloyd and Gina Rae are in some form of actual communication; Lloyd responds to Gina Rae's accusation that he "sold his card" by saying to Rae via Smith, "How am I a sellout?/ How am I an Uncle Tom?/ A lot of this is just plain old jealousy./ I learned that as a child. Whoever had the money in town. Doctors, morticians, [...]" (44). Ultimately, Lloyed rejects Gina Rae's assertion that the Latasha story is an issue of race, claiming that the political aspects of the case were fabricated by activists and the media. Lloyd explains that the death of Latasha boils down to a 'hair trigger' of Soon Ja Du's gun, a tragic mishap, but nothing more significant than that fact:

> A hair trigger? That's an expression from the Old West./ It's something men know a lot more about than women./ "... external examination/ has revealed evidence/ of disassembly/the-wrong-screws-were-reassembled/ dry-firing-of-this-weapon-reveals-

> that-the-hammer/can-be-pushed-off/ without-pulling-the trigger! Hitting the hammer in full cock/ will discharge this firearm without pulling the trigger. This firearm must be classified as/ unsafe!"/ They made it political!/ If Latasha had been killed by a black woman it wouldn't have ever/ been/ in the black papers,/ it's such a common occurrence! (45)

The narrative which Smith constructs of the Latasha Harlins' story functions as a microcosm of the larger dramatrugical structure of the Rodney King riot segments of the play. Smith creates the world of the Latasha Harlins' story, alternating from different perspectives without arriving at an ultimate truth. Smith is far more interested in dismantling absolutist claims to truth rather than asserting monolithic meaning. The Latasha Harlins' story is a perfect example of Smith's curiosity and regard for the alternative vantage points that create the reality. In describing her artistic intentions, Smith says: "the goal is to tell a story that has multiple points of view, [...] and in doing so, indicate on an artistic level that the old idea of the single author, if you will, is flawed. Because it takes, ultimately, many people to tell the story of a community or the story of a society. So that sense of the august author, who can come in and speak for women and speak for men. I don't believe that" (Big Think Interview). Smith's exploration of various vantage points means that there can be no single authorial voice in *Twilight.* It is clear, however, that through the cacophony of various voices that populate the *Twilight* narrative, Smith's perspective emerges as the ultimate arbiter of meaning: she creates the narrative drive through organization and careful selection.

At the same time, Smith manages to construct an ambiguous text, the meaning of which is never fully determined and remains open to endless interpretation. Such ambiguity is artfully demonstrated in Smith's construction of the Latasha Harlins story. With respect for the complexity of the situation, Smith does not encourage the spectator to choose sides, despite the fact that she ends the Latasha

Harlins story with Gina Rae's perspective. Smith is not necessarily identifying with Rae's point of view by giving her the last word, but rather it is Rae's final point which frames the significance of the Latasha story. It is representative of the larger problem: the continual unchecked injustice black community faces. The significance of the Latasha Harlins story within the context of *Twilight* is that it is one of many sparks which ignited the 1992 riots. Rae voices what the black community felt regarding the Latasha story: "because no matter what people say, /the injustice of what happened to Rodney King,/ it just coincides/as there's a parallel/ between Rodney and Latasha" (48). Therefore, it is not that Smith is asserting a final interpretation of the Latasha story in ending with Gina Rae; instead, she is mirroring the feelings of the black community to the community at large. Thus, Smith's mandate in *Twilight,* remains the same as in *Fires*: to reflect back to a community its own diverse and and conflicted points of view. As Smith says: "Where does theatre fit into this? Theatre can mirror a society. But in order to do that, theatre must embrace diversity" (Rubino 221).

The body of the story as constructed in *Twilight* is a cross section of the various communities affected by Latasha's death. In presenting the story from multiple perspectives, Smith intends to explode the idea of absolute truth, thus presenting a democratic model; she also subsequently performs hermeneutics. What I mean by "performs hermeneutics" is that Smith, in self-consciously performing multiple and differing points of view, shows how human beings continue to speak and act out of their own biased perspectives. This self-conscious performance of hermeneutics, that is, the performative enactment of human biases and perspectives, is what gives Smith's work both its ethical and aesthetic dimensions. Ethical, because Smith shows how identity is inextricably bound up in hermeneutics, therefore forcing the spectator to consider identity through the questioning of individual biases. Also ethical because, through the performance of hermeneutics, showing that identifying with different vantage points is accessible, the possibility of leaving one's "safe house of identity" is suggested.

Through inhabiting diverse perspectives and the performance of hermeneutics, Smith's intention with regard to the spectator is to prove that movement, in terms of identity, is possible:

> I understand that I'm one human being with a set of experiences that colour my lens. And I've always been very interested since I was a little girl, how that person across the town, across the street, how do *they* think? And understanding I could never think like they think. But wanting to try and do something about that gap [...] So first of all, I hope that by being present as forty-six people, say in *Twilight,* a play about the Los Angeles riots, and playing a Korean woman whose store was burned to the ground by African Americans, or playing one of the African American kids who beat up a white man, or playing Daryl Gates, the very unpopular chief of police, that it suggests to an audience that they don't have to sit in their one position. (Think Big Interview 2011)

Smith captures and performs identity as it contextualized by a specific vantage point, and so her style of acting has certain Brechtian undertones. One area of influence with regard to the dramaturgical structure of *Twilight* is Brecht's "Not... But" aesthetic[1]. The "Not this, but that" technique is typical of Brechtian acting, where an actor would present a given reality that would then be interrogated through the course of the performance, consequently pointing toward alternative possibilities to the reality presented on stage. A moment where the "Not...But" manifests in *Twilight* happens during the Latasha Harlins' story. When Charles Lloyd, attorney for Soon Ja Du, and who according to Gina Rae, "sold his card" as a member of the Black community, says at the end of his account of Latasha's death:

> Latasha comes up to the counter with the orange juice!/ just like in Hollywood-/She puts the orange juice back,/ and the gun,/ the girl sees the gun./ Makes one step!/ Boom!/

1 "The Not/But" theory as used by Elin Diamond, (Diamond 1997): "Each action must contain the trace of the action it represses, thus the meaning of each action contains difference" (49).

> Blood, brains all over, right in front of the cash register./ They had the girl walkin' out of the store./ But if you look at the girl's head in relationship to the cash register./ Right under there./ Thirty six feet/from the front door./ Isn't that sad?/ Isn't human life cheap? (41)

Lloyd's rhetorical question to Smith also presents an invitation for the audience. Lloyd's question points to a larger issue that *Twilight* grapples with, that of tolerance and regard for the precariousness of human life. "Isn't human life cheap?" also asks the audience to consider alternative possibilities to the outcome of not only Latasha's story, but also to the L.A. riots in general implying that, alternatively, human life should not consistently be treated in such a flippant and careless manner. The question opens up all kinds of possible considerations, spanning questions such as, how could Latasha's story have ended differently?

As a result of performing the hermeneutics of others, Smith's aesthetic becomes one of an almost surgical mimesis. The ethical and aesthetic dimensions of Smith's work are irrevocably intertwined; her acting is an exercise in the ethical implications of inhabiting another's point of view (thus leaving the safe house of identity) aesthetically realized through the mimetic performance of the other. When asked why others see the same events differently, Smith says:

> I think it's very hard, in fact, not to see reality through the lens of your own experience. And I also think it's difficult to put past experiences behind us. Past experiences that become that lens. It's very hard to change that lens and we don't have a version of surgery to help us do that. I suppose we used to think things like psychotherapy could help with it, but now most people go to a psycho-pharmacologist and they're less interested in the process of telling their myths to someone who should understand them and tearing those myths apart when they don't help. (Big Think Interview)

Thus, what Smith does as a performer is to show the possibility of suspending one's own positionality in the world (leaving the safe house of identity) in order to understand another's point of view in the name of empathy, while also deconstructing the myth of identity. That is, through detailed mimetic performance, Smith shows the precariousness of identity, for the spectator is able to observe the very myths that we tell ourselves, about ourselves, which then go into the construction of our identity. Smith is able to achieve both an empathetic performance as well as an estrangement effect, where we become aware of the performance of identity, particularly through the performance of hermeneutics, through her mimetic acting methodology.

