IW (FLEXIBLE CASTING): DIVERSITY AND DOUBLENESS IN ANNA DEAVERE SMITH'S ON THE ROAD: A SEARCH FOR AMERICAN CHARACTER

DISSERTATION

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for
the Degree Doctor of Philosophy in the Graduate
School of The Ohio State University

By

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The Ohio State University
2005

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation examines playwright and performer Anna Deavere Smith’s critically acclaimed series, *On the Road: A Search for American Character*. Focusing on the project’s thirteenth, fourteenth, and fifteenth installments, *Fires in the Mirror: Crown Heights, Brooklyn and Other Identities*, *Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992*, and *House Arrest: A Search for American Character In and Around the White House, Past and Present*, respectively, this study demonstrates how diversity and doubleness serve as the foundation of Smith’s dramaturgical investigation into the relationship between language and character.

Smith focuses on communities experiencing socio-political duress and persons whose voices have gone largely unheard within those communities. In collecting, editing, and performing verbatim excerpts from interviews with white, African American, Korean, Latino, and Jewish women and men, Smith’s interest in cultural diversity plays a crucial role in fulfilling the mission of *On the Road*: to make connections between the seemingly disconnected and spark productive discussion about matters of race.

Characters in Smith’s dramas regularly reveal a sense of double consciousness, to quote W.E.B. Du Bois’s influential concept, grappling with their awareness of themselves as racial minorities and how their identities are viewed as “other” by the dominant culture.
Furthermore, many events upon which the plays are based are shown to have double meanings and be open to a wide range of interpretation. The same holds true for the imperfect but poetic language employed by characters to describe these events. By presenting a panoply of voices and exploring events from multiple perspectives, Smith investigates how and why disagreements, tensions, failures to understand, and inabilities to communicate have plagued the diverse populations of Crown Heights, Los Angeles, and the United States.

This dissertation also explores how Smith’s multiple identities as African American, woman, interviewer, playwright, and actor complicate her staged representations of character and are essential to reading her work in production. Finally, it examines the plays’ production histories and critical response, weighing the consequences of how critics did and did not take into account arguably the most important character of all in *On the Road*: Smith herself.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I wish to thank the many teachers who have provided me with mentorship and support throughout my theatre studies, especially my adviser, Dr. Joy Reilly. I am forever grateful for her insight and the emotional support she provided me during this process.

My sincere gratitude goes to Dr. Lesley Ferris and Dr. Alan Woods for their time and effort as members of my dissertation committee.

I am deeply appreciative of Dr. Esther Beth Sullivan, who offered valuable guidance in developing the dissertation.

I am grateful also to Dr. Leah Lowe and Dr. Thomas Postlewait for their counsel and mentorship throughout this process.

I am indebted to the staff of The Ohio State University’s Lawrence and Lee Theatre Research Institute, especially Val Pennington, who aided me in my research.

I extend my appreciation to those individuals who granted me interviews or responded to my inquiries, including Toni-Leslie James, Carol Martin, and Ric Wanetik.

Finally, I must express my gratitude for my family, my parents David Michael Seamon and Cheryl Lee Seamon, my parents-in-law William Richey Graf, Jr. and Martha Bush Graf, and my wife Lauren Graf Seamon for her love, kindness, and endless encouragement.
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“I believe that character is the struggle to say what we think. Character is the struggle to put things into language.”

The creative impetus for Anna Deavere Smith’s *On the Road: A Search for American Character* derived from a book of Native American poetry, a childhood memory of the playwright’s grandfather, Shakespeare’s Queen Margaret, Sophia Loren, Joan Rivers, and Johnny Carson. It is appropriate that these diverse and seemingly unrelated sources inspired her work, as Smith strives for similar coherency through apparent disjointedness in her dramaturgy. This is best evidenced by a trio of documentary dramas belonging to her *On the Road* series. *Fires in the Mirror: Crown Heights, Brooklyn and Other Identities* explores tensions and commonalities in the relationship between the African American and Hasidic Jewish communities of Crown Heights, Brooklyn. *Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992* considers how L.A.’s diverse populations, including its African American, Korean, Latino, and white

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communities, are inextricably linked to one another despite their dissimilarities. *House Arrest: A Search for American Character In and Around the White House, Past and Present* examines how contrasting attitudes about sex, race, and politics throughout American history have come to shape modern sensibilities toward these subjects. Smith’s methodology is to juxtapose multiple perspectives by jumping from one group’s point of view to another’s and back again, showing how people are connected not merely in terms of geography but also through their disconnectedness. Her use of verbatim and often imperfect dialogue appears also to lack continuity, until the realization is made that the extraordinariness of how people speak is yet another shared point. An inquiry into contemporary American life, *On the Road* makes connections between “things that don’t fit together,” pursues “relationships of the unlikely,” and aims to help Americans “assemble our obvious differences.” At the heart of this search for American character is Smith’s abiding interest in race, community, and language.

Before *On the Road* was set in motion in the early 1980s, Smith was already experimenting with the power of words. She first realized the compelling relationship between language and character as a young acting student:

> I remember leafing through a book of Native American poems one morning while I was waiting for my Shakespeare class to begin and being struck by a phrase from the preface, ‘The word, the word above all, is truly magical, not only by its meaning, but by its artful manipulation.’ This quote, which I

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added to my journal, reminded me of something my grandfather had told me when I was a girl: ‘If you say a word often enough it becomes your own.’ [Later my father] told me that my grandfather had actually said, ‘If you say a word often enough, it becomes you.’ I was still a student at the time, but I knew even then, even before I had made a conscious decision to teach as well as act, that my grandfather’s words would be important.³

Inspired by the Native American poem⁴ and her grandfather’s saying, Smith approached a class assignment with experimentation in mind. She selected fourteen lines of a Queen Margaret speech from Richard III.⁵ Without thinking about what the speech meant, she simply repeated the lines aloud multiple times, letting Shakespeare’s words travel through her until they revealed their power. The experience made a lasting impression and broadened Smith’s thinking about the correlation between language and character:

I then started thinking that if I listened carefully to people’s words, and particularly to their rhythms, that I could use language to learn about my own time. If I could find a way to really inhabit the words of those around me, like I had inhabited those of Queen Margaret, that I could learn about the spirit, the imagination, and the challenges of my own time, firsthand.⁶

³ Anna Deavere Smith, introduction, Fires in the Mirror: Crown Heights, Brooklyn and Other Identities xxiii-xxiv.

⁴ In a discussion with first-year students at The Ohio State University on 20 Apr. 2005, Smith remarked that “I the Song, I Walk Here,” a Modoc song rooted in Native American oral tradition, is the Native American poem which first inspired her.

⁵ Queen Margaret’s speech, which begins “From forth the kennel of thy womb hath crept,” appears in Act IV, Scene IV of Richard III.

⁶ Anna Deavere Smith, introduction, Fires in the Mirror: Crown Heights, Brooklyn and Other Identities xxv.
Disillusioned with traditional models of actor training, particularly those based in psychological realism, Smith believed she could uncover truths about character if she turned outward, examining character not as something that existed inside of her, as she had been taught, but rather as something beyond her own self, something “other.” The overarching principle for this experimentation was a focus on how people speak. By paying attention to speech patterns, vocabulary, mannerisms, and gestures, Smith sought to stretch her mental, emotional, and physical capacities in ways the Method did not. As part of her research she studied interviews as written texts, i.e. published in newspapers and magazines, and also as performances, i.e. broadcast on television talk shows. She then attempted to recreate the “character” of the interviewees by repeating their words. With enough repetition, Smith hypothesized, the words would ultimately instruct her body how to behave. She discovered that combining a person’s language and vocal qualities with his or her physical behavior was essential to creating “character” and a necessary step in her travel from “self” to “other."

The act of speech is a physical act. It is powerful enough that it can create, with the rest of the body, a kind of cooperative dance. That dance is a sketch of something that is inside a person, and not fully revealed by words alone. I came to realize that if I were able to record part of that dance – that is, the spoken part – and reenact it, the rest of the body would follow. I could then create the illusion of being another person by reenacting something they said as they had said it. Using my grandfather’s idea that if I
said a word often enough it would become me, the reenactment, or the reiteration of a person’s words would also teach me about that person.\textsuperscript{7}

As Smith practiced this technique she encountered one particular television interview that influenced her thought process and imagination. In a 1979 episode of NBC’s \textit{The Tonight Show}, host Johnny Carson welcomed actress Sophia Loren, comedienne Joan Rivers, and singing/dancing brothers Gregory and Maurice Hines to the show. Smith recounts the unusualness of the interview between Carson and Loren, Rivers’ response to Loren’s interview, and the Hines brothers’ presence:

[Loren] managed to disrupt the whole show by just refusing to participate in the rhythm of the show. She was so quiet and in control, the show was so loud. She defied the whole language of the show. Then Joan Rivers came on and she was just bananas. All of her jokes were about how beautiful Sophia Loren was and how unattractive she was and she went on and on about this European beauty. And then the Hines brothers came on and tap danced. And I turned off the TV set and said, ‘This is America.’ A European beauty comes and suddenly we have no voice, no culture. A comedienne comes on and talks about the European beauty. And some black men come out and tap dance.\textsuperscript{8}

What was subversive about Loren’s appearance was that she did not adhere to the conventions of the talk show format. She asked questions of her own, thereby interrupting

\textsuperscript{7} Anna Deavere Smith, introduction, \textit{Fires in the Mirror: Crown Heights, Brooklyn and Other Identities} xxv-xxvi.

Carson’s fast-paced rhythm, and very often her answers to his innuendo-laden questions were not what the host anticipated. Assuming control by defying language and disrupting the overall flow, Loren created what Smith calls a “characteristic moment.” Joan Rivers responded to Loren with an over-the-top performance in which she praised Loren’s physical attributes and jokingly criticized her own lack of looks. The Hines brothers’ tap routine introduced the element of race into the mix. While Smith was primarily interested in the vocal gymnastics between and among the show’s white characters (Carson, Loren, and Rivers), she observed that the role of the black characters was silent. The Hines brothers’ dancing provided a “happy ending” to a variety show in which language had inverted power structures and turned conventions upside-down. Captured in this bizarre union of white and black persons, women and men, power and struggle, words and silence, language and character, Smith noticed a portrait of America worthy, if not in need, of critical inquiry.

On the Road: A Search for American Character is a series of documentary plays in which Smith performs verbatim excerpts of interviews she conducts with members of various communities. The project was launched in the early 1980s when Smith, seeking to explore language and its relationship to character, introduced herself to strangers on the streets of New York City by saying: “If you give me an hour of your time, I’ll invite you to see yourself performed.” She initially consulted a linguist who helped devise three


10 Anna Deavere Smith, qtd. in Weinraub, “Condensing a Riot’s Cacophony Into the Voice of One Woman” C15.
questions as prompts to get people talking: (1) Have you ever come close to death?; (2) Have you ever been accused of something that you did not do?; (3) Do you remember the circumstances of your birth? Smith became as interested in the answers to these questions as the manner(s) in which people responded to them. She concentrated not only on what people said but how they said it. She singled out those moments when people verbally and physically struggled to articulate their meaning. Smith surmised that these moments of searching, complete with natural pauses, stutters, and propensities to wander and change subjects, constitute where, when, and how human beings reveal “character.” In other words, “character” is located in the stuttering, in the subject-shifting, in the imperfect:

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


route. It is on the road. Character lives in the linguistic road as well as the destination.\textsuperscript{13}

Smith’s location of character in the pursuit of poetic moments parallels an important theme running through On the Road: the difficulty Americans have engaging in meaningful conversation about race. Smith works to move communities closer to saying and hearing something meaningful about race by focusing on moments where language breaks down. Her methods are distinctive because they seek truth in the form of poetry and discover it in the roughness around human edges. By paying attention to how people talk and what they do and do not say to each other, particularly in regard to matters of race, she approaches an idea of American character that takes into account as many identities, perspectives, languages, and differences as possible. This approach constitutes the basis of her On the Road project and the oeuvre of Smith’s body of work.

The invitation to interviewees to see themselves performed was crucial to the development of On the Road. Smith immersed herself in communities experiencing socio-political duress and created performances based on interviews with members of those communities. A fundamental part of her strategy involved providing an outlet for individuals whose voices go largely unheard to express their point(s) of view. By performing verbatim interview excerpts to audiences that included the interviewees themselves, Smith in effect “showed” individuals to themselves and communities to one another, thus providing people with a new understanding of their situation and opening the lines of communication. Early On the Road performances were confined to smaller communities,

\textsuperscript{13} Anna Deavere Smith, introduction, \textit{Fires in the Mirror: Crown Heights, Brooklyn and Other Identities} xxxii.
such as the National Conference of Women and the Law (*Building Bridges Not Walls*, 1985); Princeton University (*Gender Bending: On the Road Princeton University*, 1989); the University of Pennsylvania (*Gender Bending: On the Road University of Pennsylvania*, 1990); and the Crossroads Theatre Company, New Brunswick, NJ (*From the Outside Looking In*, 1990).  

Topics ranged from racism, feminism, and broader questions of social and cultural identity. Smith’s project developed into more than an innovative theatrical investigation; it became a unique kind of public service that enabled dialogue to take place among communities in need. More than twenty years later this remains the signature of Smith’s dramatical calling card. Through research and performance, she rejuvenates communication and fosters understanding about persons and issues considered “other.” This ability to hold the mirror up to nature is a major reason why her work is widely considered high art with a social purpose.

If its socio-political function is one trademark of *On the Road*, then Smith’s performance ethos is the other. Smith’s acting style stands out because of its virtuosity. For each of the three major installments of the *On the Road* project, she drew on interviews (plus historical documents in the case of *House Arrest*) to create dramatic text, action, and a diverse array of characters. There are twenty-six different roles in *Fires in the Mirror*, thirty-seven in *Twilight*, and forty-one in *House Arrest*. In the case of *Fires in the Mirror* and *Twilight*, Smith played all the roles herself in the original stage productions. She did the

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15 I am referring to the acting editions of these plays, published by Dramatists Play Service. See bibliography for details.
same for *House Arrest* when it debuted in New York City, although initially the play was work-shopped as an ensemble piece.\textsuperscript{16} In assuming all 104 roles, Smith, who is African American, played persons of white, African American, Korean, Latino, and Jewish descent. She portrayed individuals from a variety of different professions, including scholars, journalists, poets, playwrights, painters, accountants, attorneys, police officers, opera singers, physicians, liquor store owners, truck drivers, chefs, graphic designers, prison inmates, real estate agents, speech writers, security guards, religious ministers, community activists, rappers, tour guides, photographers, newspaper columnists, historians, and politicians, including mayors, Congresspersons, and U.S. Presidents. The vocal and physical demands that Smith has met in representing this wide-ranging group make her a chameleon – a solo performer whose distinctive, African American body allows her to represent multiple and diverse characters with disarming accuracy. At five feet, nine inches tall, her height and build complement her knack for playing both women and men. As a light-skinned African American, she is able to “pass” for different races and ethnicities by altering her vocal intonation and adding a prop or costume piece. It is not only Smith’s representations that are noteworthy, however. Her transitions between characters are equally significant. With quick changes in vocals, posture, and movement, Smith has demonstrated the ability to morph from male to female, African American to Caucasian, and Jewish to non-Jewish with dexterity and believability. For her skill in crossing racial, ethnic, and gender lines in performance and raising questions about important issues of

\textsuperscript{16} I provide production histories of *Fires in the Mirror*, *Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992*, and *House Arrest* in the chapters devoted to each play.
diversity facing the United States, Smith has been described as possessing “a gift for reaching into the soul of contemporary Americans”\(^{17}\) and referred to as “She, the people.”\(^{18}\)

Whereas early On the Road pieces focused primarily on smaller communities, many critics have observed that the project’s thirteenth, fourteenth, and fifteenth installments, *Fires in the Mirror: Crown Heights, Brooklyn and Other Identities*, *Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992*, and *House Arrest: A Search for American Character In and Around the White House, Past and Present*, respectively, explore issues that concern the broader community of the United States. *Fires in the Mirror* and *Twilight* brought Smith widespread attention and critical acclaim. *Fires in the Mirror* was the recipient of the Obie Award Special Citation, 1991-92; Drama Desk Award, Solo Performance, 1992-93; and the Lucille Lortel Award, Outstanding Actress, 1993. The play was also a runner-up for the 1992 Pulitzer Prize for Drama. For *Twilight* Smith received the Obie Award for Best Play, 1993-94; Drama Desk Award, Outstanding Solo Performance, 1993-94; New York Drama Desk Critics Circle Special Citation, 1994; and the Los Angeles Drama Critics Award for Distinguished Achievement, 1993. *Twilight* also earned Smith a pair of 1994 Tony Award nominations: one for Best Play and another for Best Actress in a Play. In 1993, following the successful run of *Twilight* in New York City, *Newsweek* magazine called Anna Deavere Smith “the most exciting individual in American theatre.”\(^{19}\)


In addition to these critical accolades, Smith received in 1996 the prestigious MacArthur Foundation “Genius” Fellowship, a multi-year grant in the amount of $280,000, for creating “a new form of theater – a blend of theatrical art, social commentary, journalism and intimate reverie.”

She has taught at Carnegie Mellon University, the University of Southern California, Stanford University, and New York University, where she is currently a tenured Professor appointed to the Tisch School of the Arts and affiliated with the School of Law. Smith also served as Founding Director of the Institute on the Arts & Civic Dialogue, a project held at Harvard University and funded by the Ford Foundation, from 1997-2000. She developed the Institute as a so-called “think and do tank” where artists gather to “make work about social change,” often addressing issues of race, identity, and community.

In light of her considerable achievements and contributions to the American theatre, Anna Deavere Smith is a worthy topic for further study. Her On the Road series deals with issues of American diversity, culture, and thought. It asks relevant questions about what it means to be living in the United States right now.

Moreover, Smith’s plays have become woven into the fabric of American theatre practice and studies. They have been produced on stage and film, anthologized in texts, and frequently incorporated into theatre curricula. Because the field necessitates a review of On the Road: A Search for American Character, this study will examine the literary and performance merits of the project’s three largest and most recognized components: Fires in

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I have determined there are three primary categories of research surrounding Anna Deavere Smith. The first consists of articles published in academic journals and as chapters in books. As no book devoted exclusively to Smith’s work has yet been published, these articles provide some of the most valuable sources of critical insight. The available scholarship appears in publications across a wide range of disciplines, including Theatre, Performance Studies, Film, History, American Culture, African American Studies, and Women’s Studies. The fact that analyses of Smith permeate academic borders is fitting given that scholars and critics have classified her work variously, such as “theatrical journalism,”22 “performed interviews” and “enacted oral history,”23 and “performance art.”24 Even Smith has referred to it in assorted terms, including “community work,” “low anthropology,” “low journalism,” and “a bit documentary.”25 Not all of the existing scholarly articles deal expressly with Smith, so analysis is occasionally limited. Sandra Richards’s “Caught in the Act of Social Definition: On the Road with Anna Deavere Smith” provides discussion and examples of Smith’s early work for On the Road.26 In their article “Masks or Faces Re-Visited: A Study of Four Theatrical Works Concerning Cultural


23 Sandra L. Richards, “Caught in the Act of Social Definition: On the Road with Anna Deavere Smith” 35.


Identity,” William H. Sun and Faye C. Fei devote one-quarter of their analysis to *Fires in the Mirror*.\(^{27}\) Kimberly Rae Connor’s “Negotiating the Differences: Anna Deavere Smith and Liberation Theater”\(^{28}\) and Tania Modleski’s “Mimetic Art in a Multicultural Society: The Work of Anna Deavere Smith”\(^{29}\) examine *Fires in the Mirror* and *Twilight*, although briefly. Another limitation of the available scholarship on Smith is that nothing has yet been published on her most recent play, *House Arrest*.

The second category is critical reviews of *Fires in the Mirror*, *Twilight*, and *House Arrest*. These may be broken down into two primary groups: (1) reviews of original productions (starring Smith, with *House Arrest* being an exception), and (2) reviews of subsequent productions (sans Smith and with flexible casts). Production reviews are published in a variety of sources, including academic journals, newspapers, and magazines, and provide details about how the plays have been staged and received. In March 1993, *Theatre Journal* published Katie Laris’s review of Smith’s performance of *Fires in the Mirror* at the Joseph Papp Public Theater, New York City.\(^{30}\) *Theatre Journal* expanded its critical analysis of Smith in March 1994, publishing seven reviews of her performance of *Twilight*.


at the Mark Taper Forum, Los Angeles. Written by scholars (Judith Hamera, Susan Suntree, and Edit Villarreal), performance artists (Joyce Guy and Sandra Tsing Loh), a theatre critic (Martin Hernandez), and a poet/photographer (Sae Lee), these reviews offer rich multi-voiced analysis. In March 1996, Attilio Favorini examined a subsequent, multi-actor production of *Fires in the Mirror* by the City Theatre, Pittsburgh. In addition to performance details, critical reception of Smith’s work also offers perspective on her development as playwright and performer, as well as her theatrical innovations and contributions to American theatre.

A third and final category is works by Smith. These may be divided into three groups: (1) interviews, (2) essays and short articles, and (3) play scripts and video performances. Smith has given interviews which appear in sources ranging from newspapers to academic journals that offer helpful insight into her rehearsal and performance processes. In Carol Martin’s “Anna Deavere Smith: The Word Becomes You,” for instance, Smith discusses the origins of *On the Road* and her work on *Fires in the Mirror* specifically. She expounds on the theatricality of her work and its relationship to Brecht in an interview with Carl Weber. In “Shades of Twilight,” Smith reveals to Dorrine Kondo, one of four dramaturgs employed by Smith for *Twilight*, rehearsal and

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production challenges, while Kondo offers an “insider” account of how *Twilight*, both as script and performance, developed over time.³⁵ Smith’s interviews may also be considered a kind of performance in and of themselves. Having played the role of the interviewer innumerable times, it is fascinating to compare Smith’s “performance” as interviewee with her stage and film performances. Next, Smith has written essays and brief articles (often as “op-eds”) for major newspapers including the *New York Times* and popular magazines such as *American Theatre* and *Newsweek*. The most valuable of her short writings are the introductions to the plays, which address such topics as her artistic goals and working methods.³⁶ Lastly, in addition to the scripts themselves, video documentations of Smith’s performances of *Fires in the Mirror* and *Twilight* are widely available resources. Adaptations of the original stage productions, these films have been broadcast on PBS and are generally regarded as accurate and definitive representations of Smith’s performance. There is no video record of *House Arrest*, which is a limitation of this research category.

By examining *Fires in the Mirror*, *Twilight*, and *House Arrest*, I wish to demonstrate how notions of diversity and doubleness are essential to reading Smith’s dramaturgical treatment and staged representations of character. Following the lead of cultural theorists and critics, including Clay Calvert, W.E.B. Du Bois, Neal Gabler, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., bell hooks, Peggy McIntosh, Toni Morrison, and Cornel West, I show how the plays are bound by these themes. Characters in Smith’s dramas regularly reveal a sense of double

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³⁶ Smith’s introductions to *Fires in the Mirror*, *Twilight*, and *House Arrest* appear in the reading editions of the plays, published by Anchor Books. See bibliography for details.
consciousness, to quote Du Bois’s influential concept, grappling with their awareness of themselves as racial minorities and how their identities are viewed as “other” by the dominant culture. Furthermore, many of the events upon which the plays are based, such as the 1991 deaths of a seven year-old African American boy and twenty-nine year-old Jewish student in Crown Heights (Fires in the Mirror) and the Los Angeles riots of 1992 (Twilight), are shown to have double meanings and be open to a wide range of interpretation. The same holds true for the imperfect but poetic language employed by characters to describe these events. By presenting a panoply of voices and exploring events from multiple perspectives, Smith investigates how and why disagreements, tensions, failures to understand, and inabilities to communicate have plagued the diverse populations of Crown Heights, Los Angeles, and the United States. Doubleness of consciousness, language, and events are at the heart of Smith’s examination of and search for American character.