Mimesis, as defined by Elin Diamond, is “a sensuous critical receptivity to, and transformation of, the object.” (*Unmaking Mimesis* ix). A defining feature of mimesis, according to Diamond, is its ability to show the effort of interpretation; “given the reification of human and commodity relations under capitalism, mimetic truth must be pried open through interpretive labor. Mimesis is this labor” (ix). If Mimesis is the laborious effort to receive and understand an object, and then to transform that object, this is exactly what is happening on stage when Smith performs her 'characters.' She both suspends judgement through listening and revealing the vantage point of the other, while inevitably transforming the character through her own self-conscious interpretation of their words, vocal rhythm and gestures. This is what makes Smith's work create a third space[1], in that she is able to perform from a place where both she and the character's identity is suspended: “I am constantly in a state of being, to borrow a phrase from the cultural theorist Homi Bhabha, “almost but not quite” (*Talk to Me,* 23). This is a 'dangerous' place to live, precisely because it challenges the assertion of the fixidity of identity, a fixidity that is desirable to ideologies such as capitalism, white supremacy and patriarchy as it can be used to maintain status-quo power relations. The danger of mimesis is that it exposes a lack of essence

1 Third Space theory (Bhabha 1997): “The pact of interpretation is never simply an act of communication between the I and the You designated in the statement. The production of meaning requires that these two places be mobilized in the passage through a third space” (208).

when it comes to the formation of identity:

> On the one hand it, [mimesis] speaks to our desire for universality, coherence, unity, tradition, and, on the other, it unravels that unity through improvisations, embodied rhythm, powerful instantiations of subjectivity, and what Plato most dreaded, impersonation, the latter involving outright mimicry. In imitating (upholding the truth value of) the model, the *mimos* becomes an other, *is being* an other, thus shapeshifting Proteus, a panderer of reflections, a destroyer of forms (Diamond v).

Through mimicry and the representation of diversity, Smith seeks to challenge directly the stereotyping of human beings upheld through normative power relations and ideological truth claims. In response to the question, "what is your creative process?" Smith answers,"aesthetically and artistically what I've been trying to contribute is something about details. That, maybe there's a wider variety of human beings that we've thought about and we can tell compelling stories without having to have those same stereotypes that we've been thinking about over and over again" (Big Think Interview). Thus, at both artistic and ethical levels, her work strives to represent the diversity of human expression which is often sublimated by white supremacy and other hegemonic power relations.

The story of Latasha Harlins ominously concludes just before the next chapter, "The story of Rodney King." Clearly, the Latasha story is meant to give additional significance to the Rodney King segment, and Smith, after including perspectives from Charles Loyd and various members of the Korean-American community, chooses to end the Latasha story with the perspective of community activist Gina Rae. Rae's words echo one of the major issues that *Twilight* grapples with, and that is the predominately white hegemony of the media:

> There were two children/who were eyewitnesses to Latasha's death. And they both testified/that Latasha/ begged Mrs. Du to let her/ go and that she was not trying to steal

> orange juice/and Latasha lay dead with two dollars in her hand./ Her last act was two dollars in her hand./If-the-white-media-does-not-decide-to-print-something-that/ Happens-to-us,-we-won't-know./That is another reason why I think we have to travel the country to make it known. [...] /And the sentencing of Soon Ja Du,/ was a five-hundred-dollar fine,/ [...] We think its to the tune-of-one-billion/ It-cost-the-city/ April twenty the ninth [sic]./ Because no matter what people say,/the injustice of what happened to Rodney King,/ it just coincides,/ as there's a parallel/ between
> Rodney and Latasha. (48)

With this final analysis given by Rae, Smith begins the next segment of the show: "The Story of Rodney King: The First Trial/ Simi Valley February 1992." The dramaturgical structure of the Rodney King story begins with various perspectives about the beating itself. Josie Morales, a clerk typist for the City of Los Angles, describes her experience of witnessing the King beating, detailing how eventually when it came time for her to testify at the trial, the prosecution decided not to call her to the stand. Morales' story is interesting because it provides insight into the actual beating. Morales, who witnessed the Rodney King beating from her apartment, claims that the video does not show the extent to which King was beaten, Morales' point being that the video is only a snapshot of a much larger more brutal beating. Morales tells Smith how she complained to the prosecutor, "and I told him:/ If you do not put witnesses,/ If you do not put one resident and testify to say what they saw/ that those officers were going to be acquitted/ but I really believe that the prosecution was dead set/ on that video/ and that the video would tell all./ But you see, the video doesn't show you where those officers went/ and assaulted Rodney King at the beginning" (51). The dismissal of eye-witness accounts is one of many problematic instances where the public felt their views and perspectives were being left out of the judicial process, particularly, people of colour and other minority groups. The undertone of Morales' speech, that

minority people who wanted to speak against the powers that be were ignored an dismissed, is made only more apparent in the following speech, entitled “Control Holds,” by Sergeant Charles Duke, Special Weapons and Tactics Unit, LAPD. Duke reveals how the officers who beat King, specifically Officer Powell, used beating tactics which were antiquated and “inefficient” (55). Duke explains that the “upper body control hold” had been outlawed as a police tactic in 1982 because,“we had something like/ *seventeen to twenty deaths,* in a period of about 1975-76 to 1982./ And they said it was associated/ with, it was being used on blacks,/ and blacks were dying (54). What Duke's speech reveals is twofold: that there is a history of police brutality toward black people and that what is being upheld within the police system is a disregard for the precariousness of human life. With regard to the insidious police brutality, Duke says through Smith:

> I started seeing a lot of incidents similar to Rodney King./ and some of them identical to Rodney King./ And I said, we gotta find some alternative uses of force./ And their attitude was:/ “Don't worry about it,/ don't worry about it.”/ And the last conversation I had was with my commander./ “We gotta explore some techniques and we gotta explore some/options/ And his response to me/ “Sergeant Duke/ I'm tired of hearing this shit./ We're gonna beat people into submission/ and we're gonna break bones/ and he said the police commission and the city council took this/ away from us./ Do you understand that/ Sergeant Duke?” (55)

Thematically, what emerges from the narrative as constructed by Smith is that police brutality towards minority groups was a catalyst in the eruption of the riots.

With respect to the plot of *Twilight,* there is no single narrative, although Smith does provide a kind of beginning, middle and end complete with a climax and denouement. What structures the play is the way in which the different voices (of the characters) are woven together to create tension and

synthesis with out a final end point. Smith takes the pulse of the various communities affected by the riots and concludes this section of the play with various reactions to the verdict of the initial trial where four police officers, accused of beating King, were acquitted. Logically then, the show mirrors the trajectory of events leading up to the riots. As *Twilight* moves next into a meta-narrative, where the speed, rhythm and intensity of the stories being told is meant to reflect the intensity of the rioting itself. Smith moves more abruptly from character to character and at the end of this section, entitled "ROCKED" the stage is meant to look dishevelled and chaotic. The play takes on a more reflective tone after the climactic "ROCKED" section as it moves toward narratives with a sense of grief and devastation, again, mirroring the physical devastation of the city of L.A. after the riots. This section, aptly titled "LOSSES," is conceivably the darkest moment in the play, exploring themes of slavery of African-Americans, isolation of the Korean-American community, and irrevocable bodily harm inflicted on various victims of the rioting. The end of the section "LOSSES" heralds a sense of despair, allowing for the sense of collective grief over the riots to be expressed. This moment in the show, while allowing for communal grief, is not cathartic for its audience as it is left unresolved. The following sections "THE NATIONAL GUARD COMES TO L.A." and " AFTER DINNER"; primarily focus on the justice system's negligence toward African-Americans. The question of justice and modes of seeking justice is presented with narratives that focus on whether justice should be fought through violent or non-violent means within the black community. A schism within the black community on this very issue emerges as a theme in the section "AFTER DINNER;" however Smith artfully concludes this section as she begins it, with Alice Waters, Chef, at the Panisse Restaurant in Berkeley, CA, who speaks on the importance of communication. Waters talks of the importance of the dinner table, allowing people to share food and come together. In a sense, Waters' story reflects what Smith is trying to do with the show itself: present an atmosphere where diverse members of the community may come

together and communicate, despite differences. The offering, in Smith's case, is a kind of emotional sustenance. The concluding words by Waters are clearly meant to echo back to the all of the speakers in the section "AFTER DINNER," who aren't interested in communicating with one another through their differences: "It's an *offering*/ to someone-who-needs-food/It's *healing*/ And I think that's what the table is!/ It's an offering to nourish people!/ And the more you're out there/The more you realize/ what's upstream is coming downstream./ The more you realize/that/you know/we're all/ sort of connected here" (156).