A key part of this study involves deciphering how Smith’s character is present in both text and performance. I analyze Smith’s representation of culturally and socio-politically diverse characters and explore tensions in her multiple identities as African American, woman, interviewer, playwright, and actor as they emerge in performance. I consider how Smith’s presence and identity generate multiple meanings and complicate her staged representations of character. Finally, I examine the plays’ production histories and critical response, weighing the consequences of how critics did and did not take into account arguably the most important character of all in On the Road: Smith herself.
Each chapter in this dissertation presents a study of one of the three major components of On the Road: A Search for American Character. I provide background information about the real-life persons and events upon which the plays are based and how Smith came to the pieces initially. My goal is not to conduct an analysis of Smith’s historical source material, but rather an examination of her dramaturgy from literary and production points of view. As it concentrates on issues of diversity and “otherness,” this study is inspired by Smith’s work and her desire “to promote reaching, reaching, reaching beyond what you know.”  

In April 2005, I moderated a discussion between Smith and a group of first-year students at The Ohio State University. In response to a question I asked Smith about the idea of speaking for others, she remarked: “You don’t have to write about what you know. In fact, you ought to try and reach for the ‘other’.”  

Smith went on to say this is precisely what she has attempted to do in her work as a student, professor, and artist. Following Smith’s lead, I set out in this dissertation to productively explore the On the Road project and races, ethnicities, cultures, and life experiences that differ from my own.

Chapter Two is a discussion of Fires in the Mirror: Crown Heights, Brooklyn and Other Identities, the project’s thirteenth installment. I investigate Smith’s treatment of character with respect to race and dramatic convention, exploring how double consciousness informs notions of character for African Americans and Hasidic Jews and creates tensions between these two groups. In examining Smith’s performance and the critical response it produced,

37 Anna Deavere Smith, Fireside Chat, The Ohio State University, Baker Hall West, Columbus, Ohio, 20 Apr. 2005.

38 Anna Deavere Smith, Fireside Chat, The Ohio State University, Baker Hall West, Columbus, Ohio, 20 Apr. 2005.
my aim is to demonstrate how multiple meanings of character emerge through Smith and are complicated by her identity as an African American artist.

Chapter Three concerns the fourteenth component of the On the Road series, Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992, which solidified Smith’s status as a prominent figure in American theatre. By examining her inclusion of a larger and more diverse group of persons, including African Americans, Koreans, Latinos, and whites, I analyze the relationship between double consciousness and character, as well as the play’s treatment of masculinity and violence, the “problematization” of racial minorities, and representations of violence in the media. After considering how Smith’s character comes to the fore, I survey critical response to show how critics acknowledged Smith’s identity and measured her journalistic “objectivity.”

Chapter Four focuses on House Arrest: A Search for American Character In and Around the White House, Past and Present, the fifteenth installment of On the Road. The play charts the evolving relationship between the press and the U.S. Presidency, as well as the American public’s fascination with celebrity. Smith utilizes doubleness to explore the “insider/outsider” dynamic of national politics and the culture of Washington, D.C. I consider how factors such as consciousness, race, ethnicity, class, gender, and politics contribute to characters’ awareness of and struggle with their “insider” or “outsider” status. In addition, I discuss Smith’s exploration of the public/private lives of Presidents, including Thomas Jefferson, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, and William Jefferson Clinton, and how these double personas have been represented and received through the media. Finally, by studying the overwhelmingly negative response the play received, I demonstrate
that Smith’s character and reawakened sense of double consciousness impacted her research and critical reception, and how her virtuosity as an actor failed to compensate for perceived textual and performance shortcomings.

In 1993, John Lahr noted the enormous impact Smith has made on American theatre. With *Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992* as his point of reference, Lahr wrote that Smith’s work “goes some way toward reclaiming for the stage its crucial role as leader in defining and acting out that ongoing experiment called the United States.”39 The purpose of this dissertation is to provide the first study that measures how *On the Road: A Search for American Character*, in its examination of race, community, and language, participates in and contributes to that experiment.

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CHAPTER 2

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

“I think that the Crown Heights struggle is about race. Absolutely. There’s no way to say it’s not about race. It’s about race and it’s about power and it’s about turf and it’s about tribes. But we can’t talk about power and tribes without talking about race.”¹

Introduction

In this chapter, I consider the thirteenth installment of Anna Deavere Smith’s On the Road: A Search for American Character series and first to gain national recognition, Fires in the Mirror: Crown Heights, Brooklyn and Other Identities. I begin by providing background information about the 1991 Crown Heights riots upon which Smith’s play is based. I introduce her original stage production and describe how Smith approached the Crown Heights struggle in order to create the piece. Next, by performing a close reading of the text and drawing on a range of cultural theorists and critics for support, I investigate Smith’s treatment of character with respect to race and dramatic convention. Fires in the Mirror

consists of twenty-nine monologues from twenty-six different characters. These monologues are divided into seven thematic parts. The first six parts—entitled “Identity,” “Mirrors,” “Hair,” “Race,” “Rhythm,” and “Seven Verses”—pertain to Crown Heights prior to the events of 1991. The seventh part—“Crown Heights Brooklyn, August 1991”—is devoted exclusively to Gavin Cato and Yankel Rosenbaum’s deaths and the subsequent riots. Smith’s dramaturgy echoes W.E.B. Du Bois’s notion of double consciousness in that her characters, Jewish and African American alike, are aware of their racial and cultural identities in and of themselves and, at the same time, as performances of difference that are perpetually viewed and critiqued by others. I explore this concept by examining how double consciousness informs notions of character for African Americans and Hasidic Jews in *Fires in the Mirror* and creates tensions between these two groups. I couple my study of Smith’s performance in the *American Playhouse* film version with an examination of the critical response that surrounded *Fires in the Mirrors* in order to demonstrate how multiple meanings of character, as a dramatic convention, emerge through Smith and are complicated by her identity as an African American artist.

**Background on Crown Heights, Brooklyn (1991)**

The neighborhood of Crown Heights, Brooklyn, became the focus of national attention in August 1991 when riots broke out between the Lubavitcher Hasidic and African American communities. The conflict ensued after a seven year-old Guyanese

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American boy, Gavin Cato, was struck and killed by a car in Grand Rebbe Menachem Schneerson’s motorcade that swerved onto the sidewalk. Shortly thereafter, Yankel Rosenbaum, a twenty-nine-year-old visiting Hasidic student from Australia, was stabbed to death by a group of young African American men in an apparent act of retaliation. Anna Deavere Smith’s *Fires in the Mirror: Crown Heights, Brooklyn and Other Identities* is a response to and re-presentation of the violence and unrest that resulted from these two deaths. It is also an examination of the cultural conflicts and differences that have long existed between the African American and Lubavitch communities in Crown Heights. *Fires in the Mirror* explores why the deaths of Gavin Cato and Yankel Rosenbaum brought these pre-existing tensions to the top, and how members of both communities reacted violently as a result.

**Background on Smith’s Production**

For *Fires in the Mirror*, Smith spoke with members of the Jewish and African American communities, politicians, and various eyewitnesses to get as many different perspectives on the riots, why they occurred, and how tensions in Crown Heights might or might not be addressed in the aftermath. Her subjects ranged from well-known figures, such as Ntozake Shange and the Reverend Al Sharpton, to lesser-known family members of Gavin Cato and Yankel Rosenbaum, plus several anonymous Crown Heights residents.

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3 See Appendix A for a detailed chronology of the Crown Heights conflict. I have included this information to help contextualize the real-life persons and events upon which *Fires in the Mirror* is based. Smith incorporated chronologies into the 1992 Playbill for the New York Shakespeare Festival/Joseph Papp Public Theater production and the 1993 Anchor Books reading edition of *Fires in the Mirror*. Her inclusion of this material indicates Smith’s belief that her play may be better understood by audiences and readers who are familiar with Crown Heights and the riots that ensued there in 1991.
Smith conducted these interviews over a period of eight days in the fall of 1991. In performance, Smith used verbatim excerpts from these interviews to perform every role herself—male and female, African American and Caucasian, Jewish and non-Jewish. The production was commissioned by George C. Wolfe for his *Festival of New Voices* at the New York Shakespeare Festival (Joanne Akalaitis, Artistic Director). Under the direction of Christopher Ashley, *Fires in the Mirror* opened on May 12, 1992 at the Joseph Papp Public Theater, New York City, and closed on August 16, 1992. Smith subsequently took her performance on the road and presented it at the American Repertory Theatre in Cambridge, Massachusetts; the McCarter Theatre in Princeton, New Jersey; Brown University; Stanford University; the Brooklyn Academy of Music; and the Royal Court Theatre in London, among others. It was later adapted for film, again performed by Smith and directed by Wolfe. The film version aired as part of PBS’s *American Playhouse* series in April 1993.

**Character as Theme**

In the twentieth century, the character of race finds its earliest significant study in the work of W.E.B. Du Bois. In *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), Du Bois articulates what would become the hugely significant and influential concept of double consciousness:

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It is a peculiar sensation, this double consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, or measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness, – an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.\(^6\)

According to Du Bois, there is a sense that being black is, in and of itself, a performance of difference or “otherness” that is constantly viewed by the dominant white culture. Du Bois observes blacks’ simultaneous awareness of themselves as blacks, and awareness that African Americans are observed, critiqued, and judged by others as “others.” In this way, for Du Bois the character of race has double dimension. It exists within the black person him or herself, and it lives outside the black person as well – in the dominant (white) “audience’s” perception of his or her actions and in the black person’s awareness of that perception. Du Bois frames his discussion around the question that he says he is often asked as a black man: “How does it feel to be a problem?”\(^7\) The problematization of black people and the notion of double consciousness are two of Du Bois’s main ideas that African American theorists and critics across the twentieth century latch onto and explore for their own purposes. They are also fundamental components of Anna Deavere Smith’s dramaturgy.

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\(^7\) Du Bois 9.
In *Fires in the Mirror*, both African American and Jewish characters frequently reveal a sense of double consciousness. This theme is introduced early in the play, where various community members shed light on the tension and history of African Americans and Jews living side-by-side in the densely populated neighborhood of Crown Heights. By virtue of its dramaturgical structure, the first half of the play suggests that, despite their differences and suspicions of the other, it is possible that African Americans and Jews in Crown Heights have more in common than they acknowledge. A shared sense of double consciousness links these two groups and, as such, serves as the thematic center of Smith’s work.

A trio of early monologues demonstrates how double consciousness is evident first among African Americans. In the play’s third monologue, entitled “101 Dalmations,” African American theatre and film director George C. Wolfe describes growing up in a racially segregated community where he was encouraged by his family to think of himself as “extraordinary” because of his blackness. Despite having been raised with this positive mindset, as an adult Wolfe still struggles not to see his blackness in relation to whites:

I am – not – going – to place myself

(Pause.)

in relationship to your whiteness.

I will talk about your whiteness if we want to talk about that.

But I,

but what,
that which,
what I –
what am I saying?
My blackness does not re – ex – re –
exist in relationship to your whiteness.
(Pause.)
You know
(Not really a question, more like a hum. Slight pause.)
it does not exist in relationship to –
it exists
it exists.\(^8\)

Wolfe reveals awareness of his own blackness and the pressures to view his blackness not only as “extraordinary,” as his family would have it, but also as “other” from the white point of view. This tension is reflected in Wolfe’s language, particularly in his noticeable struggle to find the right words and articulate his meaning, such as when he stops to ask himself what he is saying. Furthermore, his repeated emphasis on the word “exists” reflects his determination to reject this notion of double consciousness by asserting his black identity.


In citing excerpts from monologues throughout the dissertation, I recreate the formatting style employed by Smith in her scripts. Characters’ words stagger down the page as though to indicate verse. This textual arrangement, coupled with Smith’s use of irregular spelling and punctuation, gives the reader more precise information about how the characters spoke to Smith during their initial interview(s), with special emphasis on the vocal “imperfections” of the interviewees, including stutters, pauses, incomplete thoughts and sentences, and subject-shifting.
A similar scenario is described by the Reverend Al Sharpton in “Me and James’s Thing,” the first of his two monologues in the play. Sharpton explains that he styles his hair in tribute to James Brown, who played the role of father figure in Sharpton’s life. Steadfast in his devotion to Brown, Sharpton is also aware, at the same time, of the criticism he receives in the media because of his hair. He rejects the role that whites might supposedly have had in determining his hair style:

And just like

in other communities

people do their cultural thing

with who they wanna look like,

uh,

there’s nothing wrong with me doing

that with James.

It’s, it’s, us.

I mean in the fifties it was a slick.

It was acting like White folks.

But today

people don’t wear their hair like that.

So it’s certainlih not

a reaction to Whites

It’s me and James’s thing.\(^9\)

\(^9\) *Fires in the Mirror* 30-1.
Sharpton is outspokenly aware of African Americans’ sense of double consciousness. He indicates how the dominant white culture has influenced African American culture in the past. Despite criticism about his hair style, however, he assertively rejects that influence for himself. Sharpton, a politically tested and media savvy individual, brings to the fore his double consciousness as a way of critiquing the dominant culture which creates and perpetuates black people’s awareness of themselves as “other.”

Following Wolfe and Sharpton, another instance of African American double consciousness can be found in the monologue, “Look in the Mirror,” by Anonymous Girl. Through stage directions we learn that she is a teenage black girl of Haitian descent who attends junior high school in Brooklyn. Anonymous Girl begins by explaining when and how she first became aware of her blackness:

When I grew up and I look in the mirror and saw I was

Black.

When I look at my parents,

That’s how I knew I was Black. [. . .]

Black is beautiful.

I don’t know.

That’s what I always say.

I think White is beautiful too.

But I think Black is beautiful too.

In my class nobody is White, everybody’s Black,

10 Fires in the Mirror 7, 27.
and some of them is Hispanic.

In my class

you can’t call any of them Puerto Ricans.

They despise Puerto Ricans, I don’t know why.

They think that Puerto Ricans are stuck up and everything.

They say, Oh my Gosh my nail broke, look at that cute guy

and everything.

But they act like that themselves.

They act just like White girls.

Black girls is not like that.¹¹

Like Wolfe, Anonymous Girl’s awareness of her own racial identity came from her family. Her choice of words, especially “beautiful,” suggests a positive initial experience. Once she grew older, however, and immersed herself in an environment outside the home, Anonymous Girl’s contact with people of different racial backgrounds altered her perception of herself. In this case, it is Hispanics who play the dominant role by influencing a black person’s perception of herself. Hispanics behave “just like White girls” and, in this respect, are the exact opposite of Anonymous Girl and her black classmates. By linking Hispanic students with the dominant white culture, Anonymous Girl acknowledges an external influence on the shaping of her identity and character. She moves from first becoming aware of her blackness by seeing her parents and looking at herself in the mirror

¹¹ Fires in the Mirror 27.
as a child, to being aware of her black character as a teenager based on how it is different from majority (white/Hispanic) culture.

In these three monologues, George C. Wolfe, Al Sharpton, and Anonymous Girl reveal a specifically African American sense of double consciousness that stems from early childhood and carries over into teenage and adult life. Parents (or a surrogate parent, in the case of James Brown to Sharpton) play a significant role in determining how these individuals have come to see themselves as African Americans, as well as their perspective of others who view them as African Americans. Interestingly, there are no comparable examples of this in any of the Jewish characters’ monologues. What exists, instead, is double consciousness among Jewish characters (and other African American characters as well, in fact) expressed largely in terms of how language and cultural laws and customs are misunderstood by those outside the culture (which at times includes Smith the interviewer, dramatist, and performer, to be explored later in this chapter). The absence of any monologues that deal explicitly with the development or expression of personal/familial Jewish identity early in life is significant. It suggests, at least in the first part of the play, a certain presence that is given to the African American point of view and, conversely, a lack of attention to the Jewish perspective. This creates a sense that the play will, perhaps, ultimately be more concerned with African Americans issues than it will be with Jewish issues. Put another way, the strong African American presence and noticeable Jewish void early on might lead one to the conclusion that Fires in the Mirror is “more” African American than it is Jewish. In some ways, this seems a potentially logical leap given the playwright’s own African American identity. I will return to this point later when
discussing Smith in performance, as I believe the point-of-view issue contributes to the
tensions inherent in her representation of Jewish characters.

Another way that double consciousness is revealed by both African American and
Jewish characters in *Fires in the Mirror* is through struggles with language and customs. In
this regard, the play follows a theoretical framework outlined by Henry Louis Gates, Jr. In
*The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of Afro-American Literary Criticism*, Gates argues that when
black vernacular, which has an inherently performative quality, is added to the mix of
language, the concept of “signification” becomes what Gates calls “signifyin’,” because the
meaning of the language is multiplied for a knowing audience.\(^\text{12}\) In other words, in black
vernacular, there are multiple “signifieds.” Through this coded language of the vernacular,
only a knowing/understanding audience will recognize a double message. This can be
illustrated through the hypothetical example of an encounter between two slaves and their
master. The master comes across two slaves working on a plantation and says something to
them, perhaps giving an order. One slave replies in what the master takes to be an
appropriate way and the master is satisfied. However, what the second slave hears in the
same exact response, and in the delivery/performance of that response, is something much
different. Instead of obedience or respect, which the master perceives, the second slave
hears criticism or slander. It is a combination, then, of what is said and how it is said that
the extra meaning is produced for the knowing (in this case, black) audience. At the center
of Gates’ notion of the character of race is a sense that potential meaning(s) of the
performance of a specialized language depend on the performer and, of equal importance,

UP, 1988).
the audience. We are reminded in Gates of the doubleness of character and the idea that representation is never minus the audience. This concept is applicable to both African American and Jewish characters in *Fires in the Mirror*. It is another element common to their sense(s) of double consciousness.

One of the most prominent examples of Gates’s thesis at work in terms of an African American character can be found in Monique “Big Mo” Matthews’ monologue, entitled “Rhythm and Poetry.” In explaining the fundamentals of rap, Mo argues how poetry and poetic lyrics can often be misinterpreted not only by those outside of African American culture, which one might expect, but also by members of that culture who may even be rappers themselves. For example, Mo explains that she wrote a song in response to rapper Big Daddy Kane’s “Pimpin’ Ain’t Easy,” a song she takes offense to for its suggestion that white, not black, women possess greater appeal for African American men:

And one of my songs has a line that’s like

‘PIMPIN’ AIN’T EASY BUT WHORIN’ AIN’T PROPER.

RESPECT AND

CHERISH THE ORIGINAL MOTHER.’

And a couple of my friends were like,

‘Aww, Mo, you good but I can’t listen to you ‘cause you be

Men

bashin’.’

I say,

‘It ain’t men bashin’, it’s female assertin’.’
Shit.

I’m tired of it.

I’m tired of my friends just acceptin’

that they just considered to be a ho.\textsuperscript{13}

Mo’s black female audience hears one message in her lyrics but, as Mo explains, there is actually a deeper, more critical meaning behind the words. Her intent is not simply to criticize, as her friends assume. Rather, she offers a more powerful and empowered image of women that is absent in male-dominated rap, as evidenced by Big Daddy Kane and the group 2 Live Crew, with whom Mo also takes issue. If members of her own race and gender fail to grasp the coded message in her lyrics, it seems likely that those outside Mo’s experience as an African American woman will follow suit, thus adding to her frustration.

Following Gates, there are two key Jewish monologues that also locate double or multiple meanings in language. These are significant as they introduce Jewish cultural perspective into \textit{Fires in the Mirror}. The first occurs in the monologue entitled “Static.” In this scene an Anonymous Lubavitcher Woman in her mid-thirties recounts a conflict she once experienced with Jewish law and her interaction with a black youth. On a late Saturday afternoon, the woman’s baby had accidentally switched her radio on, resulting in loud, static-laden music to fill their home and carry out onto the street. The woman explains that she was unable to turn the radio off because, according to Jewish law, certain activities such as turning electricity on or off are not allowed on Shabbas, a day of rest.

\textsuperscript{13} \textit{Fires in the Mirror} 48-9.
Desperate to put an end to the noise coming from the radio, the woman went outside in search of help:

I went outside
and I saw
a little
boy in the neighborhood
who I didn’t know and didn’t know me –
not Jewish, he was black and he wasn’t wearing a yarmulke because you can’t –
so I went up to him and I said to him
that my radio is on really loud and I can’t turn it off,
could he help me
so he looked at me a little crazy like,

Well!¹⁴

At this point, the African American boy likely assumed that the woman’s inability to turn the radio off had to do with a physical limitation of some kind. However, upon entering her home, the boy found that this was not the case:

so he followed me into the house
and he hears this music on so loud
and so unpleasant
and so

¹⁴ _Fires in the Mirror_ 14-5.
he goes over to the
stereo
and he says, ‘You see this little button here
that says on and off?
Push that in
and that turns it off.’
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 the their radios.  

In seeking the African American boy’s help to perform a simple act, the Lubavitcher woman had to omit the true reason behind having to ask for help in the first place (i.e. observance of Jewish law). As a result, what the boy heard in the woman’s request was something obvious and much simpler (i.e. ignorance or stupidity). Presumably any Jewish person with knowledge of Shabbas and Jewish law would have understood another meaning and, as such, would not have thought her incompetent. Misunderstood by an outsider, the exact meaning of the Lubavitcher woman’s spoken and unspoken words is discerned only by a knowing audience.

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15 *Fires in the Mirror* 15.
A similar case of doubleness in language and cultural practice occurs in Rabbi Shea Hecht’s monologue, “Ovens.” Hecht explains that he must reject invitations to eat dinner with others (i.e. non-Jewish, African Americans) because they do not understand Jewish laws pertaining to kosher food. African Americans, he implies, might take Hecht’s rejection personally and think that he simply does not want to associate himself with them simply because they are “other.” However, the situation is more complex than that, as Hecht explains:

And I said,

so, like one Black said,

I’ll bring in kosher food.

I said eh-eh

We can’t use your ovens,

we can’t use your dishes,

it’s, it –

it’s not just a question of buying certain food,

it’s buying the food,

preparing it a certain way.

We can’t use your dishes, we can’t use your ovens.

The – the higher you go

the more common denominator.16

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16 *Fires in the Mirror* 116.
This is a quintessential example in *Fires in the Mirror* of the fundamental lack of understanding between cultures. Here, the lack of understanding about a cultural practice (i.e. the preparation and consumption of food) carries over to language, where words have one meaning for knowing audiences, whether African American or Jewish, and another for those on the perimeter of that particular culture.