Smith is artful in how she weaves a plot line together through the juxtaposition of her characters' varied perspectives. Such is the case with Sergeant Duke's speech where he describes how his commander ordered excessive use of force, "We're gonna beat people into submission/ and we're gonna break bones [...]" (55). With Duke's speech we get a sense of the misuse of force and cavalier abuse by the police toward black people, "The reason that we lost the upper body control holds, [...]/ it was being used on blacks,/ and blacks were dying" (54). The response to Duke's speech comes an entire section later where, at the end of "ROCKED," Opera singer Jessye Norman, explains the eruption of violence from a black perspective. After talking about how African-Americans have a tradition of singing in order to cope with the reality of being forced into slavery, Norman reflects on how the silencing of voices (particularly violent attempts to silence) can create a violent response:

> But I think, that if I were,/ a person/ already, you know, a teenager,/ sort of a youngster,/ twenty or something,/ And I felt I were being *heard* for the first time/ it would not be singing as we know it/ It would be a *roar.*/ (*slight pause.*)/ Oh I think it would be a roar/ oh it would come/ oh it would come, from the bottom of my feet!/ It would be/ I really think that/ It would be like a *lion*/ just *roaring*/ It wouldn't be singing as we know it/ It wouldn't be words/ it would just be/ like-the-earth's-first-utterance./ I really do feel so.

(101)

That Norman has the last word in the section “ROCKED” allows her speech to claim authority with regard to the systemic abuse by police toward African-Americans. Norman's words in part function in response to Duke's speech as they promote greater nuance and clarity to the issue of whether or not to use “upper body control holds.” If Duke's speech presents a microcosm of police brutality in that it focuses on specific examples of the misuse of power within the police department, then Norman's speech is macrocosmic, in that it speaks to the larger picture of what systemic police abuse does to a people.

In her later writings, Smith has shown herself to be outspokenly critical of systematic police brutality and the disproportionate power the police enjoy. Her criticism of the police is nuanced, but unmistakably critical:

> Sometimes when I see how the press treat people, I find myself thinking about the police and the press in a similar light. Neither is a uniformly bad institution. But they do not always use their power responsibly, and there's not a lot we can do about it. Nobody monitors the media. When asked about that, some of them bristle and say, “We monitor each other.” People have been fighting police brutality vigorously for forty years. How many citizen's review boards are there, and how effective are they?[...] Both the police and the media represent fairness and unfairness, justice and injustice, and both have the power to practice brutality should they choose to. (*Talk to Me* 165)

The story which unfolds shows how police brutality coupled with an implicit mandate to silence the voices of minority citizens led to civic unrest as voices which had been historically and perpetually silenced finally erupted into cries of grief and anger.

From a dramaturgical perspective, the accounts of King's violent beating soon shift toward the

beating the City of Los Angeles took beginning on April 29th, 1992. Smith guides the narrative through an arc which begins with King's beating, to the outcome of the first trial (the verdict of which caused the riots) through to the violent eruption of the city. Here I will focus on the section "ROCKED" and how this moment in the show serves to explore how the riots were not only the voice of the 'unknown' but how Smith disables the white/authorial voice and introduces multiple protagonists. The section entitled "ROCKED" beings the various accounts of the violence enacted upon the city as Television Writer, Joe Viola, the first voice we hear in that section, describes the incredible shock and fear he experienced as the riots first erupted. The whole section of "ROCKED" is meant to mirror the build up and utter destruction of the riots, as Smith's stage directions clearly indicate:

> *Whereas most of the play is played barefoot, this segment should be played in combat boots. This part of the play should look like a human riot. However the stage is when "Rocked" begins, it should be completely dishevelled by the end.* [...] *As a new segment begins it should be as if it is interrupting the segment before. Sound and music can be used to build the energy and pacing to its crescendo, which is Keith Watson's piece "Rage."*[59].

Recounting his experience with the first moments of the riot, Joe Viola, a "white man, in his late forties, early fifties," describes a kind of violence which he had never encountered before. It is notable that Smith puts Viola's experience as an affluent white man at the beginning of the "Rocked" section, setting the stage for the violent shock felt by the affluent white community, who largely never have to encounter such violence and devastation, particularly violence directed toward them: "For the first time,/ in my entire life,/ my entire life,/ I was terrified!/ I was standing there,/ Just-having-mailed-my-daughter's-registration-to-Berkeley, what/ better stroke!/ And I was standing there when the first cars rolled by and this was/ like one-thirty in the afternoon, / and they...I saw a kid with a nine!/ and he

brought it up,/ he didn't aim it directly at me but he said,/ “I'm going to kill you, you motherfucker!” (60).

The narrative that describes the destruction caused by the rioting, reveals a white fear of the black community. Stanley K. Sheinbaum, former president of the Los Angeles Police Commission, stumbles over his words when he describes the first incidence of violence he saw after the verdict was announced, “There was a,/ uh,/ nice-black-recent-BMW,/ small car,/ in good shape,/ and there was an Afro-ican, [sic]/ uh,/ African-American woman/ driving it./ And a *man/* next to her,/ also African-American,/ and she.../ Her window was open./ and she had a *hammer* in her hand,/ [...] and it said to me:/ *Trouble* (63). White 'othering' of blacks continues in the next speech by Shelby Coffey III, Editor of the Los Angeles Times, who relates how his wife tried to stop him from confronting rioters from vandalizing his office building. Coffey had grabbed a pair of scissors, presumably to threaten the rioters, and his wife, wisely advised him to stay in the building because: “you might not/ (*Slow, one word at a time.)* / do very well with the crowd you seem to want to be running/ with” (65). Again, this suggests a divide between the rioters, mostly people of colour, and white people looking to place themselves in the role of protagonist, the role they are used to playing in mainstream art and in life. Thus, the beginning of the section “ROCKED” explores a white, privileged perspective of the riots. However, “ROCKED” then shifts toward other vantage points from different communities, namely black and Latino perspectives. “ROCKED” produces a tension between these two perspectives thereby resisting one authorial experience of the riots. For example, white privilege is directly challenged with the next speech Smith introduces by Keith Watson. Watson is one of several black men who assaulted Reginald Denny, a white truck driver. In his speech, “Rocked,” also the title of the section, he points out that violence was a demonstration of the frustration with being systemically unheard. Watson's speech is placed in reaction to the white perspective of the riots, which is also the mainstream, accepted

interpretation of the riots. Watson says:

> 'Cause/ what took place here?/ Southern California was *rocked*./ You know?/ I mean the the/ the whole infrastructure/ the foundation was *cracked*/ Know what I'm sayin'?/ The seams of that fine fabric,/ that that Los Angeles image that we have?/ That California? That sunshine?/You know?/ See we showed the insides./ The core./ Follow what I'm saying?/ That which is usually bypassed/ or overlooked?/ It came forward./It/ let it be *known.* (66)

At this moment in *Twilight,* the intentionality behind Smith's work merges with the actual narrative of the piece. Her work, in part, involves an exploration of voices that are often left out in society, voices that go undocumented and unheard within mainstream culture, both political and otherwise. In listening to individuals who might not otherwise be listened to, Smith performs, as Carol Martin asserts, a kind of cultural shamanism, where individuals, entire communities and even human beings on a national level, are allowed to heal through Smith's rigorously empathetic listening;

> The authority of one group over another, of one individual over others, is undermined by the presence of Smith as the person through whom so many voices travel. Smith gives these people a chance to speak as if to each other- in much the same way a "spirit doctor" brings ancestors or other spirits in contact with the living- in the presence of the community of the audience. It is this fictional and yet actual convergence of presences that gives Smith's work its power. (*The Word Becomes You* 45)

What Keith Watson describes is an uprising from a group whose voices have been ignored. Jessye Norman's "Roar" is also relevant here, and although her piece occurs at a slightly later part in the play, the sentiment is abundantly clear: when individuals and communities are ignored, systematically or personally, the dehumanizing effect is profound. Thus, Smith's acting methodology,

which incorporates listening as one of its basic tenets, is looking to humanize the voices of the disenfranchised in order that these voices find representation and are allowed to be considered categorically human as opposed to negated. Watson speaks to this sense of alienation and negation, in turn showing that the eruption of violence occurring on April 29th, 1992 resulted from the frustration of a community who felt negated by the justice system. Watson explains that those citizens who felt that they were unknown by the mainstream system of power, in this case the justice system, "that which is usually bypassed/ or overlooked?" is what Smith is searching for both in who she seeks to listen to and perform, but also in terms of what she choses to represent in someone's vocal pattern. It is that which "rocks" the status quo of representation that Smith wishes to engage with and reveal for the spectator. In searching for American character, Smith searches for uniqueness:

> I am prepared for difference, live in difference. My pursuit of American character is, basically, a pursuit of difference. Character lives in that which is unique. What is unique about America is the extent to which it does, from time to time, pull off being a merged culture. Finding American character is a process of looking at fragments, of looking at the *un*merged. One has to do footwork, one has to move from place to place, one has to stand outside. It's not easy, and the danger is that, when you stand outside, you could end up undocumented. (*Talk to Me* 23)

One key word in Watson's speech which speaks to Smith's artistic mandate is the word "*known".* The distinction that Watson implicitly makes is that those who are 'known' in society, that is, those who have a certain degree of social power through class and race, are those who enjoy mainstream representation which is ultimately a legitimation of one's identity. The communities in Los Angeles that were frustrated with their lack of representation, revealed themselves to the greater public and powers that be, just as Smith reveals the "*un*merged" parts of her interview subjects to an audience.

She explains that one part of the problem in society between those who enjoy social power (white people, the wealthy and upper-middle classes) and those who are ignored and oppressed by normative power relations, is the fact that those who have power do not learn about those without power. Thus, those with out social/political power remain unknown, while those with power enjoy continued representation and legitimation within society. The issue then becomes one of identity. Relating from an African-American perspective, Smith describes how when growing up, black people where forced to identify with white people, but white people never had to learn to identify with black people (*Talk to Me* 71), thus, black people remain unknown within the constructs of mainstream society and, are systematically left out of the political realm. If the only identity acknowledged by mainstream society is 'white,' black people face negation for they are forced to identify with that which they are not. If mainstream society places 'whiteness' as the exemplar of identity, then there is no room for other identities to exist in the symbolic realm. It also means that white people only "have themselves to identify with" (Smith, *Talk to Me* 72), remaining ignorant toward identities which are not white. Keith Watson's speech shows that what "rocked" California was that it was an incident which forced the privileged classes to pay attention; to get to *know* other identities.

Though the theme of Black- White racial tension runs throughout *Twilight,* other themes do emerge as pertinent causes for the 1992 riots. As the show progresses, Smith begins to unearth the profound class tensions at the heart of much of the rioting as well. Near the end of the section "ROCKED," the issue of class begins to take centre stage, put best by Kate Miller, bookkeeper and accountant. Touching upon the issue of the excessive looting which took place, Miller expresses disgust at those who were outraged that "high end" stores where robbed:

> Anyway we went to Magnin/ and we seen people run in there and looted./ Its on Wilshire. Very exclusive store./ For very, you know,/ You have to have money to go in

> there to buy something./ And the people I seen runnin' out there that didn't have money to/ buy. And I turned on the TV,/ and here is Paul Moyer,/ saying/ "Yeah/ they they uh/ I. Magnin,/ I remember goin' to that store when I was a child./What he call 'em?/ He called them *thugs!*I say "Hell with you *asshole!"/* That was my my,/ I say "Okay! Okay!" for them to run into these *other* stores/ you know?/ "But don't go in no store,/ that I I grew up on that has,/ that my parents/ took me to,/ that is/ expensive!/ These stores/ they ain't supposed to be to be/ looted!. How dare you loot a store/ that rich people go to!/ I mean the nerve of them!" (*slight pause.*)/ I-found-that-very-offensive! (74)

The inequitable discrepancy of wealth distribution emerges as one very important detail in the section "ROCKED" as it points to how firmly entrenched the upper-middle classes are in their "safe house of identity," and thus, completely removed themselves both physically and psychologically as possible targets of the rioters. Thus, we see an important shift in "ROCKED" which further complicates the forces behind such intense rioting. Class relations emerge as a distinct cause along side race relations in the latter half of this section and Smith is careful to place this reality near the end of "ROCKED" in order to guide the spectator to that realization. Beginning this exploration of class relations is the "Anonymous Talent Agent" musing on how the upper classes got to protect themselves from the violence in the streets. Describing a lunch with colleges at an expensive restaurant, he says, "It's like we were transmitting/ thoughts/ to each other/ all across the restaurant./ We were transmitting thoughts to each other./ All the/ Frankly, the/ white/ upper class,/ upper-middle-class/ whatever your/ the/ definition is/ white, successful,/ spending too much money,/ too ya know,/ too good a restaurant,/ that kinda thing./ getting ourselves into a *frenzy/* Which I think a lot of it,/ involved,/ guilt./ Just *generic-guilt* (76). The "*generic-guilt"* described points to how rarely the privileged classes have to face the unfair playing field created by hegemonic power relations. In the reality of the L.A. riots the

privileged classes suffered least, for they remained fortified in their mansions and expensive cars, while the working class and immigrant communities burned to the ground. Here is a case of the systemic oppression of minority communities, for, as the same Hollywood Talent Agent points out, the 'marginalized' communities turned in on themselves and each other; “It/ 's so/ awful out there/ it was so *heart*breaking/ seeing those/ the *devastation* that went on/and people reduced to *burning down their own neighbourhoods*/ burning down our neighbourhoods/ I could see/ but burning down their *own/* that was more dramatic to me (93).

Elaine Young, a white Real Estate Agent from Beverly Hills who Smith interviewed (Smith was criticized of caricaturing Young, prompting Smith to provide a brief video of Young in the filmed PBS version of *Twilight*), is a prime example of how those with social privilege and power were able to buttress themselves from the harsh reality of what was taking place outside of their gated communities. Her speech is entitled “Safe and Sound in Beverly Hills,” and paints a vivid picture of the class divide from the perspective of unabashed privilege:

> [...]Some *man* wrote me a letter./ “To Mrs. Young./ You are really an asshole./ You take life so lightly./ I saw your interview on television./ As far as I'm concerned,/ you're a dumb shit bimbo,/ talking about having fun during the riots at the Polo Lounge./ How stupid can you be./ You're an embarrassment.” (*seems shocked.*) I mean, oh my God, I'm reading this letter./I got it three weeks ago./ That's when the Polo Lounge closed./ [...] It was like people hanging out together./ So then you say, “Well let me put this out of my mind for a while and go on”/ like safety in numbers./ No one can hurt us as the Beverly Hills Hotel/ 'cause it was like a fortress! So that was the mood at the polo lounge/ “Here we are,/ and we're still alive-”/ and you know, / “We hope there'll be people alive when we come out!” (80)

Smith shifts the focus from the white/ upper-class perspective after Young's speech. If Young's speech, along with the Anonymous Talent Agent's, are about the privilege of self-protection from reality, then the next speech by Elvira Evers, is a direct antithesis. Evers' speech is exemplar of how those with less privilege can't simply protect themselves from the reality of the violence.