Ironically, the Jewish and African American communities of Crown Heights are bound in *Fires in the Mirror* by these cultural differences and failures to understand. Smith links these two groups together in order to present the Crown Heights riots of 1991 primarily as a racial conflict and power struggle. This linkage is consistent with one of Smith’s central goals of *On the Road: A Search for American Character*, which is to bring people together and spark critical and productive discussion about race relations in the United States today. In this way, *Fires in the Mirror* reflects the work of Toni Morrison, who, in *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*, contends that it is essentially impossible for literature, whether written by white or non-white authors, to have nothing to do with race when we live in such a racialized society.¹⁷ Morrison discusses race in terms of being conceived of and determined by power. In this context, blackness is then constructed and imposed on African Americans, whether it fits them or not. Morrison discovers a racialized component to selected texts that have historically seemed not to be about race in order to illustrate this point. For example, in her reading of Willa Cather’s *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*, Morrison notices that although the power relationship between master and slave is real and evident, Cather fails to comment on the racialized presence

inherent in the text.\textsuperscript{18} For Morrison, Cather imposes an inauthentic blackness by virtue of creating this relationship and not exploring its significance with respect to race.

As an alternative, Morrison positions herself in the tradition of “American Africanism,” a term she coins and explains is created out of the consciousness of being of the race and trying to grapple with the authenticity of that experience. For her, American Africanism is about the awareness that blackness has been imposed, the ability to read into the experience of that imposition, and the sense that some other experience is possible beyond that imposition. On the one hand, then, it is an effort to provide a window into the experience of blackness from a person who is identified as black. At the same time, American Africanism also involves paying attention to the fact that there is more than just racism in literature and culture; there are moments where the primary reference is not to white culture but to some intra-culture sensibility. In this way, Morrison expresses and advocates a more authentic version of race. In so doing, she suggests that there are multiple versions and understandings of the character of race.

Morrison’s theory is evident in \textit{Fires in the Mirror} primarily in the ways that the African American and Jewish communities attempt to negotiate power. This concept is suggested most directly by Robert Sherman’s “Lousy Language” monologue. Sherman, director of the City of New York’s Increase the Peace Corps, outlines the demographics of Crown Heights. The percentages of African Americans and Hasidim living in the neighborhood matter a great deal because they have historically determined who has enjoyed more control over the area. Sherman also explains how the growth of the black

\textsuperscript{18} See Morrison 18-28.
and Jewish populations and the fluctuations in their numbers have resulted in a “conflict [that] has been brewing on and off for twenty years.”\(^{19}\) A sound understanding of the struggle in Crown Heights is dependent on knowledge of what David Savran calls “the complex and intractable histories of racism, anti-Semitism and economic deprivation” that define this Brooklyn neighborhood.\(^{20}\) Sherman’s monologue suggests that the riots, as well as Crown Heights itself, can best be understood in precisely these terms. America’s inability and/or reluctance to examine areas that are largely defined by race, however, has contributed to racial and cultural tensions as expressed, in this case, by rioting.

Considering other social problems in Crown Heights such as poverty and education is crucial, of course, but these issues are part of a larger problem that is first and foremost about race. Ignoring this hard fact, Sherman seems to say, is comparable to what Toni Morrison would deem the equivalent of Willa Cather ignoring the racialized component of a master-slave relationship in her own novel.

In the seventh and final part of *Fires in the Mirror*, devoted exclusively to the deaths of Gavin Cato and Yankel Rosenbaum, Smith again focuses on race as the defining characteristic of the riots. Once again a sense of doubleness emerges. By including multiple first- and second-hand accounts from various African American and Jewish characters, the play provides information about what happened and why – how Gavin Cato and Yankel Rosenbaum lost their lives and how various members of the community responded. The idea of double consciousness resurfaces here as African Americans and Jews protest their

\(^{19}\) *Fires in the Mirror* 73.

innocence and, at the same time, are viewed by the other as responsible for either Cato or Rosenbaum’s deaths and the resulting violence. In addition to assigning blame, both groups explain how they view the other as racial/political “problems” within the Crown Heights community. This is where *Fires in the Mirror* echoes Cornel West’s “Learning to Talk of Race,” which brings the idea of double consciousness, as well as the problematization of racial minorities, to the fore. West observes that many of our country’s supposedly most significant discussions about race take place in the realm of professional politics. The dialogue is typically charged with either overtly conservative or liberal ideology, with little room in between. In West’s view, the conservative plan historically has been a moral one: black people (particularly those living in inner cities) should get jobs, support their families, and avoid doing crime. Meanwhile, the liberal agenda has maintained that programs sponsored by the government can solve the problems (which are usually economic) of these same black people. West offers two criticisms here. First, as a country, we are done no favors by having only these two primary ways to think and talk about race. Our discussions are hindered by this (political) doubleness that we impose on race, and the limitations of language that are a product of that imposition. Second, and even more importantly, the crucial mistake with these lines of thinking is that both view black people as “problems,” as West points out:

> we confine discussions about race in America to the ‘problems’ black people pose for whites rather than considering what this way of viewing black people reveals about us as a nation. [... ] Both [conservatism and

liberalism] fail to see that the presence and predicaments of black people are neither additions to nor defections from American life, but rather constitutive elements of that life. [ . . . ] As long as black people are viewed as a ‘them,’ the burden falls on blacks to do all the ‘cultural’ and ‘moral’ work necessary for healthy race relations. The implication is that only certain Americans can define what it means to be American – and the rest must simply ‘fit in.’

West invokes the effects of double consciousness. He is aware that African Americans are viewed by others (i.e. the overwhelmingly white establishment of American politics) as African Americans. As such, black people are typically viewed as “problems,” a group of cultural outsiders who lack opportunities to “define what it means to be an American.” West’s efforts to move people away from thinking about the “problems” that African Americans pose for whites and instead contemplate what that approach says about race relations in the United States and, indeed, the country itself, reveals that the issues forwarded by Du Bois roughly a century ago still resonate and inform our understanding and discussion of race and racism.

In *Fires in the Mirror*, Richard Green, director of the Crown Heights Youth Collective and co-director of Project CURE, a black-Hasidic basketball team developed after the riots, describes how blacks have been problematized in Crown Heights and the mainstream media. In a monologue entitled “Rage,” Green observes that African Americans have come to be viewed as “problems” largely because of the lack of familial

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22 West, “Learning to Talk of Race” 256.
stability in Crown Heights (a theory which echoes the conservative political ideology
described by West) and also because of young African Americans’ lack of knowledge about
culture, including their own. To the first point, Green expounds on how the absence of
family structure motivated the violent actions taken by young blacks during the riots:

Those young people out there are angry
and that anger has to be vented,
it has to be negotiated.
And they’re not angry at the Lubavitcher community
they’re just as angry at you and me,
if it comes to that.
They have no
role models,
no guidance
so they’re just out there growin’ up on their own,
their peers are their role models,
their peers is who teach them how to move [. . .] 23

Green goes on to suggest that young African Americans’ knowledge of their own culture is
limited to that which is communicated about it through the media (which often involves
images of violence, such as riot footage, for example) and popular culture, as in the case of
director Spike Lee’s films. Given their lack of knowledge about themselves, it is perhaps

23 Fires in the Mirror 124.
not surprising that the black youths of Crown Heights know even less about their Jewish
neighbors and their cultural history, as Green points out:

when [young African Americans] see the Lubavitchers

they don’t know the difference between ‘Heil Hitler’

and, uh, and uh, whatever else.

They don’t know the difference.

When you ask ’em to say who Hitler was they wouldn’t even

be able

to tell you.

Half of them don’t even know.

Three quarters of them don’t even know. [. . .]

Half them don’t even know three quarters of ‘em.

Just as much as they don’t know who Frederick Douglass

was.

They know Malcolm

because Malcolm has been played up to such an event now

that they know Malcolm.

But ask who Nat Turner was or Mary MacCloud Bethune or

Booker T.

Because the system has given ‘em

Malcolm is convenient and

Spike is goin’ to give ‘em Malcolm even more.
Green’s involvement in the Crown Heights Youth Collective and Project CURE demonstrates that he is working to bridge the gap between the African American and Jewish communities by fostering knowledge about each culture. In addition, where others in *Fires in the Mirror*, such as Al Sharpton, criticize the representation and problematization of African Americans, especially in the media, Green looks inward. He focuses not on problems *perceived* by others, but rather the actual problems (i.e. family instability) *experienced* by young African Americans in Crown Heights, which, of course, factor into the hostility that exists within the community. In other words, Green focuses more on the problems of black people and less on their problematization. He also reinforces one of the play’s underlying contentions: that we cannot underestimate the built-up racial, cultural, and political “rage” between African Americans and Jews, or how and why this rage came to be expressed through rioting.

It is interesting to note Green’s mention of the role of families and the raising of children in describing the problems experienced by African Americans in Crown Heights. This echoes the theme of double consciousness that emerged in the previously mentioned trio of African American monologues of George C. Wolfe, Al Sharpton, and Anonymous Girl, where parents and families played a significant role in the development and cultural awareness of these individuals. The absence of a Jewish element should be noted here as well. There are no monologues in the second half of the play comparable to Richard Green’s, for instance, which deal exclusively with the problematization of Jews, or cultural

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24 *Fires in the Mirror* 124-5.
problems experienced by Jews separate from the riots. (This must also be factored into the complicated nature of Smith’s staged representation of Jewish characters, to be explored later in this chapter). Smith portrays the Crown Heights affair as a racial conflict in order to reveal what she considers to be a larger, national epidemic about the failures in communication and our (American) tendency to problematize “others,” whether African American or Jewish, based on race. But again, with regard to problematization, there is attention paid to the African American experience and perspective for which there is, in effect, no Jewish counterpart. This is not necessarily a weakness in Smith’s dramaturgy. However, it is important to bear in mind insofar as it contradicts what many critics perceived to be absolute balance, fairness, and objectivity on Smith’s part in her staged representations of both African Americans and Jews. Despite what might be fairly described as an emphasized African American presence in the text, a majority of critics either ignored or simply did not observe the same in Smith’s performance.

By taking up problematization, even if from a predominantly African American point of view, as a way of examining race relations, Smith’s dramaturgy combines elements of Cornel West’s theory with that of bell hooks’s in *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics*. hooks picks up where West leaves off by observing and criticizing the problematization of black people. hooks is interested in looking at the ways in which African Americans are represented in popular culture. By identifying the process of how African Americans get problematized, she argues that seeing race as a problem only perpetuates racism. Moreover, she takes issue with how the “problem” is sometimes

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regarded as being “solved.” For instance, it may appear on the surface to some that because there are African Americans on television (in sitcoms, network news, et cetera) that racism is being addressed on the strength of this minority representation in mainstream culture. Yet hooks maintains that while this may seem like a “solution,” all it does is frame black people as a “problem.” This is merely a way of treating the symptoms of racism and not the cultural and economic root causes of racism. As long as a group of people are viewed as the “problem” (and not the social institutions that privilege certain kinds of difference) Americans are not only remaining stagnant in our efforts to address racism – we may actually be making things worse. The key problem in hooks’s estimation is that this approach reflects no real engagement with the fact that racism affects not only those who experience it, but those who perpetuate it, too. Like Du Bois, Gates, West, and Morrison, hooks is acutely aware that the character of race is a fluid concept, informed by representation and perception.

In order to demonstrate how Smith links the problematization of African Americans and Jews as a way of observing a broader concern regarding race, I return to Robert Sherman’s “Lousy Language” monologue. Here we find further evidence of Cornel West’s argument regarding the limitations of language, particularly with respect to the character of race, and bell hooks’s theory about the ramifications of racism. Sherman contends that America possesses a transparently limited vocabulary when it comes to matters of race. Our understandings of bias, prejudice, racism, and discrimination “tangle up” because we do not have enough words at our disposal to differentiate between these
This problem is compounded by what Sherman takes to be the country’s collective lack of desire to acknowledge or confront the situation:

I think in part
because vocabulary
follows general awareness....

I think you know
the Eskimos have seventy words for snow?

We probably have seventy different kinds of bias, prejudice,
    racism, and
discrimination,
but it’s not in our mind-set to be clear about it,
so I think that we have
sort of lousy language
on the subject
and that
is a reflection
of our unwillingness
to deal with it honestly
and to sort it out.
I think we have very, very bad language.  

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26 Fires in the Mirror 74.
27 Fires in the Mirror 74-5.
Sherman echoes Cornel West in his analysis of the shortcomings of America’s (un)racialized language. The noticeable lack of diversity in our vocabulary supports West’s theory about the inadequacies of the American political arena as a forum for serious discussions on race. It is no wonder that exclusively conservative or liberal ideologies and dialogues fail as they reflect our inherent “unwillingness” to negotiate the (multiple) differences between bias, prejudice, racism, and discrimination, and to “deal with” the results of that sorting-out process.\(^{28}\) Sherman also supports bell hooks’s contention that the effects of racism are felt by those who experience it and those who perpetuate it. His repeated emphasis on the word “we” suggests that race is a multi-faceted issue and, as such, affects African Americans, Jews, and indeed all Americans. In this way, Sherman organizes the character of race around community as opposed to the individual and maintains that it is best understood when the language and actions of multiple parties are taken into account. This is consistent with the theme of doubleness in *Fires in the Mirror*, and Smith’s goal to bring communities together and use their multiple perspectives for mutual understanding and social progress.

**Smith in Performance**

In my literary analysis of *Fires in the Mirror*, I have observed how W.E.B. Du Bois’s notion of double consciousness, both in and of itself and as it has been adapted by various theorists across the twentieth century, is fundamental to Smith’s dramaturgy. I turn now to Smith’s performance of *Fires in the Mirror*, where the theme of doubleness also exists. A key

\(^{28}\) *Fires in the Mirror* 75.
element here is the added complication of Smith’s identity as an African American artist. Drawing on the American Playhouse film version and critical response surrounding Smith, I examine Smith’s performance of several African American and Jewish monologues to observe how her African American identity affords her “insider” status among blacks and, conversely, how it distances her from the Jewish characters she represents. This is the result of Smith’s “character” existing simultaneously with the characters she represents in performance. In other words, Smith’s multiple identities as African American, woman, interviewer, playwright, and actor play an important role in generating multiple meanings both on stage and in the audience.

I begin by examining Al Sharpton’s monologue, “Me and James’s Thing,” in which Sharpton explains why he styles his hair in tribute to James Brown. Sharpton’s sense of double consciousness, as argued, is made evident by his awareness of the media criticism about his hair style. Two key points stand out about Smith’s staged representation of Sharpton. I make these points as a way of examining this specific monologue and introducing broader theoretical concepts about Smith’s performance style.

First, Smith is made to look like a physical approximation of Sharpton in this scene. She is smartly dressed in a man’s suit and wears a wig that is comparable to Sharpton’s hair. The first shot is an extreme close-up on the backside of Smith’s head. The camera slowly pans out and, gradually, Smith turns around and addresses the camera from a comfortable distance. It is important to note that as Smith looks and speaks into the camera, both here and elsewhere, she recreates the moment(s) where the character, Sharpton, looked and spoke directly to her during their original interview. As we watch the
film and the characters speak directly to us, we the audience stand in for Smith the interviewer. This concept of “standing in” has been developed by Elinor Fuchs in *The Death of Character: Perspectives on Theater after Modernism*.29 Fuchs deals with the question of character as it is represented on stage and as it exists in the audience. She believes that in twentieth-century theatre, Aristotle’s notion of thought, or theme, has become more important than either plot or character because of the non-realistic nature of much of the theatre that has been produced in the last 100 years. Most important here is Fuchs’s argument that actors “stand in” for a character, audiences “stand in” for their communities, and the on-stage events of drama “stand in” for changes that have occurred in the larger culture. In this way, according to Fuchs: “Character is a word that stands in for the entire human chain of representation and reception that theater links together.”30 Fuchs is convinced that any study of character necessarily depends on an understanding of the concept as having more than one point of focus and more than one connotation. By linking actors, audiences, communities, and cultures, Fuchs forwards a theatrical notion of character that is not located exclusively on the stage or in the house. It exists in both places and beyond. Character is a complex give-and-take enterprise between these multiple parties. This is a useful model to bear in mind when considering Anna Deavere Smith’s performance style, where multiple parties are represented and multiple meanings are generated. Equally, Fuchs’s theory applies to Smith’s body of work insofar as Smith stands in for characters by representing them and their communities on stage, while the audience


30 Fuchs 8.
simultaneously stands in for Smith the interviewer and our own communities. I explore critical response to *Fires in the Mirror* later in this chapter, but it is appropriate here to mention Katie Laris’s review of Smith’s original stage performance. By employing the notion of “standing in,” Laris captures the unique relationship between Smith, the play’s characters, and the audience in the following way:

> In a provocative and involving displacement, the audience assumed the part of Anna Deavere Smith as she in turn took on the role of the interviewee. Placed in this position, we are asked to read the text of the situation as closely as she has, to see what is really there, not what we have imagined or what has been fed to us by the media.  

The critical inquiry posed by *Fires in the Mirror* relies upon the audience’s ability to stand in for Smith while she simultaneously stands in for her characters. In this way, Laris articulates how Fuchs’s theory directly applies to Smith and, at once, how Smith’s performance generates meaning that is in perpetual motion, moving constantly between interviewer and interviewee, performer and audience.

The second point to be made about Smith’s performance of “Me and James’s Thing” is the significance of Sharpton’s calling attention to Smith. This is one of several moments in *Fires in the Mirror* – and the *On the Road* series, in fact – where a character makes a direct and specific reference to Smith, acknowledging her presence, identity and, indeed, her character. To illustrate, as Sharpton explains why he wears his hair as he does

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(in spite of media criticism), he acknowledges Smith’s presence and, at once, comments on what he believes her point of view or understanding of the matter would be:

And if I had to choose between arguing with people about my hairstyle or giving him [James Brown] that one tribute he axed, I’d rather give him that tribute because he filled a void for me. And I really don’t give a damn who doesn’t understand it.

Oh, I know *not you, not you.*

The press and everybody do *their* thing on that.

It’s a personal thing between me and James Brown.\textsuperscript{32} [author’s emphasis]

Sharpton acknowledges Smith’s presence not only as interviewer, but also as an African American. In the context of the monologue, Sharpton marks Smith as African American, intimating that she is likely if not certainly able to understand the point he makes about the (black) cultural significance of his hairstyle, how it is not a reaction to whites, why he doesn’t care about media criticism, and so forth. Furthermore, saying that the press does “*their* thing” indicates that despite her being an interviewer, Sharpton does not view Smith

\textsuperscript{32} *Fires in the Mirror* 30.
as a member of the media (which is, of course, predominantly white), but rather as somebody close to his own position. The implication here is that with Smith’s African American identity comes the assumption of intimate or authentic understanding of the culture that Sharpton describes. This is reinforced by the straightforward performance style of the monologue. Smith speaks forcefully and directly into the camera. She stutters and mumbles but does so comfortably; in other words, everything about Smith’s recreation of Sharpton’s physical and vocal patterns suggests that Sharpton was forthcoming with the “insider” Smith. Consequently, through Smith’s performance he effectively reveals his character and a shared level of comfort and familiarity between interviewer and interviewee.

These moments in Smith’s work where characters acknowledge her presence and/or identity have a Brechtian effect on the audience. We are regularly reminded of the innate theatricality of Smith in performance as she represents “others.” Audiences are further distanced from the piece when this theatricality is pointed out during moments within the actual performance, such as Sharpton calling Smith. This distancing effect is consistent with Smith’s goal of employing an anti-Method style of acting. She is not interested in becoming the character, as Method acting instructs, but rather in representing the character by recreating vocal and physical patterns. In other words, her audience is not meant to think that Smith actually “is” or has “become” Al Sharpton in the same way that we might think an actor “is” or has “become” Hamlet in a production of Shakespeare’s play. These are two completely different approaches to actor training at work. We are meant to observe this anti-Method difference in Smith’s performance. It shapes her
presentational style and is a significant motivating force behind On the Road. To illustrate further, Smith explains the intellectual and practical difficulties she experienced with the Method as a young acting student, and her desire to incorporate her own character in her work, in the following way:

Since I was a girl my creative life has been about trying to find a way of being me in my work. [. . .] If anything opened me intellectually it was when I was trying to write about acting in order to find out why I had trouble with the Stanislavsky technique. I came across a graph of the objectives of the Stanislavsky technique. Super objective. Little objective. It was a straight line 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 center. I knew then that I wanted to try to find a way of thinking or a structure that was more like that.33

This anti-Method distinction is crucial in order to comprehend the significance of Smith’s character as part of the performance. She is not a neutral figure in the performance of her plays, as some critics have claimed and even Smith herself has asserted. On the contrary, her presence and identity inform character behavior and impact audience reception.

In her efforts to represent character, Smith’s performance style is closely related to what David Mamet outlines in True and False: Heresy and Common Sense for the Actor.34 Mamet describes an approach to acting and actor training that is an alternative to

34 David Mamet, True and False: Heresy and Common Sense for the Actor (New York: Pantheon, 1997).
Stanislavsky and the Method approach. Despite the fact that much of Mamet’s language is rooted in the Method (he frequently reiterates the need for actors to identify and pursue objectives, for instance), Mamet’s concern with character is similar to Elinor Fuchs’s in that it takes both representation and audience into account. Mamet believes that it is impossible for an actor to “become” a character largely because audiences can never really believe that the actor they are witnessing on stage is, say, Hamlet, Prince of Denmark. Mamet argues that for this reason actors should abandon any thought of becoming somebody they are not. Instead, they should simply go on stage, repeat their lines as written, and be themselves. As such, who the actor is as a person is that actor’s “character.” Moreover, this is precisely the “character” that the audiences are interested in and have the ability to believe. Character for Mamet, then, as an aspect of theatre also has multiple meanings. It is a two-way street in any performance that runs back and forth between the actors as “themselves” on stage and the “real” audience members in the house.

Mamet’s approach is useful for its explanation of how and why we ought to be interested not only in the characters Smith represents in performance, but also in Smith’s own character. Richard Schechner develops this point further by arguing that the dual presence of Smith’s character and those whom she represents gives the work an especially powerful and meaningful edge:

As spectators we are not fooled into thinking we are really seeing Al Sharpton, Angela Davis, Norman Rosenbaum, or any of the others. Smith’s shamanic invocation is her ability to bring into existence the wondrous ‘doubling’ that marks great performances. This doubling is the
simultaneous presence of the performer and performed. Because of this
doubling Smith’s audiences – consciously perhaps, unconsciously certainly
– learn to ‘let the other in,’ to accomplish in their own way what Smith so
masterfully achieves.  

As Schechner observes, there is an inherent doubleness at work in Smith’s performed
representations of others which is vital to our reading of her performance. Charles R.
Lyons and James C. Lyons support Schechner’s claim, asserting that the “simultaneity of
the material presence of the performer and the theatricalized reference to the material
presence of the figure performed [is] the real innovation of Smith’s work.”  

Drawing connections between Smith and Bertolt Brecht, Carl Weber reaches a similar conclusion, asserting that

Smith steps back behind the person she performs, yet she is still clearly
present in her own persona, with her own ‘gestus,’ as Brecht would have
put it, while presenting with striking precision the specific gestus of the
characters she is portraying on stage.  

As Schecher, Charles and James Lyons, and Weber suggest, the moments where we are
reminded of Smith’s presence and identity are every bit as revealing of the doubleness of
character as the moments when those persons who Smith represents struggle with


56 Charles R. Lyons and James C. Lyons, “Anna Deavere Smith: Perspectives on her Performance within the

57 Carl Weber, “Brecht’s Street Scene – On Broadway, of all Places!: A Conversation with Anna Deavere
Smith,” *Brecht Then and Now: The Brecht Yearbook* 20, ed. John Willett (Madison, WI: U of Wisconsin P,
1995) 52.
language. By marking the doubleness of Smith’s performance, we comprehend the subtle but crucial distinction between representing, as opposed to becoming, character. In turn, we reach a fuller understanding of the plays and the multiple “sides” or versions of the stories that Smith tells. As an anti-Method actor, or “shaman,” to borrow from Schechner, we recognize Smith’s character and stand in for her during performance, thus becoming an integral part of the theatrical experience ourselves.

While these principles hold true for Smith’s performances throughout the On the Road series, it is worth noting here that Smith’s presence emerges somewhat differently in her representations of Jewish characters than it does in her representations of African American characters in Fires in the Mirror. For example, Smith plays Rivkah Siegal, a Lubavitcher woman who struggles with how she views herself and how others view her based on her cultural practice of wearing wigs. Siegal articulates a sense of double consciousness that is akin to Al Sharpton’s. As Smith performs Siegal, however, the same level of comfort and familiarity does not exist. Siegal’s monologue, entitled “Wigs,” comes immediately after Sharpton’s and is a detailed explanation of the importance of hair as a Lubavitch custom. Like Sharpton, Siegal also recognizes Smith’s presence within the monologue. Siegal’s acknowledgement of Smith is scripted in the text as follows:

There’s –
the reason is
when you go to the mikva [bath]

you may, maybe
it’s better if it’s short
because of what you -
the preparation
that’s involved
and that
you have to go under the water.\textsuperscript{38} [author’s emphasis]

In performance, however, the acknowledgement is somewhat different. Smith does not repeat these words exactly. She alters the line, “you may, maybe” and instead says: “Maybe you know.” Compared to Sharpton’s acknowledgement of Smith, where he speculated assuredly about Smith’s understanding of an aspect of African American culture, here a Jewish character approaches Smith without the same assurance. Even her actual line – “\textit{maybe you know}” – suggests hesitancy on Siegal’s part. The viewer senses that Siegal regards Smith as more of an “outsider” and in her presence and speaks and behaves accordingly. Siegal’s soft, deliberate tone suggests that she is explaining cultural information to somebody who she does not expect to understand. This is further supported by Siegal’s impulse at the end of the monologue to reiterate the nature of her cultural dilemma as a Jewish woman:

\begin{quote}
I mean, I’ve gone through a lot with wearing wigs and not wearing wigs.

It’s been a big issue for me.\textsuperscript{39}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{38} \textit{Fires in the Mirror} 33-4.

\textsuperscript{39} \textit{Fires in the Mirror} 35.
Siegal restates her main point as if to give it added emphasis in order for Smith to fully appreciate her predicament. In this instance, then, as an “outsider” and representative of the African American community, Smith is regarded as a person to whom matters of Jewishness must be explained. In performance, her outsider status among Jews is foregrounded by the fact that we are made aware of Smith’s own African American-ness. As she plays (white) Jewish characters who, like Siegal, make reference to Smith as “other,” the viewer is reminded of the complications of Hasidic Jews being represented through Smith’s African American body. These representations may appear highly theatrical at best or less authentic at worst, as Smith is often twice removed from her characters, such as when she plays Jewish males, for example. Whether by virtue of characters calling her and/or by her physical presence alone, in performance we are made aware of Smith’s identity. The audience must constantly negotiate this double, simultaneous presence of Smith’s character and the characters she represents.

What should also be pointed out here is the dramaturgical significance of Smith’s placing Sharpton’s “Me and James’s Thing” and Rivkah Siegal’s “Wigs” monologues immediately beside one another. The strategy of linking seemingly unrelated persons or ideas together in the texts is a common thread running through On the Road. In this case, while it would appear that Sharpton, an outspoken African American religious figure, political activist, and celebrity, may have little or nothing in common with Siegal, a Lubavitcher female, the fact that both struggle with the cultural importance of hair demonstrates otherwise, as Tania Modleski observes:
At odds with their respective groups over the question of adopting the customs and styles that signal their difference from the dominant culture, the militant black minister and the Lubavitcher woman appear for a moment to have more in common with each other than with members of their own groups.  

William H. Sun and Faye C. Fei concur, expanding Modleski’s point by asserting that Smith’s ability and, indeed, tendency to unveil commonalities between seemingly polar opposites, such as Sharpton and Siegal, allow us to grasp the socio-political and dramaturgical “big picture” of the work:

[Smith’s] achievement is making the big picture onstage truer than each individual’s words. Only when each person’s words are put in the context of all the others is light shed on the whole incident. It is this careful intertextualizing that gives Smith’s performance such power. Smith has a signature dramaturgy that is not a simple collage, that transforms street language into intriguing drama, and provides her histrionic skills with a powerful vehicle. This dramaturgy drives *Fires in the Mirror*.  

It is not only Smith’s use of verbatim excerpts from interviews, then, which lends her work an aura of truthfulness. Her careful juxtaposition of those interviews is an equally

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important factor which contributes to the plays’ dramaturgical soundness, theatrical potency, and coherency through apparent disjointedness.

Following Smith’s performance of Siegal, a similar pattern of doubleness emerges in two additional monologues that compare the historical atrocities of slavery and the Holocaust. In his monologue entitled “Seven Verses,” Minister Conrad Mohammed’s multiple references to Smith imply a shared African American knowledge and cultural experience. Mohammed explains that, as a result of women having been raped in the middle passage, some blacks today “look like you, some look like me” [author’s emphasis]. He further states that black people’s names were “taken from us” [author’s emphasis] and substituted with names such as “Smith” and “Jones” – with “Smith” being an obvious reference to Anna Deavere Smith. He calls her “sister” [43] – suggesting a kind of familial relationship – and, like Sharpton, Mohammed speaks to Smith in a direct manner which suggests that she understands and identifies with his culture and historical experience. [44]

By way of contrast, Letty Cottin Pogrebin’s monologue, entitled “Isaac,” points up Smith’s outsider presence. Pogrebin describes how her uncle, Isaac, a blonde, blue-eyed man, was chosen by the Jewish councils of his town as a designated survivor. Isaac had to feign Germanic heritage by forcing a group of Jews, which included members of his own

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42 *Fires in the Mirror* 64.

43 *Fires in the Mirror* 66.

44 Carol Martin observes similar tensions in African American characters’ tendency to identify with Smith as an African American and Jewish characters’ inability to identify with her in a comparable way. Martin further notes how African Americans share a “sense of inclusion” with Smith, largely based on their use of words such as “us” and “them,” while Jews conversely regard Smith “as a member of the black community.” See Martin, “Anna Deavere Smith: The Word Becomes You” 48.
family, into gas chambers. The monologue begins with Pogrebin on the telephone, explaining to Smith on the other line that she is reluctant to tell this story. Ultimately she agrees to share it, but only if allowed to read directly from a book. Smith delivers Pogrebin’s nearly five-minute monologue into the phone, head down, without ever making eye contact with the audience. The performance style stands in stark contrast to Smith’s representation of African Americans. Where black characters, such as Sharpton and Mohammed, speak comfortably and directly with Smith, here we see a Jewish individual unable to do the same. By opting to read from a book, Pogrebin does not allow herself to pause, stutter, or change topics; in this way, she is unwilling to reveal her “character” to Smith (a stark contrast to Sharpton and Mohammed, who hold little if anything back). While this is in part attributable to Pogrebin’s stated desire not to make herself cry from telling the horrific story about her uncle, Smith’s non-Jewish identity should also be factored into the character’s reservations to divulge such personal information, as well as the guarded nature of her delivery.

Finally, I will look at Smith’s performance of the “Static” monologue, as it combines representations of both Jewish and African American characters. In this scene, Anonymous Lubavitcher Woman asks an African American boy for help turning off her radio. Similar to Rivkah Siegal, who explained Jewish customs regarding hair, Anonymous Lubavitcher Woman goes to even greater lengths here to describe laws pertaining to Shabbas. She is careful to make Jewish law as clear as she can to Smith, explaining the problem of the radio and why as an adult Jew she could not do anything about it:

we can’t make the baby turn it [the radio] off but if the baby,
but if a child under three

turns something on or turns something off it’s not

considered against the Torah, [. . .]

so you can have somebody who’s not Jewish can do a simple

act like

turning on the light or turning off the light,

and I hope I have the law correct,

but you can’t ask them to do it directly.45

The woman’s detailed if scattered approach to explaining Jewish law presumes that Smith is culturally uninitiated and may struggle to comprehend. Furthermore, Smith’s African American identity is pointed up in this scene as she plays a Jewish woman who plays others, including an African American boy. At one point late in the monologue, the woman impersonates the African American boy who helps turn off the radio:

And I said I don’t know what to do,

so he said okay,

so he followed me into the house

and he hears this music on so loud

and so unpleasant

and so

he goes over to the

stereo

45 Fires in the Mirror 14.
and he says, ‘You see this little button here
that says on and off?
Push that in
and that turns it off.’\textsuperscript{46}

The woman goes on to explain that because she pretended not to know how to turn off her radio, the boy probably assumed that she was the antithesis of a certain cultural stereotype about Jews:

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 the their radios.\textsuperscript{47}

Smith’s representation of the Jewish woman as the African American boy is critical in understanding not only the multiple meanings produced here, but also Smith’s outsider status. The African American boy in the story, like Smith herself, is viewed by the Jewish woman as an outsider. Smith and the boy are linked by a presumed lack of knowledge in Smith’s case, and an actual lack of knowledge in the boy’s case, regarding an aspect of Jewish culture. Moreover, with regard to performance style, it is worth considering whether differences exist in Smith’s representations of the Jewish woman playing the black boy and

\textsuperscript{46} Fires in the Mirror 15.

\textsuperscript{47} Fires in the Mirror 15.
the Jewish woman playing herself. If her representations seem exaggerated, as some critics have claimed, are they equally so? This line of inquiry raises broader questions about Smith’s ability to portray “others.” Are her representations of African Americans, for instance, more authentic or closer to their subjects because Smith is African American, while her representations of Jews are distanced at best, or stereotypes at worst, because we assume that she is not Jewish? How might we interpret her multi-faceted representations and dramaturgical strategy to allow “others” to speak through her?

Critical Response to Smith in Performance

In responding to Smith’s performance of *Fires in the Mirror*, many critics approached this topic without tackling these specific questions. The majority of critical response praised Smith for her ability to objectively portray such a diverse array of characters. For example, in the *New York Times*, Frank Rich, who called the play “the most compelling and sophisticated view of urban and racial class conflict,” was particularly taken with Smith’s ability to combine, in essence, theatre and hard journalism:

> Ms. Smith’s performance abilities are impressive and fun, but what makes ‘Fires in the Mirror’ so moving and provocative, so remarkably free of cant

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48 Some critics, such as Michael Kuchwara, Christopher Meeks, Dennis Harvey, and Daniel B. Wood, have described Smith’s staged representations as exaggerated. However, their criticism was offered in response not to Smith’s performance of *Fires in the Mirror* but rather *Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992*. I explore this further in the “Critical Response to Smith in Performance” section of Chapter Three.

and polemics, is its creator’s ability to find the unexpected and unguarded in nearly each speaker and her objective grasp of the troubling big picture.\textsuperscript{50}

Rich goes on to suggest that Smith could, and perhaps should, put the intelligence and objectivity that she displayed in creating *Fires in the Mirror* to good use by throwing her hat into the realm of professional politics:

[Smith’s] show is a self-contained example of what one person can accomplish, at the very least in disseminating accurate, unbiased inside reportage, simply by listening to all the warring occupants of the urban neighborhood. This puts Ms. Smith ahead of most politicians, and, indeed, she may be that rare actor who actually should be encouraged to run for public office.\textsuperscript{51}

If Smith is so gifted as to be able to present the Crown Heights conflict effectively on stage, Rich wonders, how might she fare with the American political arena as her stage? The question is indicative of how *Fires in the Mirror* was received as a ground-breaking political drama and how Smith, at the center of the piece, was viewed as a purveyor of objectivity and truth and whose art provides a valuable social service.

Equally enamored by Smith’s powers of performance and journalistic objectivity was David Richards, also of the *New York Times*, who said:

To every story, especially one as tangled and inflammatory as this, there are as many sides as there are participants. The fact that Ms. Smith takes all of

\textsuperscript{50} Rich C1.

\textsuperscript{51} Rich C1.
them in turn strips the work of any partisanship. The prevailing tone is curiously cool and distanced, even when the actress is depicting behavior that isn’t.\footnote{David Richards, “And Now, a Word From Off Broadway,” rev. of Fires in the Mirror: Crown Heights, Brooklyn and Other Identities, perf. Anna Deavere Smith, dir. Christopher Ashley, Joseph Papp Public Theater, New York, New York Times 17 May 1992, late ed., sec. 2: 5.}

Richards picks up on Frank Rich’s point by observing how Smith was able to depict the Crown Heights struggle as a series of smaller narratives from multiple storytellers, all the while without offering comment of her own. Kevin Kelly of the\footnote{Kevin Kelly, “‘Fires’: A Scathing Universal Portrait of Hatred,” rev. of Fires in the Mirror: Crown Heights, Brooklyn and Other Identities, perf. Anna Deavere Smith, Loeb Drama Center, Boston, Boston Globe 1 Oct. 1992, city ed.: 49.} Boston Globe offered similar praise for Smith’s ability to remain neutral, and re-present the conflict between African Americans and Jews from decidedly middle ground:

Smith occupies a dangerously truthful position. [. . .] Having documented what happened [. . .] Smith fills the stage with characters both anonymous and well-known [. . .] and lets them speak their minds. Even as the hatred escalates (and it escalates with you terrorized in your seat), Smith never takes sides.\footnote{Kevin Kelly, “‘Fires’: A Scathing Universal Portrait of Hatred,” rev. of Fires in the Mirror: Crown Heights, Brooklyn and Other Identities, perf. Anna Deavere Smith, Loeb Drama Center, Boston, Boston Globe 1 Oct. 1992, city ed.: 49.}

Plenty of other critics followed suit, responding enthusiastically not only to the innovative style of theatre that Smith created with Fires in the Mirror, which was variously described as performance art, anthropology, and journalism, but to her knack for “removing” her own cultural and/or political identity from the piece in favor of the cultural and political identities – and crises – of others.\footnote{Kevin Kelly, “‘Fires’: A Scathing Universal Portrait of Hatred,” rev. of Fires in the Mirror: Crown Heights, Brooklyn and Other Identities, perf. Anna Deavere Smith, Loeb Drama Center, Boston, Boston Globe 1 Oct. 1992, city ed.: 49.} Hap Erstein of the Washington
Times called Smith’s approach “evenhanded.”\textsuperscript{55} Sydney H. Weinberg of the Hollywood Reporter observed that Smith allowed “all sides to be duly represented.”\textsuperscript{56} Benedict Nightingale, reviewing Smith’s performance at London’s Royal Court Theatre for the Times, remarked that Smith “does not prod or editorialize. She presents, and leaves us to think and feel.”\textsuperscript{57} Sue Fishkoff, in reviewing the American Playhouse film version for the Jerusalem Post, commented that Smith “[steers] clear of partisanship.”\textsuperscript{58} Marianne Evett reached a similar conclusion in her film review in the Cleveland Plain Dealer, stating that Fires in the Mirror is “so compelling” and that it “takes no overt stand” and represents “all sides in the conflict.”\textsuperscript{59} In the Washington Post, Lloyd Rose described Smith’s “documentary” approach in the film as “hands-off.”\textsuperscript{60} These critics and others who pointed


to Smith’s objectivity and/or neutrality ultimately equated her racialized identity with an
ability to fairly re-present the Crown Heights riots, itself a racialized event. Many marveled
at her chameleon-like ability to “transform” and become “other.” But in a play about black
and Jewish relations, it seems odd that more critics failed to explore either the
dramaturgical emphasis placed on African American characters, especially early in the play,
or the inherently charged and complicated representations of “others” through the vessel
of Smith’s African American body.

Perhaps critical reception surrounding *Fires in the Mirror* was informed by Smith’s
outspoken desire to be an objective and neutral figure in re-presenting the Crown Heights
riots on stage. In an interview with Matt Wolf of the *Times* which ran simultaneous with
the play’s London premiere, Smith said:

I resist taking sides. I know that’s disturbing for some people because
somewhere, identity in us has to do with what side you’re on. People want
to know, ‘just what does she think about this? What does she really think?’
But I feel a big responsibility to the people who talk to me not to do this. I
want to tell all sides of the story. 61

Smith made a similar claim when speaking with Tony Norman of the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*
when *Fires in the Mirror* was re-staged in 1995:

61 Anna Deavere Smith, qtd. in Wolf, “Lone Woman Reads the Riot Act.”
Many people ask me about my biases and how I maintain objectivity. I’m flattered by that, but that’s not my (main) goal. If it happens, it’s a byproduct of the aesthetic goals that I have.\(^{62}\)

Of interest here is Smith’s sense of double consciousness and awareness of tensions inherent in her quest for objectivity. She ultimately rejects those tensions, maintaining that she is able to be objective despite concerns that some may have about her ability to do so.

While the majority of critical response deemed her successful in her mission, some critics picked up on these tensions by raising questions about Smith’s supposed neutrality and even-handedness as writer-performer. Lloyd Rose, for example, in reviewing the Public Theater production, pointed out the significance of Smith’s presence in the piece:

> It is Smith herself – with her astonishing plasticity, her complete submergence of self as she shifts from character to character – who is the story. You could get the information in ‘Fires in the Mirror’ from reading transcripts. What is breathtaking is Smith’s almost literal identification with various speakers.\(^{63}\)

In reviewing the Royal Court production, Paul Taylor of the Independent took Rose’s observation even further. Beyond identifying the presence and importance of Smith’s character, as Rose does, Taylor challenges Smith’s ability to be neutral as she represents others:


[Smith’s] views are left out of the picture. It’s hard to see, though, how she can claim to be a neutral ‘repeater’ when there is such a strong element of impersonation in her performance. This inevitably creates an impression (whether favourable or otherwise), which Smith must be aware of managing.64

Taylor argues that by virtue of “impersonating” or representing others by simply “repeating” what they said to her in an interview, Smith necessarily brings her point of view about the characters and events to the drama. Far from being a flaw in Smith’s dramaturgy, it is perhaps only natural that Smith’s first-hand experience of conducting the interviews and studying her subjects on a personal level would influence her opinion and performance. The positive or negative consequence(s) of Smith’s point of view depends, of course, on the individual viewers, their identities, and where their political sympathies lie. Regardless, this pair of critical reviews stands out for its acknowledgement of Smith’s presence (Rose) and politics/point of view (Taylor), and how these factors create multiple meanings in Smith’s performance of *Fires in the Mirror*.

Another pair of reviews that pursued tensions surrounding Smith’s supposed objectivity came some time after Smith’s initial performance. In reviewing the audiobook of *Fires in the Mirror* published by Doubleday in 1994, Patricia Holt of the *San Francisco Chronicle* observed that “underlying [the impersonations] is Smith’s own ‘take’ as an actor.

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and as a person with biases and prejudices of her own.” Holt does not go on to suggest what those biases and prejudices are, but that they occur to her in a “performance” of the play where Smith’s body is absent is especially intriguing. For Holt, Smith’s vocal impersonations alone, however accurate and virtuosic, do not create the sense of objectivity that many critics who judged Smith’s vocal and physical performance observed. This suggests that Smith’s physical presence is vital in performance not only for her ability to establish a sense of authenticity by recreating bodily movements, gestures, and mannerisms, but for the ability of the play itself to convey a sense of objectivity and balanced critical inquiry as well. Second, in reviewing Smith’s latest work, *House Arrest: A Search for American Character In and Around the White House, Past and Present*, Andrew Ferguson of the *Weekly Standard* recalled Smith’s performance of *Fires in the Mirror* roughly four years prior:

> while she recites her subjects verbatim, the impressions occasionally manifest that greatest of contemporary horribles, the ethnic stereotype. Her impersonation of Al Sharpton [. . .] sounded like Steppin Fetchit after a night of freebasing. And when she played a Jewish housewife from Brooklyn, she might have been a drag queen doing Barbra Streisand.  

Despite Ferguson’s somewhat dismissive tone, what is useful here, along with Holt, is the implied call for renewed analysis of critical response to Anna Deavere Smith. The relatively few critics of *Fires in the Mirror* who questioned Smith’s objectivity asserted that there may,

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in fact, be more complex meaning to be unearthed in Smith’s claim that “my voice is in the juxtaposition of other voices.”

67 Most critics failed to notice her voice at all; those who did notice it reminded us that we can “forget” neither Smith’s character nor perceived racial identity in performance – which we should be able to do, Smith has argued, “if the language is stunning enough.”

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Given the inherent doubleness of *Fires in the Mirror*, and that the riots created schisms within the Crown Heights community, it is not surprising that Smith’s play elicited a complex array of responses. Close examination of Smith’s performance and critical reception reveals that her presence and identity are more a part of the play’s multiple meanings than many critics initially assumed. Indeed, reconsidering the claims of objectivity that first surrounded *Fires in the Mirror* opens up the play’s meaning(s) even further, as well as the social, racial, cultural, and theatrical ramifications of Smith’s body of work and her representations of “others.”


“Twilight is a time when objects are obscured by the coming darkness. It is the time when we’re not sure of whether it’s dark or light. It’s limbo time. It’s quiet, but it’s not peace. There is a rustling at twilight. People are still active. It is a creative time because it asks more of our vision. We have to work harder to see.”

Introduction

If Fires in the Mirror: Crown Heights, Brooklyn and Other Identities established Anna Deavere Smith as an important and ground-breaking figure in American theatre, then the next installment of her On the Road: A Search for American Character series, Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992, solidified her formidable presence on the national scene. In this chapter, I provide background information about the events that form the basis of Twilight and details about how Smith came to the piece initially. I then consider the thematic importance of character in terms of race and dramatic convention. In analyzing the play from a literary point of view, I illustrate how the sense of doubleness that is prevalent in Fires in the Mirror reemerges in Twilight. Specifically, I focus on how double consciousness informs racial identity and character. I also explore the play’s treatment of masculinity and

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violence, the “problematization” of racial minorities, and representations of violence in the media, and how these issues are unique to Twilight. The dramaturgical scope of Twilight (paralleled by the sprawling city of Los Angeles and its various smaller communities) is broader than that of Fires in the Mirror (and the densely populated neighborhood of Crown Heights, Brooklyn). This is accounted for in Twilight by Smith’s inclusion of racially, ethnically, and socially diverse perspectives. Appropriately, her search for American character on the West coast yields wide-reaching and complex results. Focusing on the topics outlined above will allow me to manage the expansiveness of Twilight and pursue my critical inquiry more directly.