Elvira Evers, a young, Black Pan American, working-class mother, suffered a gunshot wound during the riots just as she was stepping into her door. What is remarkable about Evers' story is that she was pregnant at the time, and the bullet happened to get lodged in the elbow of her unborn baby. The story she relates of driving to the hospital with her friend after getting shot in her pregnant stomach is harrowing, but what is even more moving is the fact that, as the doctor explains, if her baby had not caught the bullet in its elbow, both she and the child would have died: “And her doctor he told,/ he explain to me,/ that the bullet/ destroyed her placenta/and/went through me/ and she caught in her arm./ [...]If she didn't caught it in her arm,/Me, and her, would be dead./See,/ So it's like/ open your eyes!/ *Watch* what is goin' on! (98)

Elvers' story can be read as a challenge to Elaine Young and the Anonymous Talent Agent, both of whom have the privilege of being able to shut their eyes to “that which is normally bypassed/overlooked” (Watson 66). The image of Elvers' baby catching a bullet in her arm conjures up notions of receptivity, responsibility, and adaptability, all notions which are vital to Smith's work as an actor and social activist. To “*Watch* what is goin' on!” is to take interest and responsibility for one's community, and implies a sensitivity to one's environment-- a sensitivity which is cultivated through empathy. Moreover, I would like to suggest that Evers' insistence to “open your eyes!/ *Watch* what is going on!” mirrors Smith's effort to travel in between cultural lines in so far as it demands that a person be present and adaptable within their environment. To “open your eyes!” to what is taking place means to be present and aware, which Smith describes as an ethical mode of living as well as an artistic one.

With respect to Globalism and adaptability to a changing world, Smith says, “At such a time as this, it would be useful, I think, to have at least a cadre of people who were willing to move between cultural lines and across social strata. Globalism will require it, so we may as well practice our moves” (23).

Evers intuitively understands what Smith both theoretically and practically articulates: that movement and adaptability are necessary tools for survival, as well as humanizing ones. Smith is interested in how various people in her shows are stuck inside their “safe house of identity” and which ones are able to move and be moved, physically, intellectually, and emotionally. Ultimately, adaption and movement speaks to a liminal mode of being in the world. With reference to *Fires in the Mirror,* Smith says: “Motion is what I'm interested in right now. People who talk about motion, who use the word move. In my show I've become interested in which characters can move in the space and which ones can't. Angela [Davis] walks. Richard Green walks. Sharpton moves his chair. Whatever we think about Sharpton's limitations, he's in motion” (Martin 54). Thus, there is an interesting dance between those characters in Smith's shows who are able to adapt, who are able to potentially step out of their “safe house of identity” and those who remain inside the fortification, such as Elaine Young.

“ROCKED” concludes with Jessye Norman's speech, heralding the beginning of the second act of the show, “LOSSES.” “LOSSES” is possibly the darkest moment in the play as it explores themes of enslavement, hatred, and profound violence. Several themes emerge from “Act Two: Losses,” such as the schism within the black community about whether their lack of black rights and representation within American society should be dealt with through non-violence or aggression. One equally important theme, crystallized in act two, is how Korean-Americans were heavily scapegoated during the riots. The Korean-American experience in L.A. was largely downplayed or ignored by the media and judicial system. In *Twilight,* a parallel is drawn between the insidious oppression of African-Americans and the historical and ongoing oppression of Koreans. In one poignant moment, Jin Ho Lee

describes how Koreans understand the African-American experience, for they too come from a history of slavery and other systematic attempts of erasure:

> I don't care if you're black, if you're, uhm, Asian or Caucasian./ And many black people are telling me: “No! We weren't here with American Dream. We are here as a slave.”/ I understand What I”m saying is, you are not slave at this moment. And I con-/sider their resentment many times, but somehow African-American people think they are still slave./ That's wrong, that's what's wrong with these people's mind, you know./ Because, two hundred years ago in Korea, I know if my father was slave cause there were slave system in Korea also. [...] We can tell by the name. There's eight last name. There's eight last name that were slave. Chung, Bao, Chi, Chu, Mah, Wah, Pi.../...oh seven,/ those last names are slave name, you know. (141)

Historical and ongoing oppression and degradation of both African-Americans and Korean-Americans “makes itself *known*” in act two and this intuitive and actual understanding of oppression is clearly one thing both blacks and Koreans share; however it is not something available to white people as an experience or point of reference. Scholar Cornel West, in his speech, “Chekhov/ Coltrane,” points out this divide in understanding between white people and black people: “But if whites experienced black sadness...(*pause*)/ It would be too overwhelming for them. (*pause)/* very few white people could actually take seriously,/ black sadness and live the lives that/ they livin: livin' in denial/ “Oh it couldn't be that bad”/ And they have their own form of sadness/ Tends to be linked to/ the American dream/ But it's a very very very different kind of/ Sadness (108).

It is notable that during the riots, the Korean-American community were targeted by mostly black rioters, while little damage was affected upon white communities. Ultimately, one of the most direct and honest analyses of this phenomenon is by Mrs. Young Soon Han, Korean-American and

former liquor store owner, who points out that the pattern and need for scapegoating as power is acutely sequestered by white supremacy- meaning that white people have the privilege of remaining "safe and sound in Beverly Hills," while more vulnerable communities must absorb and perpetuate frustration and rage.

The last section of act two, "JUSTICE" explores an idea which Smith is very concerned with, that is, how a society treats its most vulnerable (*Big Think,* 2007). In this section, Mrs. Young Soon Han questions, as Smith puts it, "the official truth" (*TED Talks* 2007). Smith credits Mrs. Young Soon Han with teaching her the most about race (*TED Talks* 2007), and describes how, in her speech entitled, "Swallowing the Bitterness," Mrs. Young Soon Han is "taking a chance and questioning what justice is in society." Mirroring Smith's quest to question normative realities and status quo representations, Mrs. Young Soon Han examines the world she has inherited through an acutely analytical and critical lens. The issues presented in her speech come down to a lack of representation in society, coupled with a resignation that Korean Americans must carry the burden of the scapegoated:

> I really realized that/ Korean immigrants were left out/ from this/ society and we were nothing./ What is our right?/ Is it because we are Korean?/Is it because we have no politicians? Is it because we don't/ speak good English?/ Why?/ Why do we have to be left out?/ we are not qualified for medical treatment!/ We are not qualified to get uh/ food stamps!/ [...] Where do I finda [sic] justice?/ [...] and I have a lot of sympathy and understanding for them [black people]/Because of their effort, and sacrificing,/ other minorities like And Hispanic/ or Asians/ maybe we have to suffer more/ by mainstream,/ you know?[...] (169).

The question of justice which haunts the latter half of *Twilight* has concerned Smith throughout her career. In questioning the official truth, Mrs. Young Soon Han succeeds in doing what Smith sees as

the role of the artist in society: which is to interpret the world through an inverted lens. Taking her cue from Sartre, Smith maintains that the actor's role in society is to see society through an alternative lens. In describing an essay on acting by Jean Paul Sartre, Smith relates how Sartre describes how an actor should be reading the financial pages of a newspaper upside down. Smith adds to his point, saying: "We should see that the pages could work just as well for the study of humanity if they were upside down. But actors today are more likely to have the financial pages right side up [...] We're all taking ourselves awfully seriously in America right now. Even the clowns have mortgages" (*Talk to Me* 48).

Mrs. Young Soon Han's speech speaks to the complexity of race relations in America, and pragmatically, suggests that these problems may never be solved. Despite her empathetic understanding of the African American plight and a nuanced interpretation of justice in American society, Mrs. Young Soon Han does not concede that relations will get better for minority groups, nor does she see much hope for positive interracial relations. As the penultimate moment in the show, her speech ends on a bitterly heartbreaking note when she says: "I wish I could/ live together/ with eh [sic] blacks/ but after the riots/ there were too much differences/ The fire is still there/ how do you call it/ (*She says a Korean word asking for translation. In Korean, she says "igniting fire."*)/ igni/ igniting fire/ it canuh/burst out any time" (169). There is a sad resignation to the end of Mrs. Young Soon Han's speech, which ultimately captures the reality of the riots: the most vulnerable within a society, those who live without the humanizing power of representation, are perpetually denied justice in the name of conserving implicit power relations.