Next, I consider Smith’s treatment of character as a dramatic convention by examining her performance for Thirteen/WNET’s prime-time drama series Stage on Screen. I point to key scenes where Smith’s character comes to the fore and argue that her presence in Twilight is equally evident, if not more so, than in Fires in the Mirror. Finally, I explore critical response to Twilight to show how critics acknowledged Smith’s identity and measured her journalistic “objectivity.” I demonstrate how Twilight solidified Smith’s status as a significant American artist and political figure who, in crossing boundaries of race, class, and gender, opens national lines of communication about matters of race.
Background on Los Angeles, California (1992)

A series of events led up to the Los Angeles riots of April 1992.2 On March 3, 1991, Los Angeles police officers pursued Rodney King, an African American male, when King failed to pull his car over when signaled. The pursuit covered nearly eight miles and exceeded speeds of 100 miles per hour. In subduing and arresting him, officers beat King. The incident, which lasted approximately two minutes, was caught on videotape by a local resident, George Holliday, and subsequently broadcast throughout the country. King suffered eleven skull fractures, brain damage, and kidney damage. Of the twenty-three officers involved, four were brought up on felony charges: Sergeant Stacey C. Koon, and Officers Laurence M. Powell, Timothy E. Wind, and Theodore J. Briseno.

On March 16, 1991, thirteen days after the King beating, a fifteen-year-old African American girl, Latasha Harlins, was shot and killed by Soon Ja Du, a Korean woman and liquor store owner in South L.A. The shooting, which took place during a dispute in Du’s establishment, was captured by the store security camera and later broadcast by various media outlets. After a trial lasting almost two weeks, Du was found guilty of voluntary manslaughter on October 11, 1991. She was sentenced to five years probation, four hundred hours of community service, and a $500 fine.

The trial of the four LAPD officers involved in the King beating began on March 4, 1992 in Simi Valley, California. Nearly seven weeks later, on April 29, 1992, a jury

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2 See Appendix A for a detailed chronology of the Los Angeles conflict. I have included this information to help contextualize the real-life persons and events upon which Twilight is based. Smith incorporated chronologies into the 1994 Playbill for the Cort Theatre/Broadway production and the 1994 Anchor Books reading edition of Twilight. Her inclusion of this material indicates Smith’s belief that her play may be better understood by audiences and readers who are familiar with Los Angeles and the riots that ensued there in 1992.
returned not-guilty verdicts on all but one of the charges; a mistrial was declared on the remaining count of excessive force against Officer Powell. The verdict, which was carried live over network television, sparked four days of protests, fires, violence, looting, and general unrest throughout greater Los Angeles. The disturbance included, on April 29, 1992, an incident involving Reginald Denny, a white truck driver who was pulled from his vehicle at the intersection of Florence and Normandie in South Central L.A. and beaten by a group of African American men, principally among them Damian Williams and Henry “Keith” Watson. Denny suffered multiple skull fractures. Like the King and Harlins-Du incidents, Denny's beating was caught on videotape (by a local news helicopter) and broadcast nationwide. By the time the riots ceased on May 4, 1992, sixty people had been killed, 2,383 injured, and $1 billion in property destroyed.¹

In *Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992*, the fourteenth component of her *On the Road: A Search for American Character* series, Anna Deavere Smith investigates reasons for and ramifications of these various events. She delves into how the incidents caused pre-existing social, cultural, and economic tensions between and among Los Angeles’s African American, Korean, Latino, and white communities to become expressed through violence. Smith also examines how members of these communities, along with leaders of local and national government, responded to the riots, and how Los Angeles might repair and rebuild itself in the aftermath.

¹ Staff of the *Los Angeles Times*, *Understanding the Riots: Los Angeles Before and After the Rodney King Case* (Los Angeles: Los Angeles Times, 1992): 130.
Background on Smith’s Production

Smith interviewed approximately 200 people in her research for *Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992*. She spoke with individuals who had direct involvement with the riots, including Reginald Denny, Henry “Keith” Watson, and LAPD Chief Daryl Gates, to name a few. Additionally, she gathered the accounts of community members, anonymous eyewitnesses, attorneys, academics, artists, and politicians in an effort to provide perspectives as wide-ranging and diverse as Los Angeles. As she did in *Fires in the Mirror*, Smith used verbatim excerpts from the interviews and performed every role herself.

*Twilight* was commissioned by the Center Theatre Group/Mark Taper Forum of Los Angeles (Gordon Davidson, Artistic Director). Directed by Emily Mann, it premiered at the Taper on May 23, 1993 and closed on July 18, 1993; the play was subsequently produced as a work in progress at the McCarter Theatre in Princeton, New Jersey. In New York City, *Twilight* premiered in March 1994 at the Joseph Papp Public Theater/New York Shakespeare Festival (George C. Wolfe, Producer), where it was directed by Wolfe. This production transferred to Broadway’s Cort Theatre on April 17, 1994 and received a run of seventy-two performances before closing on June 19, 1994. *Twilight* was produced again on January 31, 1996 by the Berkeley Repertory Theater (Sharon Ott, Artistic Director; Susan Medak, Managing Director) in Berkeley, California. The play was directed by Sharon Ott and performed by Smith. *Twilight* was adapted for film as part of Thirteen/WNET’s

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Stage on Screen series. Directed by Marc Levin, the film premiered at the 2000 Sundance Film Festival and was broadcast on PBS in April 2001.

Character as Theme

Given its broad scope, it follows that Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992 is a much longer piece than Fires in the Mirror: Crown Heights, Brooklyn and Other Identities. Where Fires in the Mirror is a one-act play consisting of twenty-nine monologues from twenty-six different characters, Twilight consists of fifty-nine monologues from thirty-seven different characters spread over two full-length acts. Similar to Fires in the Mirror, in Twilight Smith first provides background information about pre-riot Los Angeles and tensions that lurked beneath the surface even before the Rodney King incident took place. The first act is divided into five thematic parts, entitled: “Once Upon a Time,” “Smoke,” “No Justice No Peace: The Story of Latasha Harlins,” “The Story of Rodney King: The First Trial/Simi Valley February 1992,” and “Rocked.” The first of these – “Once Upon a Time” and “Smoke” – introduces varying attitudes about race among Los Angeles citizens and police officers. The third part, “No Justice No Peace: The Story of Latasha Harlins,” deals with the death of Latasha Harlins and presents the strained cultural dynamic between L.A.’s African American and Korean communities. This segues into the final two parts – “The Story of Rodney King: The First Trial/Simi Valley February 1992,” and “Rocked” – which are devoted to the

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Rodney King beating, criminal trial, and verdict, as well as the subsequent violence among whites, African Americans, Koreans, and Latinos that these events sparked. The second act of *Twilight* is also divided into five thematic parts, entitled: “Losses,” “The National Guard Comes to LA,” “After Dinner,” “Justice,” and “Twilight.” Each of these focuses on the aftermath of the riots and how the city of Los Angeles and, by extension, the United States might understand better and communicate more effectively on matters of race.

As in *Fires in the Mirror*, characters in *Twilight* experience a sense of double consciousness that echoes W.E.B. Du Bois’s theory. This is a crucial commonality between the two plays which underscores the thematic importance of diversity and doubleness in Smith’s work. Much like George C. Wolfe, the Reverend Al Sharpton, and Anonymous Girl, who reveal in *Fires in the Mirror* how their respective senses of identity (and awareness of themselves as “other”) took shape early in life, so, too, do a pair of characters at the outset of *Twilight*. In the play’s second monologue, entitled “A Broken Heart,” Theodore Briseno, a Latino police officer who was accused of beating Rodney King, discusses the importance of his father, who died of a heart attack when Briseno was only a child. Briseno explains how growing up without a father shaped his identity and influenced the parenting of his own children:

I wanted my children to look up to me

As their father

First,

but I wanted them to look at me as

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as a hero.

I didn’t have a hero,

when I was growing up.

I didn’t have a father.

My father died when I was eight. [. . .]

My oldest sister.

She said, ‘Dad died of a broken heart.’

Bein’ older now,

I know what she meant,

by a broken heart.

And he couldn’t provide the way he would have like to have

I just you know,

to this day it’s still in the back of my head.

was that he died of a broken heart.

(Pause.)

So I grew up (Louder.)

basically without a father.9

Later in the second act, in a monologue entitled “Not Their Hero Anymore,” Briseno
reveals that despite his acquittal, his children no longer consider him the “hero” they once
did because of Briseno’s association with the Rodney King incident.10 Growing up without


10 Twilight 30.
a father informed Briseno’s desire to be an admirable parent to his children and to provide for them in ways that his own father never could. It also shaped Briseno’s children’s view of their father. In this early monologue, then, Briseno reveals awareness of his own identity and how his children view him as a flawed paternal figure. Furthermore, the subtext of his two monologues reveals Briseno’s understanding of how his identity was perceived by those who observed the King trial, including his kids. Briseno views himself through his own eyes and, at once, through the eyes of his children, the public, and the media who regard him as “other” for his involvement in the King beating.

Likewise, in another early monologue entitled “My Enemy,” Rudy Salas, Sr., a Mexican American sculptor and painter in his sixties, points to his grandfather, a “gringo hater,” as a role model. Salas asserts how his own sense of double consciousness developed as a young child:

And then at school
first grade, they started telling me
I was inferior
because I was a Mexican!
And that’s where,
I knew from an early age
(He hits the table several times, taps, twenty-three taps until line ‘my enemy’ and then on ‘nice white teachers’ his hands sweep the table.)
I realized I had an enemy

11 Twilight 29.
and that enemy-was-those-nice-white-teachers.12

This observation is important for two reasons. First, it shows how Salas’s early understanding of his racial identity was informed by awareness of being viewed as “other” by the dominant white culture. Second, it exposes his deep-seated distrust of members of that culture who occupy positions of authority, such as teachers. This suspicion of authority turns to hatred in another story Salas tells in the same monologue about having been beaten by police officers as a teenager:

In forty-two
when I was in my teens!
Running around as a zootsui-
er!
One night, cops really tore me up bad!
One of them said something about my mama!
I turned around, I threw a punch at one of ‘em!
I didn’t hit him hard!
But that sealed my doom!
They took me to a room –
and they locked the door behind me!
And there was four guys four cops there,
kicking me in the head! [. . .]
So
from that day on,

12 Twiligh 29-30.
I had a hate in me.\textsuperscript{13} As Smith’s liberal use of exclamation points suggests, Salas’s tone is frantic. Throughout the monologue he jumps from subject to subject quickly, often failing to complete one thought or sentence before moving to the next. Recalling this violent episode clearly has an emotional impact on Salas. He equates his negative encounter with police as a young man with an experience that his son, Rudy, Jr., had when he was pulled over and insulted by police. Salas’s “hate” is informed by confrontations with authority that occurred in the past and continue to take place in the present. As a teenager, Salas developed an awareness of his racial identity based on how authority figures, such as teachers and police officers, treated him. This sense of double consciousness carried over into adulthood, where he remains acutely aware and outspokenly critical of police officers for their hostility toward him and his family as “others.”

In these early monologues, two racial minorities reveal how their sense of double consciousness took shape early in life – Briseno through the absence of his father, Salas through encounters with authority figures. These characters speak to the importance of family in the formation and awareness of their identities. Briseno and Salas also express how their awareness of themselves as “others” has affected their adult lives. Their stories resonate later in Smith’s treatment of the riots and her return to the subject of authority, specifically the lack of effective leadership in contemporary American politics and law enforcement.

\textsuperscript{13} \textit{Twilight} 30.
Masculinity and Violence

Dramatically, Briseno and Salas’s monologues serve another important role, illustrating how themes of masculinity and violence inform character in *Twilight*. In its exploration of the riots and pre-existing cultural tensions, *Twilight* is replete with anecdotes and accounts of violence from onlookers, rioters, police officers, and more. Most of these stories come from men who, in one way or another, link violence to their masculinity (and in some cases, as I will point out, to their racial identity). In this way, *Twilight* confirms Henry Louis Gates, Jr.’s assertion that many black men possess multiple accounts of encounters with police and swap their experiences like war stories. Smith’s treatment of violence and masculinity also echoes bell hooks’s theory in *We Real Cool: Black Men and Masculinity*. Hooks argues that in American patriarchal culture, men are expected to commit acts of violence as a way of asserting control over others:

> Showing aggression is the simplest way to assert patriarchal manhood. Men of all classes know this. As a consequence, all men living in a culture of violence must demonstrate at some point in their lives that they are capable of being violent.

Hooks further contends that African American males receive increased attention from society when they commit acts of violence. Certainly the enormous amount of media attention that the L.A. riots commanded supports this observation. I will explore hooks’s

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16 Hooks, *We Real Cool: Black Men and Masculinity* 49.
theory further by examining monologues from African American and white male
characters, including Sergeant Charles Duke, Henry “Keith” Watson, Paul Parker, and
Stanley K. Sheinbaum. Their monologues deal explicitly with the issue of violence, its
ramifications, and why employing violence becomes necessary as a means of affirming one’s
masculine identity and exerting control over others.

In “Control Holds,” a monologue that precedes a string of accounts on the Rodney
King verdict and subsequent rioting, Sergeant Charles Duke, a white male member of the
LAPD Special Weapons and Tactics Unit, provides information about the kinds of
physical force that officers have historically been allowed to utilize. Duke comments on
relatively recent changes that have been made to those rules and regulations. Smith’s
description of Duke in the stage directions suggests a quintessentially masculine individual:
“A handsome white man, very muscular, like a person who trains or lifts weights, large
biceps – police uniform and police boots.”¹⁷ The monologue begins with Duke showing a
video clip of the Rodney King beating. He quickly interrupts the tape, picks up a
policeman’s baton, and demonstrates proper utilization of the weapon. He specifies two
shortcomings – inefficiency and weakness – on the part of Officer Powell (who dealt the
majority of blows to King) and his colleagues. First, Duke reveals how the officers
inefficiently used the baton by failing to employ the same precision that he himself
possesses and the LAPD teaches. Second, he accuses the officers of physical weakness. This
is pointed up dramaturgically by the aforementioned description of Duke’s imposing
physical presence, coupled with the relative diminutive statures of the officers in the video,

¹⁷ Twilight 53.
as represented on a small-screen television. This visual juxtaposition suggests that, in addition to baton technique, Powell and the others also do not “measure up” to Duke’s strength or masculinity.

Sergeant Duke goes on to explain how the LAPD, in response to pressure from the community in the early 1980s, eliminated the “upper body control hold” as its primary physical tactic in favor of the baton. Duke argued against the decision at the time, claiming the control hold was more effective and that the baton could potentially cause bodily harm to victims. Duke recalls that his dissention, however, was met coolly by his superiors:

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? ’

And I said ‘Yes, sir.’

And I never brought it up again.  

Upset with the City Commission for substituting the baton for the control hold, the LAPD planned to retaliate, according to Duke’s commander, by showing how violent the baton could be. In other words, the police officers, who believed that the baton would likely create more problems than it would solve, were willing if not eager to prove as much to the City Commission by engaging in acts of violence.

From a dramaturgical point of view, it is significant that a monologue where a physically imposing, white male police officer expounds on the use of force precedes a series of monologues from African American males who recount confrontations with the LAPD and their perspective on the riots. This dramaturgical structure mirrors the cultural division of the riots themselves, which pitted racial minorities against members of the predominantly white law enforcement community. It also gives credence to bell hooks’s argument that in media representations of violence “black males are assigned the position of hypermasculine, out-of-control male body, and white males (whether enforcers of law or educators) are perceived to be acting within reason.”

18 Twilight 54-5.

19 hooks, We Real Cool: Black Men and Masculinity 57.
perception about (white) law enforcement to which hooks alludes. Even before the trial or video is fully examined in Twilight, however, there is evidence in Sergeant Duke’s monologue that law enforcement is neither controlled nor reasonable. This can be seen in the attitude of Duke’s commander and his wish to demonstrate the violent potential of the baton. Twilight also points out how media representations, such as those described by hooks, are often incomplete, inaccurate, and misleading – a subject Smith will give even greater attention to in House Arrest.

Continuing my analysis of masculinity and violence, I want to look at Smith’s treatment of two African American characters, Henry “Keith” Watson and Paul Parker. In “Rage,” the second of his three monologues in Twilight, Watson, former security guard and co-assailant of Reginald Denny, describes the general mood and motivation of the riots. He explains that he opted to engage in the violence because justice, as he saw it, failed when the officers were acquitted in the Rodney King case:

It was rage,
black rage,
that’s what I like ta
call it,
you know what I mean?
Black rage! [. . .]
I followed the trial cause I wanted to see if justice works
and on that particular day justice didn’t work.
Yes! I was upset.
I was highly upset!

That could’ve been me out there gettin’ my ass whooped!

and these four officers could a walked away for whoopin’ my ass

like that?

I’m-afraid-not

I wasn’t raised to take ass whoopin’s like that and turn the other

cheek

I refused!20

Watson’s “refusal” is a rejection of passivity. He responded to one violent incident, the
beating of Rodney King, and one instance of perceived injustice, the officers’ acquittal,
with violence of his own. In assailing Denny, he exerted control over one man and, in his
mind, over (white) authority more generally, including the legal system responsible for the
not-guilty verdict, as well as the police officers who attempted to quell the riots. Watson’s
choice of words in describing his retaliation reeks of machismo. The brazenness of
comments such as “I’m-afraid-not” and “I wasn’t raised to take ass whoopin’s like that”
suggests that he will not allow himself to sit idly by while his racial and masculine identities
are threatened. He must and will take action. Acting upon a principle instilled early in life,
Watson participated in the riots out of a natural male response. In light of the violence and
injustice around him, failure to acknowledge and act upon that principle would be a
betrayal of Watson’s African American male identity.

20 Twilight 81-2.
In a later monologue entitled “Make My Mark,” Watson supports bell hooks’s claim regarding the increased attention that black males receive in society when they engage in violent acts. In a more subdued tone, according to Smith’s stage directions, Watson here reflects on his historical legacy. He is fully aware that he has become “famous” for his role in the assault on Reginald Denny. What is important to Watson is not simply that his name is well known or that his likeness has been shown repeatedly on television. Rather, he believes that having committed this act of violence, society – or at least a certain segment of society, such as the African American community – will now remember and esteem him:

I mean,

you go through life

and you always want to

uh make a mark or leave a mark

to show that you passed

through this

through life

you understand what I’m saying?

Never (Laughing.)

in my wildest dreams,

did I think that,

something like this

would have happened in order for
me to make my mark,
leave my mark.
I mean I’m up there with Martin and Malcolm.
And to have my name uttered in the same breath as those two gentlemen,
I’m talkin’ about Martin Luther King, and Malcolm X.
That’s heavy.21

In both of his monologues, Watson’s masculinity and African American-ness are emphasized. In “Rage,” we are reminded of hooks’s observation of the need males feel to express themselves through violence. Certainly Watson felt that urge in responding to the verdict by participating in the riots. In “Make My Mark,” Watson describes how he has become associated with the two most significant and recognizable African American figures in U.S. history. Watson does not liken himself to Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X so much as he suggests that others (presumably other African Americans) have made that association and Watson is simply aware of it. What Watson implies here is society, by virtue of making this momentous connection, has rewarded him for his violence and that history will recall him favorably. hooks would argue, however, that this assumption is folly because in white, patriarchal society, black male violence is rarely, if ever, “rewarded.” Watson may have garnered more attention for himself and he may even be flattered by that. However, hooks would question the price at which this attention has come. To justify her skepticism, hooks cites O.J. Simpson as an example. Simpson, she says, may have been acquitted of murder and he may technically be “free,” but he is forever “prey” – a “marked

21 Twilight 87.
man” – in the eyes of the dominant white culture that considers him guilty and dangerous, irrespective of his acquittal. It is possible that Watson, then, contrary to his own way of thinking, might well suffer a similar fate as Simpson. In any case, his monologues demonstrate that hooks could not be more accurate in her assertion that violence for black men yields from society a special kind of attention, especially in the media. This may be positive and rewarding, as Watson believes, or negative and punishing, as in hooks’s view. Regardless, it is attention that these same men would likely never receive if not for engaging in violence.

Paul Parker, Chairperson of the “Free the L.A. Four Plus Defense Committee,” provides another example in Twilight of masculinity and violence converging in an African American character. In his monologue entitled “No Justice, No Peace/My Room,” Parker argues that the Reginald Denny beating received an inordinate amount of media attention because the victim, Denny, was white. Had it instead been “a nigger killin’ a nigger, a black on black crime,” Parker surmises that the entire incident would have gone virtually unnoticed. He contends that black men receive increased societal attention for their acts of violence, as bell hooks suggests, particularly when the victims are white. Like Henry “Keith” Watson, Parker is also concerned about how he will be remembered for his role in the riots. To address that concern, he describes his plans to create a special room in his home,

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22 hooks, We Real Cool: Black Men and Masculinity 60.

23 The “L.A. Four” were four African American men on trial for beating Reginald Denny. These men were Antoine Miller, Henry “Keith” Watson, Damian Williams, and Gary Williams.

24 Twilight 116.
a so-called “No Justice, No Peace” room, that will properly document the story. The creation of this room is critical to Parker because he wants his children to understand “what Daddy did” and something even more fundamentally important about their father:

You know, if I still happen to be here,

God willin’,

they can just see what it takes
to be a strong black man,

what you gotta do for your people,
you know.

When God calls you, this is what you gotta do.

You either stand or you fall.

You either be black or you die.

Parker goes on to explain that he did his part in the riots by putting the Koreans “in check.” In a later monologue, “Weapons,” he compares his collection of weapons to a young athlete’s trophies, both sources of pride in their way. Parker views engaging in violence as a responsibility, something he must do in service to African Americans (his “people”) and to God. Parker’s worry over what his children will think of him echoes Theodore Briseno’s regret over losing his “hero” status among his own children. Both

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25 Twilight 118.
26 Twilight 118.
27 Twilight 118.
28 Twilight 119.
29 Twilight 143.
Briseno and Parker reveal how their masculinity has been made vulnerable as a result of their association with the riots. What differentiates Parker’s monologue, as the excerpted text demonstrates, is the added element of violence. Where Briseno seems to regret his participation in violence for the trouble it caused him, Parker almost celebrates his participation. To be a strong black man, he suggests, one must possess the ability to engage in violence. His assertion that “you either be black or you die” reads like a life lesson that he has lived and will proudly pass on to his children. Consequently, Parker endorses bell hooks’s contention that violence is something that at some point becomes necessary in every (black) man’s life.

It is important to note that Parker’s description of his “No Justice, No Peace” room – a kind of shrine to violence – is preceded by a monologue in which Reginald Denny discusses plans for a future room of his own. This juxtaposition is a key dramaturgical strategy employed by Smith’s throughout *On the Road*. She links the improbable and unlikely in an effort to reveal commonalities and encourage communication across boundaries of difference. We see this strategy at work in *Fires in the Mirror*, where the juxtaposition of Al Sharpton and Anonymous Lubavitcher Woman’s monologues reveal the African American and Jewish significance of hair, for example. Here, Denny’s monologue shows what Denny and one of his assailants, of all people, have in common:

Someday, when I

uh

get a house

I’m gonna have one of those rooms
and it’s just gonna be
of all the riot stuff
and it won’t be a
blood and guts
memorial
It’s not gonna be a sad
it’s gonna be a happy room
it’s gonna be
of all the crazy things that I’ve got
all the
the
love and compassion
and the funny notes
and the letters from far away places
just framed, placed
framed things
Where a person will walk in,
and just have a good old time in there!
It’ll just be
fun to be in there,
just like a fun thing.
And there won’t be
a color problem

in this room. 30

Directly on the heels of Parker, Denny’s plans call for a more peaceful, idealized, and “problem”-less space. His use of words, such as “love,” “compassion,” and “fun,” contrast starkly with Parker’s talk of weapons and death. This dichotomy, emphasized by Smith’s back-to-back positioning of the two monologues, echoes hooks’s point about representations of black males who are overly violent and white males who seem by comparison more controlled. It also emphasizes that Denny and Parker are in some way bound by their humanity. By juxtaposing the idea of their respective rooms, Smith implies that if common ground can exist between two men so different from each other, then perhaps a similar mode of thinking can be productively applied to L.A.’s and, by extension, America’s diverse populations. In this way, Smith negotiates differences and engenders productive communication among individuals and communities.

I will consider one additional monologue to conclude this exploration of masculinity and violence before segueing into a discussion of racial problematization. “These Curious People” is the monologue of Stanley K. Sheinbaum, a seventy-year-old white male and former President of the Los Angeles Police Commission. Sheinbaum tells how he once attended a gang meeting that had been set up ostensibly for the purpose of a truce. Sheinbaum was accompanied by Congresswoman Maxine Waters, an African American, who first alerted him to the meeting. As Sheinbaum describes it, the scene was

30 *Twilight* 114.
tense and unsafe for outsiders. Aware of his vulnerability among gang members given his occupation in law enforcement, Sheinbaum would not be deterred:

I go

into the, uh,

into the group of gang members who were outside.

Even Maxine got scared by this.

I gotta tell you I was brought up in Harlem.

I just have a feel for what I can do and what I can’t do

and I did that.

And I spent about

two, two

hours talkin’ to these guys.

Some of these guys were ready to kill me

(A bird chirps loudly.)

I’m the police commissioner,

and therefore a cop!

And therefore all the things that went along with being a cop!

It was a very interesting experience, God knows.31

Sheinbaum’s account stands out for a few reasons. First, as a white male and police officer, he is aware of himself as “other” in this group comprised of racial minorities who frequently break the law. As such, he exposes in clear terms his own sense of double

31 Twilight 26-7.
consciousness. Second, Sheinbaum mentions Congresswoman Waters’s presence as a means of emphasizing both his acute understanding of the milieu and his courage for becoming involved. The suggestion here is that Waters, a woman, is fearful of potential violence, while Sheinbaum, a male law enforcer, is willing to meet it head on. Not only is he willing, it is natural for him to do so – in much the same way that Henry “Keith” Watson followed his natural male instincts when he engaged in the riots. By indicating Waters’s feminine “weakness,” Sheinbaum highlights his own masculine “strength.” Third, Sheinbaum calls attention to the geography of his upbringing. He believes that being raised in Harlem has given him the ability to understand violence and the courage to immerse himself into perilous situations. Even though he is aware of himself as “other” in the context of the gang meeting, Sheinbaum nevertheless claims to have some understanding of the culture of gangs and thus believes he can participate. A sense of masculinity and violence is what he has in common with gang members. Despite the fact that he is neither young nor black, and even though he does not hail from Los Angeles, Sheinbaum believes that the combination of his masculinity and his being from Harlem, which he equates with L.A. on the basis of violence, ultimately will afford him the cultural capital necessary to engage with gang members in a discussion about race relations and violence.

Racial Problematization

Stanley K. Sheinbaum’s monologue is valuable for another equally important reason: it brings up the issue of racial “problematization” present in *Fires in the Mirror* and explored in the previous chapter through the theories of Cornel West and bell hooks. To
illustrate how the issue arises in *Twilight*, at the end of Sheinbaum’s monologue he describes how some police officers were angry with him for attending the gang meeting and conversing with the “enemy.” Sheinbaum met with the officers to explain that he was trying to learn more about “these curious people,” which would benefit everybody including the police. However, the officers were not satisfied with Sheinbaum’s explanation. They remained upset with his decision to approach the gangs in the first place, which Sheinbaum admits:

the cops were mad,

they were really *mad*

that I would go talk to *them*

(*Pointing towards the ‘gang members.’*)

and not talk to *them*

(*Pointing towards ‘the cops.’*)

and I knew that if I went and talked to them

I’d have bigger problems *here*

But I *also* knew as I was doing this,

I knew they were gonna be pissed. [. . .]

I marched down to Seventy-seventh (*Precinct.*)

and, uh,

I said, ‘Fuck you,

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32 *Twilight* 27.

33 *Twilight* 28.
I can come in here
anytime I want and talk to you.’ [. . .]
Uh,
and at the end,
uh,
I knew I hadn’t won when they said,
‘So which side are you on?’
When I said, I said, it’s...
my answer was
‘Why do I have to be on a side?’
Yu, yuh, yeh know.
‘Why do I have to be on a side?
There’s a problem here!’[^34]

The “problem” Sheinbaum refers to in the final line of this passage is how the disgruntled officers view the world in terms of “us” (police) and “them” (gang members). There is another dilemma at work here, too. Implicit in the officers’ viewpoint is the regard for gangs, which are made up predominantly of racial minorities, as “problems.” This is where the problematization theories forwarded by West and hooks come into play. In “Learning to Talk of Race,” West observes shortcomings in our political and racial vocabulary.[^35]

Similar to Robert Sherman’s “Lousy Language” monologue in *Fires in the Mirror*,

[^34]: Twilight 27-8.

Sheinbaum’s monologue reflects both an unwillingness to talk about race, as evidenced by the negative attitude of the other cops, and an inability to do so effectively, as seen in Sheinbaum’s struggle to find the right words and articulate his meaning. Moreover, through his insistence that he need not belong to any “group,” Sheinbaum reveals an added complication that exists in *Twilight*: there is a larger and more diverse set of players in this real-life drama than in *Fires in the Mirror*. We see in *Twilight* how problematization affects not only African Americans, as in *Fires in the Mirror*, but an even more diverse group of racial minorities, including Koreans and Latinos. This reflects bell hooks’s assertion in *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics* that viewing racial minorities as “problems” only creates *actual* problems of a larger, more complicated variety that ultimately affect everyone, including perpetuators and victims of racism.\(^{36}\)

Exploring Smith’s treatment of racial problematization further, in *Fires in the Mirror* there are multiple suggestions that African Americans are viewed as “problems” largely due to poor or absent parenting and general instability within the home. In *Twilight*, problematization is the result of similar failed family structures, coupled with ineffective political leadership. To illustrate, in “The National Guard Comes to L.A.,” Congresswoman Maxine Waters recounts a plea she once made to a group of political leaders that included President George H.W. Bush. Citing Los Angeles as one of many American cities suffering from “unemployment, hopelessness, and despair,” Waters lobbied President Bush directly for assistance in combating the situation:


\(^{37}\) *Twilight* 134.
I said, ‘These young people
really,
ya know,
are not in anybody’s statistics
or data.
They’ve been dropped off of everybody’s agenda.
They live
from grandmama to mama to girlfriend.’
I said,
‘We now got young people
who are twenty, twenty-one, twenty-two years old
who have never worked a day of their lives.’
I said, ‘These are the young people in our streets
and they are angry
and they are frustrated.’\textsuperscript{38}

According to Waters, the nation’s political leadership, viewing minorities as “problems,” has ignored issues of poverty and homelessness and thus have made matters worse. She pleads with the government to provide help and stability for young people who are clearly not getting as much from their own families, if they have families at all. Broken-down family structures, combined with either an uninformed or apathetic government, have exacerbated both the “problematization” and actual problems experienced by racial

\textsuperscript{38} Twilight 134.
minorities. Waters’s observations are shared by former Senator Bill Bradley who, in a monologue entitled “You’re Being Held Against Your Will, Aren’t You?,” asserts that politicians and citizens alike should take more “responsibility” for each other.39 Similar sentiments are made in the monologue “Marching Orders,” where Alice Waters, Chef of Chez Panisse Restaurant in Berkeley, California, attributes many of the country’s ills to the fact that “we don’t have the leaders.”40 Smith’s inclusion of perspectives that deal explicitly with issues of political leadership and social welfare gives Twilight a “national” feel, where Fires in the Mirror by comparison seems more “local.” Twilight offers a larger survey of how racism negatively affects multiple parties, as bell hooks maintains. It also affirms Cornel West’s contention that Americans “are connected in ways we would like to be but also, in a more profound sense, that this failure to connect binds us even more tightly together.”41 Smith’s exploration of a wider, more diverse group of peoples broadens the play’s dramaturgical reach and, as I will show, Smith’s critical appeal as a performer. The expansive scope of Twilight, which reaches beyond Los Angeles and speaks to the U.S. as a whole, may in part account for the overwhelmingly positive reviews of Smith’s production and the acclaim she received for engaging in socio-political issues of national interest and consequence.

39 Twilight 150.

40 Twilight 154.

41 West, “Learning to Talk of Race” 257.
Violence and Media

Before turning to Smith’s performance and critical reception of *Twilight*, I wish to consider a final way that diversity and doubleness are evident in the play. Here, I examine how the combination of violence and media generates multiple meanings of the real-life events upon which *Twilight* is based. Relatively little mention of the media is made in *Fires in the Mirror*. Examples are limited to passing references by Al Sharpton, who remarks on the portrayal of African Americans on televised news, and Richard Green, who notes the influence of media images on black youths. The subject of the media takes on a much more prominent role in *Twilight*, as I will demonstrate. In discussing Smith’s treatment of violence and media in *Twilight*, the work of Henry Louis Gates, Jr. is crucial. Gates’s theory that language creates multiple meanings for knowing audiences applies not only to language in *Twilight*, but also to media and images of violence.  

Perhaps the most fundamental way *Twilight* examines the relationship between violence and media is its utilization of three different videos: the home video of the Rodney King beating, captured by local resident George Holliday; the video of Soon Ja Du’s shooting of Latasha Harlins, taken from the liquor store security camera; and the “telecopter” video of the Reginald Denny beating, an aerial shot generated by a television news station. It is logical that these videos play an important role in *Twilight* given the national media attention they commanded in 1991-92. In the play, each video is

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accompanied by at least one monologue where the character “reads” the images in the video for his or her purposes. In the process, an inherent doubleness in the videos’ meaning(s) is revealed.

The video of the Rodney King beating is first shown in *Twilight* as a way of introducing Sergeant Charles Duke’s “Control Holds” monologue. Duke stops the video at a specific moment, i.e. as Officer Powell performs a striking motion towards King’s body, to observe improper baton technique by Powell. Duke also references the fact that the video has been widely seen by many outside the LAPD and that it has raised a number of questions:

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Powell, holds the baton
like this
and that is
not a good

(He picks up a baton from the table and demonstrates)
the proper way of holding the baton
is like this.

So one of the things

they keep talking about –

‘Why did it take fifty-six baton blows?’
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43 For further discussion on how these videos were utilized in courts of law and the media, see Robin Bernstein, “Rodney King, Shifting Modes of Vision, and Anna Deavere Smith’s *Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992*,” *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism* 14.2 (Spring 2000): 121-34.

The whole thing boils down to,

Powell has no strength and no power

in his baton strikes

because he was weak and inefficient with the baton training. [author’s emphasis]

In the first part of this passage, Duke discusses the video like a sportscaster doing play-by-play analysis. He describes and reenacts Powell’s maneuvers, which he judges on the basis of techniques taught in police training. That Duke points to Powell’s lack of strength and skill as rationale for the fifty-six blows to King’s body is significant. Someone unfamiliar with police training might conclude from the video that the incident is simply and obviously a case of police brutality. But Duke’s analysis suggests there might be at least one additional way to interpret the video’s eighty-one seconds. That is, the officers were not being excessively violent for the sake of being excessively violent. Rather, they were overcompensating for physical weakness and inability. This important point has eluded those who do not possess Duke’s knowledge – presumably the “they” he makes mention of. By offering his perspective, Duke provides answers to questions (“Why did it take fifty-six blows?”) that have not been satisfactorily addressed in the media. At the same time, he introduces new possibilities for reading the video.

The King video receives another important treatment from Josie Morales, Clerk Typist, City of Los Angeles, and witness to the Rodney King beating. In “Indelible Substance,” Morales recalls what she saw as the beating took place. She laments the fact

44 Twilight 53.
that the prosecution, believing the video would offer sufficiently incriminating evidence, failed to call any witnesses who saw first-hand what happened. Morales specifically warned the prosecution not to make this mistake:

I told him [the prosecutor]:

If you do not put witnesses,

If you don’t 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.

You see that.45

Morales’s claim is useful because it suggests that in order to read the video correctly, one must have information that is not present in the video. Regardless of how the King incident was discussed in the media, and even in the courtroom for that matter, without knowledge of what happened beforehand, any understanding of the beating is incomplete at best and erroneous at worst. Certainly the prosecution learned this the hard way, as Morales feared would happen without the kind of eyewitness testimony that she was prepared to submit.

45 Twilight 51.
Next, in an untitled monologue in the “No Justice No Peace: The Story of Latasha Harlins” section of the play, Charles Lloyd, the African American attorney for Soon Ja Du, forwards an interpretation of the security camera video used by prosecutors in charging Du with Harlins’s death. Speaking over the video as it plays on a television set, also in a play-by-play manner, Lloyd comments on the action:

Boom! *(Hard, loud.)*

Looka there in the face

Boom! *(Hard, loud.)*

Latasha knocks Mrs. Du down, the lady throws the chair.

Mrs. Du reaches under the counter,

picking up a gun now!

Trying to take it out of a holster,

Latasha comes up to the counter with the orange juice!

just like Hollywood –

She puts the orange juice back,

and the gun,

the girl sees the gun.

Makes one step!

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46 Smith includes this note on the story of Latasha Harlins for dramaturgs and directors: “Latasha Harlins was a young black girl who was shot down by a Korean shop owner, Mrs. Soon Ja 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.” See *Twilight* 39.
Boom!

Blood, brains all over, right in front of the cash register.

(Now it slows down.)

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?47 [author’s emphasis]

Lloyd interprets the video in such a way to benefit his client. His vocal style, which Smith in stage directions likens to that of “an old-time professional radio boxing sports cast announcer,”48 is fast and furious, maintaining pace with the rapid action of the video. His language possesses a quality of showmanship. It is almost as though Lloyd “sells” his interpretation to a jury of Soon Ja Du’s peers in this scene. Moreover, by associating the events of the video with an action film – “just like Hollywood” – Lloyd suggests there is a clear villain (Harlins) and victim (Du) in this piece. At the same time, he intimates that, like any film, this one is open to interpretation. He argues that the security camera video does not provide clear-cut proof of Du’s guilt. In fact, if anything it proves her innocence.

47 Twilight 40-1.

48 Twilight 40.
As in Duke’s “Control Holds” monologue, there is a reference in Lloyd’s monologue to “they.” Lloyd uses the term to refer to the prosecution against Du. By mentioning opposing lawyers, Lloyd simultaneously holds up two different interpretations of the same video: “theirs” and his own. To highlight how “their” interpretation also has potential validity, Smith contrasts Lloyd’s reading with that of community activist Gina Rae, A.K.A. Queen Malkah. In a trio of short, untitled monologues that immediately follow Lloyd’s, Malkah contends the video shows Latasha Harlins to be a murder victim.\(^49\) In noting the lack of justice often experienced by racial minorities in America, Malkah ties the Harlins shooting to the King beating, arguing that the former “coincides” with the latter, and that “there’s a parallel” between the two events.\(^50\) In this way, Smith’s dramaturgy suggests what the Rodney King and Latasha Harlins incidents have in common is more than violence. It is the fact that they were caught on video, broadcast nationwide, and interpreted by and through the media in vastly differing ways.

Finally, Smith employs the video of Reginald Denny’s beating to demonstrate how multiple meanings are generated by its images and to underscore the important role of the media in the riots.\(^51\) The video is referenced first by Judith Tur, Ground Reporter for the

\(^{49}\) See \textit{Twilight} 42, 46, 48.

\(^{50}\) \textit{Twilight} 48.


Smith’s fascination with how events and “characters” are represented (and not represented) by the media is a subject she explores in considerable detail in \textit{Twilight}, particularly in her use of the Rodney King, Latasha Harlins-Soon Ja Du, and Reginald Denny videos. The subject of the media receives even greater attention in \textit{House Arrest}, which I discuss in Chapter Four.
L.A. News Service. In her monologue entitled “War Zone,” Tur watches the video and explains what she believes to be happening in it:

Anna,

This is the beginning of the riots.

And, uh,

this is the video we’re going to be giving you for the show.

Now watch this, Anna.

This is absolutely,

I think,

disgraceful.

Here’s a gang member.

Here...

This is

a live broadcast, by the way.

These poor...

He fell like a sack of potatoes.

I mean, real brave men, right?

Now these women here –

you’ll see them later –

are taking pictures of this.

This is sick.\textsuperscript{52}

\textsuperscript{52} Twilight 84.
Tur, who occasionally employs play-by-play commentary comparable to Duke and Lloyd, points out specific incidents in the video, such as Larry Tarvo, an African American man, offering assistance to Denny, and an anonymous man seen videotaping Denny’s beaten body instead of helping him. On the whole Tur’s commentary is derisive. She is critical of the men who beat Denny (challenging their masculinity by implying they are not brave), the anonymous man with the video camera for not doing more, and the United States in general for its apparent social, cultural, and moral deterioration as evidenced by man’s inhumanity to man in the Denny video. Tur’s reading is not an objective interpretation, although it starts out that way as she explains to Smith what the tape is and what it is for. Instead she forwards a specific point of view about what the video shows. Her feelings come into play (she later apologizes for “getting emotional”\footnote{Twilight 86.}) and she passes these feelings on to Smith, hoping that she will identify with her stance – not unlike Lloyd wanting Smith (or the jury) to adopt his interpretation of the Harlins-Du video. Tur’s analysis of the Denny video is likely to be very different from Henry “Keith” Watson’s, for instance, who views the entire event not with derision but with pride. Even as a member of the news media, a profession theoretically rooted in objectivity, Tur is not above formulating and forwarding a subjective/emotional analysis of the Denny video. When contrasted with Watson, we see how two very different interpretations and meanings of the same video may simultaneously co-exist.

The video of Reginald Denny’s beating is also referenced by Denny himself in a monologue entitled “A Weird Common Threat in Our Lives.” Denny is more concerned
with the media, especially television, than he is the actual video itself. He stresses that the media contributed to his survival and recovery, mentioning how the four people who came to his rescue during the beating – “Titus, Bobby, Terry, and Lee”\textsuperscript{54} – finally did so because they saw the beating unfold on live television and said to themselves “Enough’s enough!”\textsuperscript{55} Were it not for them, Denny posits, he likely would not have survived. Furthermore, Denny indicates that while he was in the hospital, it was television that ultimately alerted him to his situation:

I think when it really dawned on me,
that something big might had happened,
was when very important people wanted to come in and say hi.
The person that I remember that wanted to come in and see me,
the first person that I was even aware of who wanted to see me,
was Reverend Jesse Jackson
and I’m just thinkin’:
‘Not this guy!
that’s the dude I see on TV all the time!’
And then it was a couple days later that
Arsenio Hall (Stretching out ‘Hall.’) came to see me.
And then, about then, I started to uh

\textsuperscript{54} Denny is referring to Titus Murphy, Bobby Green, Terri Barnett, and Lei Yuille. These are the four African Americans who came to Denny’s aid at the intersection of Florence and Normandie and rushed him to Daniel Freeman Hospital.

\textsuperscript{55} Twilight 112.
started to get it.

And by the time I left Daniel Freeman Hospital, I knew what happened, except they wouldn’t let me watch it on TV. [author’s emphasis]

Given the severity of his injuries (he was in a coma) and the use of morphine for pain, Denny was unable to immediately recall or comprehend the event of his beating. By the time he came to, the visitation by celebrities gave Denny the idea that something momentous must have happened. By this point, the video of his beating had been scrutinized frequently on television. Denny remained unaware of this, however, and the fact that he had become a celebrity, until two figures he recognized from television came to see him. Denny’s assertion at the end of the passage that “they” (presumably medical personnel and/or members of his family) would not allow him to view the video is important. It suggests that if Denny had turned on a television he would certainly have encountered the video, an experience that might have caused psychological trauma. A stark contrast can be observed between the media, which aired Denny’s beating on a seemingly endless loop, and Denny’s family and health care providers, who feared so greatly the consequences of even one viewing that they withheld television from Denny altogether.

In its use of the Rodney King, Latasha Harlins-Soon Ja Du, and Reginald Denny videos, Twilight emphasizes Henry Louis Gates, Jr.’s theory that not only in language, but in media-generated imagery also, representation is never minus the audience. With her treatment of each video Smith shows how meanings are created depending on what Gates describes as knowing audiences. The multiple meanings found in the videos parallel the

56 Twilight 111.
divergent range of perspectives on the riots themselves and Smith’s efforts in *Twilight* to make sense of the multiplicity of those views and the cacophony of those voices.

**Smith in Performance**

Turning to Thirteen/WNET’s *Stage on Screen* film production of *Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992*, I will consider key scenes in order to analyze Smith’s performance style and demonstrate how her character, which plays a major role in *Fires in the Mirror*, surfaces here in equally important fashion. One pivotal way that Smith emerges in *Twilight* is through characters calling to her and acknowledging her presence, whether as African American, female, or interviewer. In *Fires in the Mirror*, this results in the affording of “insider” status to Smith among several African American characters. Conversely, she is often regarded as an “outsider” in Jewish culture. While many characters acknowledge and even respond directly to Smith in *Twilight*, the results are somewhat different. I begin by examining Smith’s performance of three African American characters’ monologues, followed by her performance of monologues from a pair of white characters. While Smith gains “insider” status among these African American characters, she is not necessarily viewed by the white characters she represents as an “outsider.” However, her presence does manage to unveil an important feeling among whites about the riots and the societal privilege afforded to them based on their racial identity.

The first of three African American monologues is Angela King’s, entitled “Here’s a Nobody.” In this scene, Angela, Rodney King’s aunt, recounts how she initially learned that her nephew had been beaten. She describes the physical deformities he suffered and
reiterates her commitment to seek justice on Rodney’s behalf. Smith delivers the entire monologue seated. In a low, measured tone, Smith looks directly and non-confrontationally into the camera as she speaks. She sits very still and casually thumbs through a magazine, as if biding time in a waiting room. What is especially significant about the scene is its ending. Angela suggests that justice might have been served if Rodney occupied a higher social position, such as that of President of the United States:

You see how everybody rave when something happens with the President of the United States?

You know, ‘cause he’s a higher sort?

Okay, here’s a nobody.

But the way they beat him.

This is the way I felt towards him.

You understand what I’m sayin’ now?

You do? Alright. [author’s emphasis]

Smith’s delivery of the entire monologue is controlled and comfortable. Even at the end, when King delves into her personal feelings, she does not become overly animated. Instead, Smith’s performance reflects the feeling that during their interview Angela spoke assuredly if unevenly, revealing her character in telling the story to Smith. At the end of the monologue, Angela asks whether Smith understands her meaning. Smith’s delivery of the final word – “alright” – comes off in performance not as though the character, Angela, is surprised by Smith’s unspoken/implied affirmative answer (she is not), but rather that she

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57 Twilight 128-9.
is gratified by it. As she lights a cigarette, Smith gives a knowing nod as the picture fades out, a final suggestion that Angela recognizes her as an insider of a kind, whether on the basis of race, or because Smith understands Angela’s language and point of view, or both. It constitutes a brief moment and is a powerful example of a character in Twilight directly acknowledging Smith’s presence and identity in an understanding way.