Finally the show transitions into a salient theme of Smith's work: The conception of identity in limbo, which speaks to Smith's concept of stepping out of the 'safe house of identity.' This section is titled "TWILIGHT," after the gang truce organizer, Twilight Bey. The final words of the show provide a meta-narrative as Twilight speaks, through Smith, to the very essence of what Smith endeavours to do

through her work: to conceive identity as fluid and liminal in order to attempt to empathize with another's experience. This conception of identity, the notion that identity is a process of becoming rather that being, has been at the forefront of Smith's *On the Road: The Search for American Character* project. In her introduction to *Fires in the Mirror,* She details how identity is a process rather than a means to an end: "the discovery of human behaviour can happen in motion. It can be a process of moving from the self to other and the other to the self" *(Fires in the Mirror* xxxii). This dance between the self and other, a metaphor Smith also uses, is nowhere more poignantly explored in *Twilight.* Smith refuses to have the ultimate analysis end with the foreboding words of Mrs. Young Soon Han. Instead she offers a new possibility presented through the words of Twilight Bey, organizer of the Gang Truce in L.A. Bey speaks to Smith's entire mandate as an artist, social activist, and playwright: that is, he moves out of his "safe house of identity:"

> So to me, its like I'm stuck in Limbo,/ like the sun is stuck between night and day,/ in the twilight hours,/You know?/ I'm in an area not many people exist./ Night time to me/ is like a lack of sun./ And I don't affiliate/ darkness with anything negative./ I affiliate/ darkness of what was first/ because it *was* first/ and then relative to my complexion,/ I am a *dark* individual/and with me stuck in limbo/ I see darkness as myself/ I see the light (*he lights a candle.*) as knowledge and the wisdom/ of the world and understanding others./ And in order for me to be, a to be, a true human being./ I can't forever dwell in darkness./I can't forever dwell in the idea, just identifying with people like me, and understanding me and/ mine./So twilight/ is/ that time/between day and night/ limbo./ I call it limbo. (171)

As a final analysis, Smith, uses the words of Twilight Bey to point to Cornel West's assertion that hope offers "new possibilities based/ on visions that/ become contagious" (106). Twilight Bey

articulates exactly how social change may occur; in the understanding that human beings are relational, and that to negate the other, is to finally negate the self. It is more accurate then to conceive of *Twilight*, not as a cohesive narrative with a finite point to make about race relations in America, but rather an experiment and exercise in the creation and negotiation of identity. *Twilight* is a snapshot of identity in motion. With *Twilight* there is no teleological design, ultimately saving the show from entering a didactic or oversimplified examination of race in America. Therefore, what the show offers the spectator is less a solution or final analysis on race relations, and more a testament to how it is both possible and necessary to live in an "other-oriented" state while not negating the self. This is the tension at the heart of Smith's work and life and it is through this approach that Smith re-imagines the human through theatre.

From an academic perspective, much has been written on Smith's performance of identity as liminal space. As Jacqueline O'Connor articulates with regard to the liminality created by Smith's dramaturgy: "this liminal place that houses both the individual and the communal identities is created through Smith's unique dramaturgy, which emphasizes the formation of self while it also emphasizes the travel from self to other, thereby becoming a bridge that forms communities of connected but not necessarily homogenous selves" (155). O' Connor observes that Smith's approach to character, as well as her carefully constructed dramaturgy, creates a liminal understanding of the human being. O'Connor cites Alice Raynor who illustrates that as Smith can "never fully "become" the characters she performs" (O'Connor 155) that she performs "at a site between herself as subject and those interviewees as subjects" (Raynor as qtd. in O'Connor 155), thus blurring the line between Subject-Object relations. O'Connor posits that Smith, in creating a liminal space through her dramaturgical structure, ensures that the complexity of the riots and the various reactions to them, is preserved. As Smith's work hinges on the inexplicable (as her interview subjects grope for language and in her

overlapping of antithetical points of view), she creates an ambivalent space, which is a space that opposes a final solution. What I conclude in light of O' Connor's astute analysis, is that in creating an ambivalent space through a play text and performance with no specific teleology other than to promote an empathetic understanding of the other and therefore, *movement* of the self, Smith re-defines the human as a liminal and inexplicable space. Why this is significant, is that it allows for the human to resist, even just momentarily, the drive to be formally ordered and thus objectified. The human as conceived by Smith in her work, cannot participate in a hierarchy of representation for it continually shows the seams of its identity unravelling in broken syntax and rhythmic irregularities. The movement from self to other and back again, according to this logic, is conceivably a closer expression to humanness as opposed to the notion as the human being as the self-contained individualist as nurtured by capitalism. Finally, this dance between the self and other is a fluid one where the self always comes back to the self, transformed, moved, and changed by the other, but never at the expense of the other's identity or at the negation of the self.

Chapter 4: “Talking 'bout A Revolution”

There has been a considerable hiatus with Smith's *On the Road: The Search for American Character* project. Smith's work as a tenured professor at Tisch School of the Arts and NYU and her work in television (*The West Wing* and *Nurse Jackie*) as well as film have no doubt occupied her since her last *On the Road* project, *House Arrest (*which debuted in 1995 to mixed reviews). Her most recent *Let Me Down Easy* (2009), is a considerable thematic departure from her earlier successes, *Fires in the Mirror* and *Twilight, Los Angeles 1992.* However, true to Smith's mandate to work for social change, her latest effort is just as topical and contextualized as *Fires* and *Twilight.*

In this final chapter, I will look at how, *Let Me Down Easy,* acts as a benchmark to Smith's oeuvres as a performance artist over the last thirty years. An in depth analysis of the text of *Let Me Down Easy* is not possible, as the text from the show has not yet been published; I will examine what Smith says about the piece and its various themes to provide a link between where Smith started from and where she ostensibly ends up. I will also re-examine questions I posed in the beginning of my inquiry: is the success of Smith's work reliant on her as the only one who can performer in it? Is it transferable or has she created a method that like many performance artists, is deeply personal and inseparable from her presence? Finally, I will conclude by considering the impact and relevance of Smith's work in the theatre, as a theatre artist striving for social change in America on a political, intellectual and creative scale.

Let Me Down Easy premiered in the wake of the 2009 health care debate and focuses on the frailty and resilience of the human body, as well as medicine and questions of health care reform. (Although in previous incarnations the show did not centre around health care to such an extent and was revised by Smith in order to maintain a necessary social relevance). In an interview with the *New York Times*, Smith explains that: “it's a substantial revision of what I did before, focusing far more on

health care than the previous productions. Signs seem to suggest we will soon be in a vigorous national debate over health care. The piece not only looks at the human body as both resilient and vulnerable, but also at health care as the practical part of that" (Smith, qtd. In Andrew Gans). Commissioned by the Yale School of Medicine in 2006, Smith was asked to interview doctors and patients and present her 'characters' at a "kind of fuddy-duddyish assemblage of doctors" (Smith, Bill Moyers Journal PBS 2009). Ralph Horowitz, the head of internal medicine at Yale who had originally commissioned Smith to construct the show, was concerned with, "the extent to which doctors could listen or not. And he was also very concerned about where health care was going because so much of it was in the market place" (Bill Moyers Journal PBS 2009). The problem of the market place and late capitalism's commodification of the human being is once again at the forefront of *Let Me Down Easy* which creates a world on stage where a great democratizing effect is produced as the sick, poor, dead, healthy, wealthy, famous, and relatively unknown, share a stage "housed" by Smith.