Two additional African American characters reveal a shared relationship with Smith in their discussions of African American history. In her monologue “Roar” which closes the first act, opera singer Jessye Norman explains how she was scheduled to leave Los Angeles for an out-of-town performance on the day the riots began. She resisted friends’ pleadings to remain in L.A. since she felt there was nothing she could do to improve the situation. Norman’s train of thought is interrupted, and the direction of her monologue altered, when Smith asserts her own presence, as the stage directions and Norman’s words demonstrate:

What could I have done?
except
to
talk or to sing
to somebody who would listen
to me,
I don’t think people were in the mood
to sing at that time
(In response to a remark by the author.)
Of course, of course

in the civil rights movement

you’d sing first

and then you would organize whatever, you know, protest was happening that week or day or whatever.

And you would sing at the end of it as well!

And you’d sing all through it!\textsuperscript{58}

Having abandoned the topic of the riots, Norman has turned by this time to the broader subject of the civil rights movement. Smith’s remark causes a dramatic change in the monologue’s direction. We do not know what Smith said but it clearly has significance for Norman. Smith’s documentary theatre work has been characterized by the verbatim excerpts she takes from interviews with her subjects. Interestingly enough, little attention has been paid to the questions she asks or comments she makes in these interviews. In Fires in the Mirror, there are no textual or performative references to Smith actively asserting her presence into the monologues. This instance, however, is one of several in Twilight.\textsuperscript{59} With Jessye Norman, Smith’s unscripted but noted remark causes Norman to shift topics and begin talking about race and African American history. The monologue continues along this new path:

Black people have a great tradition of singing.

\textsuperscript{58} Twilight 100.

\textsuperscript{59} Smith’s presence in the text becomes even more overtly noticeable in House Arrest, which I explore in Chapter Four.
I mean this is how the spiritual came into being

that in order to,

deal with this

unbelievable

situation

of being transported

from one’s homeland

and being made a slave we had to sing ourselves through that!

**We didn’t sing ourselves out of it**

**we sang ourselves through it!** [author’s emphasis]

Norman’s use of “we” and “ourselves” reveals her racial identity and suggests a shared experience with Smith. Norman discusses slavery and music as though Smith relates to these topics based on her own racial heritage. As a result, the monologue is reminiscent of Al Sharpton and Conrad Mohammed in *Fires in the Mirror*, who also identify with Smith as an African American. Smith’s performance of Norman has much in common with her performance of Sharpton and Mohammed. The style of these scenes is very straightforward and presentational. As Norman, Smith looks directly into the camera and speaks forcefully, which is consistent with her use of italics and exclamation points in the text. Although seated, she is physically animated, repeatedly reaching out toward the camera as though to acknowledge Smith’s presence by touching her. Both in content and style there is shared

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60 *Twilight* 100.
level of familiarity and identity between Norman and Smith that is reinforced through
Smith’s performance.

A similar instance of an African American character identifying with Smith exists
in Cornel West’s monologue entitled “Chekhov/Coltrane.” The unusually lengthy
monologue covers a wide range of topics, including West’s passion for the drama of Anton
Chekhov and the music of John Coltrane, and the philosophical differences West sees
between hope and optimism. Smith performs only a small portion of the monologue in the
film, including West’s hope versus optimism commentary and his historical comparison of
African Americans and whites. Regarding the latter, West doubts that whites could ever
comprehend the historical experiences of African Americans:

    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.\textsuperscript{61} [author’s emphasis] This passage is immediately preceded in the script by West’s statement that “black rage is a component of our black condition”\textsuperscript{62} [author’s emphasis]. Much like her representation of Angela King, Smith is remarkably comfortable here, revealing West’s gift for profound thought and oratory. She reclines in a leather chair, pauses pensively between statements, and slowly sips brandy. Although West occasionally stumbles on words in the course of the monologue, the performance suggests that in Smith’s presence West treads familiar territory. He is comfortable enough with her to speak openly and thoughtfully on a number of subjects. Moreover, by referring to whites as “they/them” and sadness as “their own,” West implies that Smith does not racially identify herself as such. Instead, his reference to “our black condition” suggests that he and Smith share an historical and cultural bond. This is not unlike the relationship implied by Jessye Norman earlier and those suggested by Sharpton and Mohammed in \textit{Fires in the Mirror}.

By way of contrast, what emerges in Smith’s staged representation of two white characters is not a sense of shared identity or experience, as in the aforementioned African American characters. It is not that whites necessarily regard or treat Smith as an outsider either, as certain Jewish characters do in \textit{Fires in the Mirror}. Instead, her performance in \textit{Twilight} underscores the sense of societal privilege that these characters enjoy based on their white racial identity. When channeled through Smith’s African American body, their privilege is brought into plain critical view. The work of Peggy McIntosh provides a useful

\textsuperscript{61} \textit{Twilight} 108.

\textsuperscript{62} \textit{Twilight} 108.
backdrop to discuss Smith’s performance of these characters. In “White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack,” McIntosh notes:

As a white person [. . .] I realized I had been taught about racism as something which puts others at a disadvantage, but had not been taught to see one of its corollary aspects, white privilege, which puts me at an advantage. [. . .] I have come to see white privilege as an invisible package of unearned assets which I can count on cashing in each day, but about which I was ‘meant’ to remain oblivious. White privilege is like an invisible weightless knapsack of special provisions, maps, passports, codebooks, visas, clothes, tools and blank checks.\(^6^3\)

McIntosh’s theory is evident in *Twilight* in the ways certain white characters acknowledge their privilege based on the threat posed to it by the riots. I will explore Smith’s performance style to show how these characters respond by revealing, or unpacking, their “invisible knapsacks” of privilege.

The first white character to consider is a talent agent from an anonymous Hollywood agency. He is described in stage directions as a well-dressed man in his forties. Smith combines segments of his two monologues entitled “Caesar Salad” and “Absorb a Little Guilt.” When he first learned that riots had broken out across Los Angeles the man was conducting everyday business over lunch in Beverly Hills. This lunch turned out to be far from ordinary, however. Restaurant patrons began feverishly discussing rumors about the brewing riots, which compounded their mutual anxiety:

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.
We were just,
getting ourselves into a frenzy
Which I think a lot of it,
involved,
guilt.
Just generic-guilt.⁶⁴

The man identifies himself as belonging to an insular community of white, privileged individuals. Situated in a restaurant in Beverly Hills, he suggests that news of the riots brought to the surface nervousness and “guilt” among whites because of their privileged

⁶⁴ Twilight 76.
status. Later, the agent admits the vast economic and social differences between himself and the rioters. He also observes how the violence has impacted his own personal feelings:

I was almost thinking

‘Did I deserve this?’

‘Do I do I deserve it?’

I thought me personally, uh, no,

generically,

maybe so [. . .]

I started to

absorb a little guilt,

and say uh

I deserve

I deserve it.

I don’t mean I deserve to get my house burned down [. . .]

it was so heartbreaking

seeing those

the devastation that went on

and people reduced to burning down their own neighborhoods

burning down our neighborhoods

I could see

But burning down their own

that was more dramatic
to me. The talent agent suggests that his being affected by the riots is an appropriate punishment for the societal privilege enjoyed by wealthy white individuals, whom he refers to as “me generically.” He also reveals that he does not understand the logic of rioters destroying “their own” communities. There is a noticeable edginess about Smith’s physical posture and vocal delivery here. She struggles to sit still, her focus wanders from the floor to the ceiling to the camera, and she employs even more stuttering and “uhhs” and “ums” than scripted. This reflects the man’s uneasiness in talking about his white privilege which has been exposed by the riots. Smith’s emphasis of the agent’s nervousness and vocal struggles in performance parallels his guilt over his white privilege and discomfort in discussing it with an African American.

A similar situation exists in Smith’s representation of Elaine Young, a white real estate agent who has had, as Smith notes in stage directions, thirty-six plastic surgeries. Smith employs an unusually elaborate costume and make-up design in representing Young, donning a flashy outfit, ornate jewelry, and fancy designer eyeglasses. She captures other features unique to Young, including a twitch in her left eye and a vocal accent that seems part Los Angeles and part Brooklyn. In a continuation of an earlier monologue entitled “Safe and Sound in Beverly Hills,” Young remarks that she followed her instincts when news of the riots reached her and took refuge in the safest place she could think of: the Beverly Hills Hotel. She believed the hotel would be safe because it serves a predominantly white, wealthy clientele, many of whom had the same idea as Young:

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65 Twilight 92-3.
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 at 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!’66

Much like the talent agent, Young is also aware of her white privilege, although she does not experience the same kind of guilt because of it. She is grateful that it afforded her protection and the opportunity to stay in the hotel during the riots. Young’s white privilege was later brought to her attention by a man who wrote her an angry letter after seeing an interview she gave on television in which she mentioned having gone to the Beverly Hills Hotel during the riots. Young claims the man totally misinterpreted her interview (yet another instance of the media distorting and creating multiple meanings) and that she was not, in fact, enjoying herself at the hotel, which the man took to be the case, but rather was frightened for her life. Through Smith’s deliberately made-up appearance as Young, which

66 Twilight 79-80.
contrasts with her otherwise normally understated attempts to physically look like the characters she represents, Young’s white privilege is highlighted and, as juxtaposed with monologues from less privileged, non-white characters, critiqued. In this way, as textual editor and performer of the piece, Smith becomes an active character herself in *Twilight*, a non-neutral figure who generates critical meaning.

I conclude this section by considering three additional ways that Smith’s identity and presence emerge in performance of *Twilight*. These examples are important because they constitute the basis for much of the critical adulation that both Smith and the play received. First, Smith’s staged representation of “others” is heightened in *Twilight*. She incorporates a greater number of characters than in *Fires in the Mirror*, many of whom hail from different racial and ethnic backgrounds. She divides up several of these characters’ monologues into shorter pieces and performs them together, creating multi-voice scenes. Smith relies upon the use of quick and theatrical transitions to accomplish this. During “No Justice No Peace: The Story of Latasha Harlins,” for instance, Smith combines representations of Charles Lloyd (African American male), Gina Rae, A.K.A. Queen Malkah (African American female), and Jay Woong Yahng (a Korean male liquor store owner). In switching from one character to another, Smith takes either a momentary pause or none at all. She only suggests a physical transformation, such as when she removes her bow tie as Lloyd and adds earrings and a lady’s hat as Rae. Smith employs a similar strategy

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67 According to Ric Wanetik, a producer of the Cort Theatre/Broadway production of *Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992*, these transitions were the creation of director George C. Wolfe. Smith initially expressed hesitation about employing them, as they marked a departure in performance style from *Fires in the Mirror*. However, Smith ultimately implemented the transitions at Wolfe’s urging. Wanetik, telephone interview, 23 Dec. 2004.
elsewhere, combining the following characters: Stanley K. Sheinbaum (white male), Daryl Gates (white male), and Mrs. June Park (Korean female); Elaine Young (white female) and Henry “Keith” Watson (African American male); and Reginald Denny (white male) and Paul Parker (African American male). Often the immediate juxtapositions of these characters reinforce thematic motifs, such as when Denny and Parker reveal their plans for creating two very different riot-related “rooms” in their future homes. As she crosses gender and racial lines by transitioning rapidly from one character to another, Smith becomes another character in the drama. Her virtuosity is not meant to simply blend in and go unnoticed. Rather, it is purposefully emphasized, which is consistent with her anti-Method approach to acting. As I will demonstrate, Smith’s ability to transform into multiple characters with dexterity and precision is a quality that many critics of *Twilight* admired.

Additionally, when it serves her dramatic purpose, Smith creates moments that did not exist in original interview situations. For example, she performs Elaine Young seated behind a desk, applying make-up and styling her hair. At the precise moment of “leaving” Young and transitioning into Henry “Keith” Watson, Smith pushes over the desk in a fit of rage, as though Watson entered the room and, disgusted with Young, retaliated by destroying her property. Another comparable instance is found late in Act II when Smith combines short segments of monologues from Alice Waters, Paul Parker, Jin Ho Lee, Elaine Brown, Bill Bradley, and Rudy Salas, Sr. to convey an imaginary dinner party among “guests.” Although Smith performs verbatim portions of interviews, by editing them together and transitioning between them in such a way, she creates added meaning that would not otherwise exist if the interviews/monologues stood alone.
A second example of Smith’s character at work in *Twilight* is found in her performance of Maria, Juror #7 in the Federal Trial of the officers involved in the Rodney King beating. An African American woman in her thirties, Maria’s lengthy monologue is entitled “AA Meeting.”68 She provides a behind-the-scenes account of how the jury arrived at its verdicts. It is an unusual monologue for its internal representations of “others.” Maria describes – and mimics – a number of jurors in the course of the monologue, including: one juror who complains of fatigue and suggests they take the day off; a woman who complains of a headache and wants to quit deliberating altogether; the Foreman, Steve, who tries to accommodate everyone’s wishes; another person who tells Maria to calm down when she gets upset that people want to slow down or quit; a black man who has broken out into hives, experiences symptoms of heart attack, and accuses Maria of being overly sensitive; a woman named Alice who plans to tell the judge that her life has been threatened; a Mexican man who invites other jurors to punch him; a “high class lady” who is worried that her life story will be exposed in a movie someday as a result of having served on the jury; and another man who agrees with Maria that everybody should quit complaining and simply address the business at hand. This chaotic scene is staged in what appears to be a jury room, complete with twelve chairs surrounding a long rectangular table. The emptiness of the room is soon filled with the confusion of the jury’s deliberations as recalled and re-presented by Maria. The scene is fascinating not only for the “backstage” information it offers about the jury’s deliberation process, but also for Smith’s agility as a performer. Relying upon only her voice and physical mannerisms (no

68 See *Twilight* 157-65.
costume changes), Smith deftly plays Maria playing many others. The impression is that Smith is every bit as talented in recreating moments and personalities on stage as Maria is in “real life.” In some ways, this is a radical extension of the scene in *Fires in the Mirror* where Smith plays a Jewish woman who imitates an African American boy. The difference, of course, is that as Maria, Smith channels an extensive range of voices caught in dramatic circumstances (i.e. men and women of various races and ethnicities confined in a room with one another, under pressure to reach what will be a highly scrutinized verdict). It is a defining moment for Smith in *Twilight*, where her presence and performance skills are displayed and shared by the character she represents.

Finally, Smith’s presence and identity come into view at the end of *Twilight* in two distinctly different moments. In the second-to-last scene, Smith portrays Mrs. Young-Soon Han, a Korean woman and former liquor store owner whose husband was shot and killed during the riots. In “Swallowing the Bitterness,” Han mourns the death of her husband, rails against injustices suffered by Koreans in the U.S., and predicts future conflicts between Koreans and African Americans. Smith performs the monologue in close-up, looking directly into the camera nearly the entire time. Her eyes are moist with tears, which she struggles to hold back during the speech. Given the immediacy of her eye contact and the passion with which Han speaks, our sense of “standing in” for Smith in this moment is clear. It is further pointed up by Smith’s repeated striking of the table, which she notes in stage directions throughout Han’s monologue:

Why do we [Koreans] have to be left out?

*(She is hitting her hand on the coffee table.*)
We are not qualified to have medical treatment!

We are not qualified to get uh

food stamps!

(She hits the table once.)

No GR!

(Hits the table once.)

No welfare!

(Hits the table once.)

Anything!

Many Afro-Americans

(Two quick hits.)

who never worked

(One hit.)

they get

at least minimum amount

(One hit.)

of money

(One hit.)

to survive!

(One hit.)

We don’t get any!

(Large hit with full hand spread.)
Because we have a car!

(One hit.)

and we have a house!

(Pause six seconds.)

And we are high tax payers!

(One hit.)

(Pause fourteen seconds.)

Where do I finda [sic] justice?69

The repeated “hits” function as a distancing device that reminds the audience of the inherent doubleness at work in the union of Smith the performer and Han the performed. With each hit of the table the audience is asked to weigh the reasons for and consequences of the injustices that Han describes. The “hits” and pregnant pauses underscore the theatricality of the scene, reminding us of Smith’s presence and challenging us to grapple with the questions raised by the character. Finally, by assigning Han one of the last opportunities to speak in Twilight, Smith cleverly takes into account the character’s concern that her voice is seldom heard. Smith gives voice to a Korean American in a way that, according to Han, her country never has.

The final scene of the play creates a much different effect by downplaying Smith’s presence. In a monologue entitled “Limbo,” Smith portrays Twilight Bey, a gang truce organizer and character for whom the play is named. Unlike the Young-Soon Han scene before it, here Smith stands some distance away from the camera, making her facial

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69 Twilight 167.
expressions more difficult to discern. The dark, limbo-esque lighting contributes to the visual cloudiness of the scene. (Smith holds a candle in her hand, providing additional but dim light). Smith performs this short monologue with little fanfare. Her vocal tone and physical presence, while effective, are not particularly memorable. She does not raise or lower her voice much, and she makes few physical movements, save a simple step or two forward. At the very end she extinguishes the candle, turns her back, and walks into the darkness. It is an appropriate ending given Smith’s stated desire to “disappear” in performance. As Han, Smith’s presence is overt as she literally pounds the table; conversely, as Twilight Bey, it seems to vanish with the character as he quietly exits. Together, these two closing scenes invite audiences to consider how, when, and where Smith’s character emerges in performance, what effect this has on the play’s meaning(s), and how it impacts audience perception.

**Critical Response to Smith in Performance**

In responding to *Twilight*, many critics observed, as they did about *Fires in the Mirror*, the “journalistic” quality of the work, Smith’s virtuosity as a performer, and her ability to re-present the events upon which the play is based accurately and objectively. To illustrate, in his review for the *New York Times*, Vincent Canby noted that Smith, in representing a diverse array of characters, manages to keep her own character from entering the picture:

> Using a minimum number of props and accessories, Ms. Smith portrays these people with dazzling simplicity. [. . .] The method is so delicate that
there’s never any feeling of a stretch [. . .] Though Ms. Smith’s slender frame and sweet, almost impassive face are onstage from start to finish, the actress herself is unseen, as if in a permanent dissolve.\textsuperscript{70}

Terry Byrne of the \textit{Boston Herald} made similar observations about the absence of Smith’s character in performance:

For the first five minutes, watching Smith on stage is almost distracting. It’s hard to listen to what her characters are saying because her detailed impersonations are so fascinating. [. . .] But after a couple of chameleon-like shifts, Smith disappears.\textsuperscript{71}

Similarly, in reviewing Thirteen/WNET’s \textit{Stage on Screen} film version for the \textit{Boston Globe}, John Koch remarked that Smith is “a gifted, concentrated listener capable of suppressing her own prejudices and preconceptions, the better to sense and internalize the formative ideas and deep-seated feelings of her diverse subjects.”\textsuperscript{72} This point of view was also shared by Jessica Winter in the \textit{Village Voice}. Winter described Smith as “an unrivaled body snatcher” who never gestures toward what she thinks is the right perspective; she only points out that all these perspectives exist, as worlds unto themselves. Their


isolation, as well as their grappling toward understanding, is highlighted by Smith’s lone-gunman performer’s stance.73

What Canby, Byrne, Koch, and Winter’s reviews have in common is their association of Smith’s ability to “dissolve” and “disappear” into the action. They admire Smith for blocking out her presence and refraining from editorial comment. By virtue of Smith’s maintaining this distance, Twilight is the creative opus of a highly gifted artist and, to quote Canby, a decidedly neutral “journalist.”74

A number of critics echoed these sentiments by pointing directly to Smith’s objectivity. Sydney H. Weinberg, for instance, described Twilight in the Hollywood Reporter as “an unbiased pictoral of the shadings of human emotion and prejudice.”75 David Patrick Stearns of USA Today described the play as “journalism [that is] masterfully organized and meticulously fair-minded in its cross section of police, jurors, and gang leaders.”76 Kevin Kelly wrote in the Boston Globe that Smith “sticks to the facts.”77 Writing in the New York Times, Bernard Weinraub noted that Smith “makes virtually no judgments and treats everyone with stern objectivity.”78 Ed Siegel of the Boston Globe shared Weinraub’s point of

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74 Canby 1.


view when he observed that Smith treats all characters, regardless of their racial or political identities, with the same critical scrutiny and that she is “as hard on black racists [. . .] as anyone else.”79 Describing Smith as “part journalist, part collagist and part chameleon,”

Steven Winn of the San Francisco Chronicle remarked:

Smith doesn’t play favorites or weight the deck. [. . .] Smith brings a potent theatricality to ‘Twilight’ and makes a strong point. She is no polemicist, but her piece, both explicitly and implicitly, insists that we all contain multiple characters and possibilities – race-blinded and color blind, selfish and selfless, terrified and loving.80

Winn’s review is important for its acknowledgement of Smith’s objectivity. At the same time, it also underscores how diversity and doubleness factor into her treatment of character in Fires in the Mirror and Twilight. Indeed, Winn observes that “character” exists not only on stage in Smith the performer, but also in the house among spectators of her work. He echoes Elinor Fuchs who argues for the complexity of character and locates its meanings in the shared, give-and-take theatrical experience between actors, audiences, and communities.81


81 See Elinor Fuchs, The Death of Character: Perspectives on Theater after Modernism (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1996).
It was arguably Greg Evans, however, who best captured the notion of objectivity in his review for *Variety*, where he observed that

Smith’s greatest accomplishment, both here and in other shows, is the even-handed yet stern compassion she shows her subjects. Humanity is found in the vilest of villains, and hate is explained, if not forgiven. Smith’s work provides no answers, easy or otherwise, but achieves something almost as elusive: ‘Twilight’ gives absolutely equitable and eloquent voice to the myriad communities touched by the riots – black, white, Asian- and Mexican-American – and to individuals who otherwise would go uncounted.⁸²

While Evans’s assessment of Smith’s “even-handedness” and her giving “equitable voice” was shared by a majority of critics, some suggested the play’s length was too great and its scope too ambitious for it to adequately and evenly explore all the voices and points of view that Smith incorporates. Some critics questioned Smith’s ability to be neutral and objective as the creator and sole performer of the piece. They picked up on skepticism that Smith herself expressed about *Twilight*:

Deep in my heart, with *Fires in the Mirror*, I was able to see both sides. This story [*Twilight*] was more complicated. I went to the second trial, and I can intellectually see some part of what the policemen felt. But I couldn’t say

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that I could watch the tape of the Rodney King beating and be completely

This, of course, contradicts many critics’ perceptions of Smith’s role in \textit{Twilight}, not to mention her own stated purpose for creating the piece: “The bottom line of my project is not to take sides. The bottom line is to speak to people and try to evoke from them performance and poetry.”\footnote{Anna Deavere Smith, qtd. in Weinraub, “Condensing a Riot’s Cacophony Into the Voice of One Woman” C15.} To develop this point further, I will provide a sampling of criticism that observed similar tensions and contradictions in Smith’s performance.