Privatized heath care in America is a prime example of how human beings are treated as commodities under capitalism. It also demonstrates how class dictates the value of human life, as only those with means may afford the benefits of health, medical attention, and insurance, while those with less money are left to languish regardless of their needs. Creating and performing a show which gives testimony to the inequality in America with regard to health and the human body, at a time where new health care legislation was being debated, shows a direct effort by Smith to take a stand as an artist politically, as well as an attempt to sway the opinions of the general public. This is one specific way that *Let Me Down Easy* differs from *Fires* and *Twilight.* In her previous shows, Smith's presence as an authorial voice who strives to create order out of chaos, meaning out of violence, stops short of pursuing a specific political agenda. With *Let Me Down Easy,* however, Smith blurs the lines between herself as an artist and as a private citizen; her own feelings about health care reform are heard against

the voices of her various interview subjects. In many ways, *Let Me Down Easy* is the least impartial and most personal work of Smith's *On the Road* series, including Smith playing her aunt on her maternal side. Smith, a historically private person, had never before performed members of her own family. Perhaps what makes Smith's most recent work so personal is her own coming to terms with the aging process and death. At sixty-one, Smith has now begun to look at her life and work from a retrospective position rather than with forward momentum.

Let Me Down Easy is more abstract and less specific than *Fires* and *Twilight.* Engaging with her standard methodology of interviewing, listening and performing the words of others, Smith creates a robust show which muses on questions of mortality, disease, and health as she interviews a broad range of characters, including Lance Armstrong, Eve Ensler, supermodel Lauren Hutton, the late Governor of Texas Anne Richards, to various health professionals, Hurricane Katrina survivors, a bull rider, a professional boxer, Rabbis, priests, and a Buddhist Monk. All her interviews have one thing in common: they reflect a sense of the vulnerability of the human body. The vulnerability that some bodies face versus the security and health of other individuals is one of the foundational reasons for Smith's creation of this project:

> I've been interviewing people who are dying, I've talked to some doctors, I went to Rwanda and talked to some people ten years after the genocide. Went to South Africa and talked to people about the pandemic of HIV/AIDS there. And on the other hand, I talked to people who are very talented, vibrant people with their bodies, like Lance Armstrong, for example. And I have come to the conclusion that, you know, it's just not fair. That some people get certain burdens, and some people get certain gifts, but that, as somebody said to me the other day, these gifts are randomly delivered. [...] If it's not fair, what do we do? What should we do? What should we do personally? Will the desire to

> have things be fair and be equal go away as a human enterprise? [...] The bad news is that some are more vulnerable than others. The good news is that occasionally, powerful human beings have used their power to make it okay for everybody. (Big Think Interview)

In *Let Me Down Easy,* Smith attempts to create a level playing field where the vulnerability of the human body is exposed and expressed, and where others who have been less fortunate than such celebrities as Lance Armstrong, may reveal their physical struggle through a verbal struggle as framed by Smith. One particular moment in the play which exposes the inequitable treatment suffered by those less fortunate with regard to care, is the moment where Smith, through the words of a head doctor at Charity Hospital in New Orleans, relates her experience of working in the poor, predominately black hospital during hurricane Katrina. The U.S. Government's profound negligence with regard to this community exposes how those with money, privilege and white skin are prioritized and those without such privilege are ignored, disregarded, and ultimately treated as disposable. As the doctor passionately relates:

> I mean, my patients at Charity Hospital, they're not dumb. The nurses at Charity Hospital, they're not dumb. They knew, they knew, that we were gonna be the last ones out. They knew the patients in the private hospitals had private helicopters, and it wasn't a shock to people. And the fact that it wasn't a shock to people, was so shocking to me. And you just see the desperation of being poor in this country, and in some ways the distrust, I mean the deep down distrust. I mean this is not the first time that this has happened to people. I'm privileged! This is the first time that I have ever been fucking abandoned by my government, but it wasn't the first time for the nurses or for the other people who work at charity or my patients at Charity Hospital. [...] Ninety percent of the

> nurses on the floor are African- American. And the African American nurses and the other people who work at Charity said two things to me early on, They said, one, they opened the levees on us, meaning they had flooded the poor areas of Orleans Parish to spare the other parts, and two, they said to me early on, they're not gonna come and get us. (*Let Me Down Easy* qtd. in Bill Moyers Journal, PBS)

This horrifying account of systemic injustice is also a testament to Smith's commitment in exposing the false ideologies insidiously lodged into her country's politics and mainstream consciousness. Such ideologies include the notion that some lives are expendable and some are worth saving. It is in this way that *Let Me Down Easy,* reflects her initial radical promise to represent humanity in the ways in which it challenges fixed notions of what is considered valid expressions of humanness. Moreover, the injustice expressed in the doctor's story and those effected by such injustice have a chance to live- albeit fleetingly and fictionally, in a democratized space as created by Smith. The creation of a space where some of the most systemically neglected individuals can have a voice alongside the powerful (such as Eve Ensler, Lance Armstrong, and Anderson Cooper to name a few), shows a potential for how democracy can function not only in the imagined third space[1] of Smith's theatre, but in reality itself. Smith, leading by example, shows how what is necessary for a true democratic situation is for others to be able to listen to one another. It is through the respectful silence of listening and exchanging that the impulse toward negating the other is dampened. Despite the fact that *Let Me Down Easy* reveals the artist's political agenda much more overtly than any previous works, the disunity and disharmony of the various voices still remains, as Smith draws from a diverse cross section of American society. Specifically, Smith is careful to have the very rich and powerful and the very poor and vulnerable speak side by side. It is in displaying the gap of inequality and unfairness that Smith finds

1 Third Space theory (Bhabha, 1997): "The pact of interpretation is never simply an act of communication between the I and the You designated in the statement. The production of meaning requires that these two places be mobilized in the passage through a Third Space" (208).

PBS).

In naming her piece, Smith said it "came to me like almost out of a dream" (Bill Moyers Journal PBS); as a way of getting her interviewees to open up, she would ask them what the title *Let Me Down Easy* meant to them. James Cone, a black liberation theologian who is one of the twenty characters in the show, replies "Those are words of broken heart. They could be interpreted as broken love. Let me down easy. I certainly heard it within that context, it's about love broken. Don't do it too harshly. Not too mean. Let me down easy" (Bill Moyers Journal PBS). Smith then asks him if the title could be about death, to which Cone responds, "it could be" (Bill Moyers Journal PBS). When asked what the title means to her, Smith reflects:

> I think it's about grace and kindness in a world that lacks that often, not always. In a winner take all world where we don't think about the people who are losing. We don't think about the people who are abandoned by jobs or governments or lovers or fathers or mothers. And a call for that kind of grace and kindness and consideration. And the metaphor, I think, of death as the ultimate form of loss, possibly, possibly our greatest fear as the ultimate form of abandonment and that in this country we have a hard time looking at death and we have a hard time looking at loss, we have a hard time looking at losing" (Bill Moyers Journal PBS).

The metaphor of death as the ultimate form of loss speaks profoundly to the many ways loss is explored through out *Let Me Down Easy.* In essence, the show is a meditation on and exploration of loss in its many powerful and varied forms. If, as Smith asserts, her country "has a hard time looking at loss" in a "winner take all world," then it is she who forces her audience to confront that discomfort through the words of those who have experienced irredeemable loss. However, the abandonment which accompanies great loss is momentarily erased by Smith as she acts as a healer accompanying us to our

death beds, promising not to abandon us in our final hours. This is Smith's contract with her audience and it provides an active example of how “grace and kindness” can be enacted once the fear of loss is revealed. But, though Smith acts as a cultural healer, her empathy does not diffuse the real need to present the material social circumstances in America that have lead to this moment in history where health care reform is being examined and debated.

The critical response to *Let Me Down Easy* has been generally positive with the one criticism that Smith's latest effort is perhaps too broad in scope, and perhaps too long. Charles Isherwood, for the *New York Times* writes; “Appealing as it is, “Let Me Down Easy” ultimately feels less like a single cohesive show than a sampler highlight from several different ones” (January 22, 2008). Having had the opportunity to see the New York production of *Let Me Down Easy* at The Public Theatre in 2010, I would agree that the piece has too broad a thematic range and is overly long. There are many different moments in the show where it could end, leaving the audience with a sense that the show could use more editing. As previously mentioned, the show reflects Smith's point of view about health care reform. However, in light of the fact that the piece betrayed Smith's political agenda in a very material way, I did feel, based on my limited perspective of only seeing the show once, that Smith was ultimately preaching to the converted. This is markedly different case than her previous shows which involved a wider range people in diverse camps of identity-her audience audibly agreeing and disagreeing with certain characters as with *Fires* and *Twilight.* I found that this audience, while racially diverse, mostly consisted of an upper-middle class, university educated, liberal demographic. The audience did not necessarily reflect the democratized community Smith presented on stage that evening. It is hard to say whether Smith be faulted for this but in any case, it does show that while her intentions behind her work may be the same, perhaps Smith has lost some of the radicalism that her earlier work reflected.

However, that this sense of a lack of immediacy does little to undermine Smith's relevance as a theatre artist today. Smith is still very much in touch with the current issues plaguing her country, she is still sensitive to listening to and revealing the many 'truths' of a diverse and at some times incompatible range of people, and she still tirelessly places herself outside her "safe house of identity" *Let Me Down Easy* is an indication of such effort. With regard to the questions I posed in chapter 1, Smith's work reliant on her as the only performer of it? And, if this is the case, what does this mean for Smith's methodology? Is it transferable or has she created a method that like many performance artists, is deeply personal and inseparable from her presence?

As a performance artist, Smith's work is reliant on herself as the principal performer. In previous incarnations when her work has been performed by other theatre companies (as was the case with *House Arrest),* the work was perceived as less effective. Part of what the spectator witnesses in her shows is Smith"s relationship to her interview subjects and vice versa; this relationship does not exist in the same dynamic way when a third perspective comes into play. That being said, Smith's work provides a very distinct model for other theatre artists and companies to follow in pursuit of doing similar journalistic style verbatim theatre. Smith has crafted a methodology that is available for use, and perhaps even more so then her plays, it is Smith's unique methodology of other-oriented acting that is her legacy. As Smith's work speaks to a specific historical context within American culture, it is difficult to say what kind of staying power her plays will have. The resilience of Smith's work, then, depends upon her technique and the principles behind it, for it is through listening and rhythmic repetition that a non-psychological, other-orientated, and rigorously empathetic acting methodology may find a place in Western acting technique. Smith's *On the Road* project is a testament to the success of her methodology, and provides a framework through which to access this alternative approach to acting, play creation, and dramatrugy. There is no doubt that Smith's contribution to acting pedagogy is

significant, again perhaps more significant than her plays for it allows an active engagement on the part of the actor in the creation of their own *On the Road* style of work. Moreover, her work is not limited to only the actor's experience, it allows others to critically and sensorially engage in rigorous empathy. The basic tenet of Smith's technique demands for an understanding of identity as liminal, a becoming as opposed to being. This approach to acting is ethically radical to a western orthodoxy where the human being is largely seen as psychologically fixed and whole: "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 character. To me, the search for the character is constantly in motion. It is a quest that moves back and forth between the self and other (*Fires in the Mirror* xxvii).

Clearly then, Smith's methodology does not rely on a specific Smith 'aura' and is entirely transferable as a legitimate acting technique. In fact this is Smith's intention, for it is exactly this travel between the self and other and back to the self that she has been teaching her acting students over the last thirty years. This technique also provides an exemplar for an ethical mode of living beyond acting, beyond the rehearsal halls and beyond the performance. To listen without negating the other, to be moved and changed by the other, is not exclusive to the performer; it is a mode of living which is echoed in post-modern philosophical discourse, situating Smith as a cultural critic as well as an actor, performance artist, and teacher. Smith's exploration of the dynamic between the self and other is akin to one that Judith Butler cogently describes in her text *Undoing Gender,* where the identity of the self is in a continual state of being undone in the face of the other. Butler describes a scenario where the subject, in the telling of a story loses their composure in their relationality to the other:

> I might try to tell a story about what I am feeling, but it would have to be a story in which the very "I" who seeks to tell the story is stopped in the midst of the telling. The very "I" is called into question by its relation to the one who I address myself. This relation to the Other does not

precisely ruin the story or reduce me to speechlessness, but it does, invariably, clutter my speech with signs of its undoing. (19)

Butler and Smith share a rhetoric about the relationality of the self to the other. This is significant, in that it places Smith's work in a larger context of American philosophy, ethics, and cultural criticism (this is how Butler self identifies), which only deepens the impact and cultural relevance of Smith's work. Incidentally, Butler and Smith are acquainted, as Smith has interviewed and performed Butler in previous *On the Road* projects, and includes snippets of conversation between the two of them in her book, *Talk to Me: Travels in Media and Politics.*

As a final analysis, it is telling to look at how Smith herself defines her own theatrical legacy. Upon being interviewed about her contribution to American theatre, Smith is pragmatically critical:

> I have been trying to contribute something about variety that I had hoped, and I haven't succeeded, that I hoped it would change the very nature of the way theatre is produced and who comes to the theatre, because, you know the theatre is a very segregated place. Most of the people who run theatres in this country are white people. My generation had many promising directors, and producers and writers, and they're not around making theatre. And it breaks my heart. And I feel in some ways that I haven't contributed nearly enough in terms of what my thought about that was when I first was studying acting in a theatre where everybody on the stage was white and everybody in the audience was white. And I thought, that's so weird.[...] So I thought well, maybe if I can figure out a way of bringing more colours of people on to the stage, more colours of people will come to the theatre. That hasn't happened. You know, I think there's so much work yet to be done in the American theatre so that it, as a cultural form can help mirror the magnificent way that this country has changed since the time I was a girl in

> Baltimore. But I just don't feel it has. And it breaks my heart. It breaks my heart. (Think Big Interview)

Smith's analysis of the state of American theatre and her own role in trying to reform it, is honest, albeit saddening. However, what *Let Me Down Easy* offers, as a testament to her kind of work, is an examination of the struggle to create and endure despite inhospitable circumstances. While Smith admits that her work has not ultimately 'succeeded' in its intention, her work nevertheless upholds the aesthetic and ethical dimensions which have founded it. Smith's dialectical struggle, to travel from the self to the other and back again, mirrors the ongoing struggle of any creative endeavour for which there is no 'telos' except for empathy. In an interview about *Let Me Down Easy,* Smith concludes that what the piece shows is the effort, the struggle to endure in the face of negation is the significance of her show. Using the metaphor of bull- riding based off of a bull-rider character from the show, Smith concludes:

> One of the themes of this play is toughness. And that toughness is, when you meet that thing that is going to defeat you, how do you ride that bull. And so I think, the thing that gets us through, whether you get a diagnosis, whether you are having trouble with the health care system, or with your insurance, the thing that keeps us going is this understanding that we are small. That we weigh 150 pounds, but the bull. What keeps you going is that determination, and that determination is hooked into a belief, that if you keep going, that if you struggle, something really beautiful is going to happen. (NPR February 2011)

The profundity of Smith's work lies in its palpable struggle. The struggle to bridge the gap between the self and other, the struggle of the human being to articulate the inexplicable, the struggle to critique and change the face of American theatre. However, the notion of struggle as a legitimate and,

perhaps, truer mode of humanness is much closer to a democratic ideal than the current state of democracy. Struggle as a mode of being opens the human up, moves the human toward a re-definition of itself as a liminal, relational, and necessarily empathetic being. As Butler concludes in her book *Precarious Life:*

> The task of cultural criticism is to return us to the human where we do not expect to find it, in its frailty and at the limits of its capacity to make sense. The task is to create a sense of the public in which oppositional voices are not feared, degraded or dismissed, but valued for the instigation to a sensate democracy they occasionally perform. (151)

In showing our continual struggle to preform our identities, Smith shows the human at its most vulnerable and perhaps the human at its best: undone.

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