While much of the critical response was positive, some critics found \textit{Twilight} less successful than Smith’s previous work. For example, Michael Kuchwara of the \textit{Associated Press} observed that Smith’s representations of her many real-life characters did not always ring true: “It’s such a wide-ranging collection of people – from police Chief Daryl Gates to various gang members and riot participants – that Smith can’t quite capture them all equally. A few end up as cartoons, particularly Reginald Denny [. . .].”\footnote{Michael Kuchwara, “‘Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992’ by Anna Deavere Smith Opens Off-Broadway,” rev. of \textit{Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992}, perf. Anna Deavere Smith, dir. George C. Wolfe, Joseph Papp Public Theater, New York, \textit{Associated Press} 23 Mar. 1994, \textit{bc} cycle.} Kuchwara does not specify what about Smith’s performance of Denny seemed cartoonish, but he was not the only critic to comment on the “size” of Smith’s representations. Christopher Meeks of \textit{Variety} also noted that

\begin{quote}
Smith approaches caricature in a couple of impersonations. Former police commissioner Stanley K. Sheinbaum’s New York accent and an anecdote of
\end{quote}
a hammer make him at first cartoonish, though his take on Daryl Gates shows him as quite astute.\textsuperscript{86}

In reviewing the Thirteen/WNET film version for \textit{Variety}, Dennis Harvey observed in Smith a tendency to create overly broad characterizations. Harvey examined the style of the film and how Smith’s “impersonations” compromise her ability to be objective:

\begin{quote}
the intended balance of the piece is upset by the intimacy and theatrical air with which the oft-handheld camerawork imbues Smith’s costumed impersonations – up close, her shapeshifting occasionally tilts toward caricature, especially whenever the subject is privileged (e.g., BevHills real estate agent Elaine Young) or racially insensitive. Results render questionable the artistic process’s pretense toward journalistic objectivity.\textsuperscript{87}
\end{quote}

Daniel B. Wood, writing in the \textit{Christian Science Monitor}, called Smith’s representations of Gates and Sheinbaum in particular “buffoon caricatures.”\textsuperscript{88} He also noted that Smith’s “exaggerated delivery” caused the audience to laugh, even at inappropriate moments.\textsuperscript{89} In much the same spirit as Dennis Harvey, Wood concluded that Smith’s performance revealed complications in her overall body of work and questions about her ability to represent “others” without offering comment:

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\textsuperscript{89} Wood 12.
\end{flushright}
The strength of Smith’s approach is her ability to filter all the interviews through one lens for cohesion, unity, and context – a kind of metaphoric

e pluribus unum (out of many views, one view – hers). But there is also the
danger that what is sold as straight news (because of the tag “verbatim”) is
really editorialized through her considerable skills of dramatic
interpretation (tone, presentation, and choice of dialogue).\textsuperscript{90}

In trying to determine if, where, when, and how Smith “editorializes” in her
creative process, critics such as Harvey and Wood tended to find more supporting evidence
in Smith’s performance than they did in the script. Hence, words such as “exaggerated,”
“cartoonish,” and “caricature” were employed to describe an over-the-top staged
representation of character and, at once, to counter what is often perceived in Smith as
absolute “objectivity,” “neutrality,” and “even-handedness.”

Twilight was also criticized for its elaborate production values,\textsuperscript{91} lengthy running
time,\textsuperscript{92} and lack of structural focus. For instance, Frank Scheck of the Christian Science
Monitor commented with some concern on the size of the production:

There’s a disquieting air of escalation about the piece: Everything is bigger –
more characters, a more elaborate production (video, projections, etc.), and

\textsuperscript{90}Wood 12.

\textsuperscript{91}Smith acknowledged the difference in production values of Fires in the Mirror and Twilight by comparing
their portability: “The good thing about ‘Fires’ is that it’s small enough to put into two trunks. But ‘Twilight’
is more complicated than that.” Anna Deavere Smith, qtd. in Patti Hartigan, “Smith’s ‘Twilight’ Illuminates

\textsuperscript{92}Producer Ric Wanetik notes that when he began working on Twilight the show was in the workshop
process in Los Angeles and had a running time of more than four hours. By the time the production opened
in New York the running time had been cut to a little over two hours. Wanetik, telephone interview, 23 Dec.
2004.
a longer running time. It benefits the gravity of the subject, but it leaves one wondering where Smith will go from here.\textsuperscript{93} (13)

Michael Kuchwara’s review followed Scheck in this regard, criticizing the expansion of the script and the show’s running time:

‘Twilight’ is not as tightly focused as ‘Fires in the Mirror’ [. . .] That earlier work concentrated on a specific situation and its consequences for two very distinctive communities. A diffuse Los Angeles has its black, white, Hispanic and Korean communities. Smith tries to cover all bases and as a result, the piece lasts about 20 minutes longer than it should. Several of the speeches would be even more effective if they were trimmed.\textsuperscript{94}

Interestingly, Steven Winn made a similar claim when he reviewed a subsequent production of 

Twilight

in 1996, approximately three years after the play’s debut. Winn’s perspective of the play changed somewhat, particularly as he compared Twilight to 

Fires in the Mirror:

In some ways more ambitious, reflective, and comically expansive than its predecessor – and nearly an hour longer than ‘Crown Heights’ – ‘Twilight’ also delivers a less gripping and memorable experience. Where Smith’s own neutrality served to focus ‘Crown Heights’ into an intense and deeply humanized conflict between blacks and Jews, ‘Twilight’ lacks that sort of


\textsuperscript{94} Kuchwara “‘Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992’ by Anna Deavere Smith Opens Off-Broadway.”

According to Winn, Smith’s neutrality was neither as strong nor as evident in Twilight as it was in Fires in the Mirror. In addition to the fact that some of the material seemed “dated,” time and distance revealed other textual shortcomings. Although Winn remains an admirer of Smith’s work, he concludes in retrospect that her newest play ultimately lacks the clarity and focus of Fires in the Mirror.

In the end, the overwhelming critical praise that was heaped upon Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992 for its examination of the riots and Smith for her virtuosity as a performer solidified her prominent status in American theatre. It also provided a ringing endorsement for her On the Road: A Search for American Character project. With Twilight, Smith came to be seen as one of America’s finest actors and an artist who engenders constructive dialogue about race relations in the United States today. Not only did she open the lines of communication among those involved in the Los Angeles riots of 1992, but by dramatizing these events, Smith also opened the nation’s eyes and ears to broader issues of race and violence. For a combination of these reasons, Jack Kroll of Newsweek called Twilight “an American masterpiece” and Smith “the most exciting person in
In re-presenting a series of events and giving voice to a multiplicity of perspectives in *Twilight*, Smith expands considerably her work in *Fires in the Mirror*. Indeed, *Twilight* raises new and additional questions about how Smith’s work can be read, how her identity factors into her dramatic material and performance, and how multiple meanings are generated by her representation of a wider and more diverse range of American characters.

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“I want to explore the nature of the relationship of the press to the presidency, which is at once intimate and distant. [. . .] I’m fascinated with the idea that leadership hasn’t changed in terms of power, but the media has gained power. I want to find out if that, in fact, is true.”

Introduction

Following the critical successes of *Fires in the Mirror: Crown Heights, Brooklyn and Other Identities* and *Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992*, Smith turned her attention to the broader canvas of American politics. It seemed an appropriate next step given the praise she earned for creating politically relevant work and, in the process, becoming a political figure in her own right. Critic Frank Rich of the *New York Times* speculated in his review of *Fires in the Mirror* about the positive impact Smith might have were she to enter the formal arena of professional politics. In a similar vein, many critics read *Twilight* as a kind of “branching

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out” on Smith’s part, covering a series of incidents that occurred in L.A. but which had socio-political ramifications for the country at large. The scope of Smith’s On the Road: A Search for American Character continued to widen with her next piece. Having moved from the East coast in Fires in the Mirror to the West coast in Twilight, Smith developed an examination of the United States, its highest political office, the mainstream media, and roughly 200 years of American history. The fifteenth installment of her On the Road series, House Arrest: A Search for American Character In and Around the White House, Past and Present explores how race, politics, celebrity, sex, scandal, entertainment, and the media have joined together to inform the American character of both the elected and the electorate.

In Fires in the Mirror and Twilight, double consciousness plays a vital role in shaping character, particularly in the wake of violence and discord. There is a sense of doubleness at work in House Arrest, too, although in regard to a much different experience. Here, Smith takes up the “insider/outsider” dynamic of national politics and the culture of Washington, D.C. “Insiders” work in and around government and enjoy privileged access to information and individuals, while “outsiders” operate on the periphery because of their race, class, gender, and/or politics. Consciousness also plays a vital role in this dynamic, as characters’ awareness of and struggle with their insider- or outsider-ness are common threads running through many of the monologues. Smith also explores the public/private lives of Presidents and how these double personas have been represented and received through the media. By examining historical and modern Presidencies, Smith considers what information about political candidates and elected officials should be divulged to the public and what should remain private. Building on her study of character in Fires in the
Mirror and Twilight, Smith adds a different critical twist in House Arrest, probing tensions in the insider/outsider and public/private dynamics prevalent in U.S. media and politics.

This chapter begins with background information on how Smith developed the play for production and a theoretical context for my literary analysis. After considering the public/private dynamic in Smith’s treatment of sex scandals surrounding Presidents Thomas Jefferson, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, and William Jefferson Clinton, I suggest the importance of race, class, and gender in the insider/outsider dynamic in House Arrest. I also demonstrate a paradox in Smith’s dramaturgical critique of the relationship between the Presidency, the media, and the American public. The chapter concludes with a discussion of critical response surrounding three different productions of the play. Unlike Fires in the Mirror and Twilight, no video performance of House Arrest exists. However, details about how the play was performed (especially with Smith as solo performer) can be gleaned from reviews. This information is utilized here to give an account of the overwhelmingly negative response the play received. I demonstrate that Smith’s character and reawakened sense of double consciousness impacted her research and critical reception. I also show how her virtuosity failed to compensate for perceived textual and performance shortcomings.

Background on Smith’s Production

House Arrest charts the evolving relationship between the press and the U.S. Presidency, as well as the American public’s fascination with celebrity. Smith described her mission and motivation for creating the piece in the following way:
My work over the years has been about exploring the nature of character—how we define our identities, both as individuals and as Americans. The president has always been such a mythic figure throughout our history, and I wanted to understand how our individual and group identities are affected by our leaders, past and present, and the stories that surround them. 

Smith pursued this inquiry for nearly five years, speaking with over 400 people, including journalists, academics, politicians (such as Presidents Jimmy Carter, Clinton, and George H.W. Bush) and government aides, artists, and assorted members of the media. This process yielded more than 4,000 hours worth of taped interviews. Smith also followed President Clinton and Senator Bob Dole on the 1996 campaign trail as part of her research. Much like *Fires in the Mirror* and *Twilight*, she used verbatim excerpts from interviews to form the basis of the play. In a departure from these earlier works, however, Smith also incorporated portions of historical texts, such as letters written by Abraham Lincoln and Thomas Jefferson’s *Notes on the State of Virginia* (1781-2).

*House Arrest* was originally commissioned by the Arena Stage, Washington, D.C. (Doug Wager, Artistic Director). It was produced in collaboration with the Mark Taper Forum, Los Angeles, the Intiman Theater, Seattle, and the Goodman Theater, Chicago.

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3 See Appendix B for a list of *House Arrest* interviewees.

Corporate and government sponsors also made financial contributions. House Arrest was an expensive endeavor, costing upwards of $2 million, or three times the average for an Arena Stage production and almost twice the cost of its most expensive production. The high price tag was in part due to the staff that Smith assembled to assist in research and production, including a team of dramaturgs and a cast of fourteen actors, and advanced technological production values. Directed by Mark Rucker, the play premiered at Arena Stage’s Kreeger Theater on November 7, 1997 under the title House Arrest: First Edition.

Smith was not an official cast member, although she made at least one onstage appearance as President Clinton. Further production of House Arrest was delayed so that Smith could incorporate the scandal involving President Clinton and White House intern Monica Lewinsky, which became the focus of national attention in 1998. The revised play was subsequently presented as a workshop, entitled House Arrest: An Introgression, at the Mark Taper Forum (Gordon Davidson, Artistic Director). This production, which opened on April 9, 1999, was directed by Smith and featured a cast of twelve actors; Smith appeared onstage as herself and others. It also included a “town meeting” in Act II, where audience members discussed issues raised by the play with Smith and other artists, community

5 House Arrest received financial support from a number of private and public sources, including Pew Charitable Trusts, Philip Morris, the Cummings Foundation, Fannie Mae, the Siemens Corporation, AT&T, the Cafritz Foundation, and the National Endowment for the Arts. See Andrew Ferguson, “Ms. Smith Comes to Washington,” Weekly Standard 8 Dec. 1997: 31.


leaders, and special guests.\(^8\) *House Arrest* received its New York City premiere on March 26, 2000 at the Joseph Papp Public Theater (George C. Wolfe, Producer) and ran for three weeks. Under the title *House Arrest: A Search for American Character In and Around the White House, Past and Present*, the production was directed by Smith (with Jo Bonney as directorial consultant). Smith performed all the roles herself. She later published portions of her research for *House Arrest*, including excerpts from select interviews and her personal account of the Clinton and Dole campaigns, in a memoir entitled *Talk to Me: Listening Between the Lines*.\(^9\)

**Media and Politics**

A steadily growing interest in the media can be observed in Smith’s two previous works. While referenced only a few times in *Fires in the Mirror*, the media take on a much larger role in *Twilight*, as evidenced by the significant role of the Rodney King, Latasha Harlins-Soon Ja Du, and Reginald Denny videos. Interspersed throughout *Twilight* are multiple references to the role of the media: the frequent broadcast of the videos on television, how members of the media reacted to the videos, how specific events related to the riots were covered by the media, and so forth. In *House Arrest*, the media assumes an even more prominent dramaturgical position as the center of Smith’s focus, inquiry, and pointed critique.

\(^8\) Joseph Papp Public Theater program.

\(^9\) Anna Deavere Smith, *Talk to Me: Listening Between the Lines* (New York: Random House, 2000). Note: This memoir was republished by Random House in 2001 as *Talk to Me: Travels in Media and Politics*. 151
The relationship between the media and the U.S. Presidency is charged with plenty of built-in drama. It has long been of interest to many, as James Deakin in *Straight Stuff: The Reporters, the White House, and the Truth* points out:

The relationship between the president of the United States and the nation’s news media is a subject of endless fascination. It exerts an irresistible attraction for presidents, members of the White House staff, reporters, editors and broadcasters, politicians, bureaucrats, political scientists, historians and an increasing number of ordinary citizens. For a long time, it was a local cottage industry in Washington, of no great interest to the rest of the country. Now it is a vast national enterprise whose tentacles spread into every village and shire. [. . .] The relationship between the president and the news media is a long-running soap. Drama. Suspense. Conflict. And a large, rapt audience.¹⁰

It is ironic that this “subject of endless fascination,” as dramatized in *House Arrest*, failed to command “large, rapt audiences” or, for that matter, much critical acclaim. Nevertheless, Deakin’s point supports the notion that whatever failures Smith’s play endured in production were not necessarily attributable to her choice of topic. On the contrary, exploring how the media represents the public/private personas of Presidents, particularly during times of scandal or crisis, is rich in dramatic possibilities.

In order to put into context Smith’s investigation of this relationship, it is useful to consider the extent to which the media is ingrained in American life. As *House Arrest*

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suggests, Americans’ appetite for information, coupled by a fascination with celebrity, has come to define the relationship between citizens and elected officials. It follows that the media has become an omnipresent and powerful force in our culture, as Barbara Ehrenreich points out:

The media are as inescapable and ubiquitous a presence in our lives as the environment. In fact, they are, to a large extent, the mental and cultural environment we inhabit every day, bringing us the first voices we hear in the morning, the opinions we absorb while driving, the stories and images that entertain us after work. Insofar as we are intelligent social beings, the media are the world we share.\textsuperscript{11}

In light of Ehrenreich’s assertions, it is no wonder the press follows closely the lives of those we elect to office. In \textit{House Arrest}, Washington, D.C. is shown to be a highly competitive environment. It is the ultimate insider/outsider culture where journalists vie for access. In an Act I monologue entitled “Body Watch,” Brian Palmer, former photographer for \textit{U.S. News and World Report}, captures the competitive nature of today’s media. Journalists must cover mundane stories, he says, to avoid missing anything newsworthy that might happen:

Like so many things in the journalistic realm these days

that’s kind of market driven,

so

your competitors are there,

so you have to be there.

And if this cataclysmic event
actually does happen and your representative isn’t there
to photograph it or to tape it, or to get first hand color
then um you’re, you’re, you’re blown out of the water [. . .][12]

Palmer goes on to suggest that a so-called “cataclysmic event” might include the
assassination of a President. Competition compels journalists to cover everyday events “just
in case POTUS gets waxed,”[13] a reference to the possibility of the President of the United
States getting shot. But House Arrest is a breathing demonstration that the event need not
involve matters of Presidential life and death to be “cataclysmic.” A story involving a
President’s private behavior and sexual activity is just as likely to rival the feeding frenzy
that an attempt on his life might summon. Today, members of the media contend for
privileged positions in order to provide Americans with a bottomless source of information
about Presidents’ (double) lives: public/professional on the one hand, and
private/personal on the other. Consequently, as Charles S. Clark observes, “privacy is a
prerogative that politicians no longer enjoy.”[14]

Barbara Ehrenreich’s observation that stories and images “entertain us” illuminates
that the media is expected to do more than simply report the news. In an age where digital
technologies such as the Internet have turned media and electronic communication into


an integral part of daily life, entertainment and information have become decidedly intertwined. This is largely the result of the premium American culture places on celebrity. Indeed, obsession with celebrity and a desire to know about those who occupy this elevated social status have encouraged the invasiveness of today’s media. Moreover, of particular interest to Smith is the fact that celebrity and media scrutiny have carried over to the realm of professional politics. George Stephanopoulos, a former assistant to President Clinton, confirms as much in “The Deal,” the second monologue in *House Arrest*:

> We’re a celebrity culture,

> and the President is the Celebrity-in-Chief.

> I think the only private time a President has,

> is when he’s in the Oval –

> and he walks from the Oval

> to either his private study or his private bathroom.

> That’s it! [. . .]

> What happens, when you juxtapose incredible, immense, power –

> but the price –

> I mean it’s a different

> Um,

> It’s a different devil’s choice!

> The price is,

> Transparency.

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Everything you do is known.

You can be the most powerful person in the world (Upward inflection.)

You’re going to uh,

have every privilege known to man!

Every whim is going to be catered to!

the deal is –

You can do whatever you want.

The price is that everybody is going to know

everything you do.\textsuperscript{16}

Stephanopoulos observes that Presidents have always been in the limelight and, as such, have enjoyed relatively little personal freedom. This holds true today, where it is commonplace for the media to cover every comment, appearance, and movement made by the President. Others in Act I suggest that this has not always been the case. For instance, Walter Trohan, White House Correspondent for the \textit{Chicago Tribune} from Presidents FDR-Nixon, explains that Roosevelt often invited journalists to White House parties without fear of scrutiny or criticism because it was an “easier” and “friendlier” time in American history.\textsuperscript{17} Similarly, R.W. Apple, a journalist for the \textit{New York Times}, recounts a story of how Franklin Roosevelt once instructed White House reporter Robert Post during a press conference to put on his “dunce cap” and “go stand in the corner” after Post asked the

\textsuperscript{16} \textit{House Arrest} 18-9.

\textsuperscript{17} \textit{House Arrest} 42.
President about his intentions to run for a third term. In its proper historical context, Apple asserts, Roosevelt’s comment was benign and taken as such. By today’s standards, though, it is inconceivable that a President would make such an utterance. Employing a modern sensibility for examining past and present Presidential behavior, political media coverage, and the public’s expectations of Presidents is a clear objective of House Arrest. It also complicates Smith’s representations of these historically specific individuals, as well as her dramaturgical critique.

As Stephanopoulos notes, Presidents today are placed squarely under intense media microscopes and, as a result, have become more than public servants; they are celebrities in their own right. This has redefined professional politics, the way(s) candidates run for office, and how the media covers political campaigns. It has even influenced our conceptions of “character,” as Bruce E. Gronbeck in “Character, Celebrity, and Sexual Innuendo in the Mass-Mediated Presidency” observes:

The American understanding of character has been extended – and perhaps inextricably complicated and compromised – by its merger in the public mind with notions of celebrity. During presidential campaigns, especially, the line between political and entertainment reporting all but disappears; issues of character (political morality) and celebrity (popularity, likability) are melded in television and print coverage of campaigns.19

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18 House Arrest 40.

I explore the notion of Presidential “character” later in this chapter. For the moment, I want to build specifically on Gronbeck’s observation that Presidents are portrayed in the media and understood by the populace as celebrities.

_House Arrest_ suggests that Presidents, with their public and private lives routinely exposed, have become as much a form of celebrity entertainment as they have a form of news. Public discourse in America, suggests Neil Postman in _Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business_, “increasingly takes the form of entertainment.”

Postman observes that television and entertainment have transformed American politics, religion, news, athletics, education, and commerce into “congenial adjuncts of show business.” Neal Gabler pursues this line of argument further in _Life the Movie: How Entertainment Conquered Reality_, asserting that entertainment has become “the primary value of American life.” Gabler argues that televised, real-life dramas (or “lifies”), such as the murder trial of O.J. Simpson, the life and death of Diana, Princess of Wales, and the repeated allegations of extramarital affairs by President Clinton, are “the new blockbusters that preoccupy the traditional media and dominate the national conversation for weeks, sometimes months or even years at a time, while ordinary entertainments quickly evanesce.” Gabler further contends that the power and popularity of “lifies” are attributable to celebrity, which he calls “the modern state of grace – the condition in the

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21 Postman 3-4.


23 Gabler 5.
life movie to which nearly everyone aspires." As evidenced by Gabler’s example of Bill Clinton’s sex life, Presidents are clearly among those celebrities to whom the media and public pay unrelentingly close attention. Their public/private personas are the subject of widespread interest and a form of entertainment that plays out in tabloid gossip columns and the network nightly news. In the media’s representation of Presidents today, there exists a definite, if lamentable, union of politics, celebrity, entertainment, and journalism. *House Arrest* explores the development of this union and the consequences it has wrought. By examining sex scandals involving Presidents Jefferson, Franklin Roosevelt, and Clinton, the play simultaneously celebrates and critiques life the movie.

Cornel West, in *Democracy Matters: Winning the Fight Against Imperialism*, acknowledges Postman and Gabler’s linkage of entertainment, television, and news by bemoaning how the media’s coverage and investigation of politics has slipped from the realm of hard journalism to that of entertainment:

> While an essential mission of the news organizations in a democracy should be to expose the lies and manipulations of our political and economic leaders – and surely many media watchdogs devote themselves to that task – too much of what passes for news today is really a form of entertainment. So many shows follow a crude formula for providing titillating coverage that

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24 Gabler 7-8.

25 Gabler 7.
masks itself as news. [...] This is the dominance of sentiment over truth
telling in order to build up market share.26

According to West, the media has substituted entertainment, which might include “lifies,”
for serious investigation of politics. Reporters and journalists have lost sight of their critical
mission and adopted another that is less worthwhile. Furthermore, West’s claim that this
has happened “in order to build up market share” suggests that entertainment posing as
news is what consumers desire and what commands strong ratings – a sentiment echoed by
Brian Palmer, who describes contemporary American journalism as “market driven.”27

Consequently, to borrow again from Gabler, it would appear that celebrity and
entertainment have conquered television news, if not reality itself.

Television, as noted by Postman, Gabler, and West, is especially important for the
visual images the medium provides. Not only has American culture become one where we
need to know about celebrities, we expect also, with the help of the media, to be able to see
them. Clay Calvert associates this expectation with voyeurism. In Voyeur Nation: Media,
Privacy, and Peering in Modern Culture, Calvert notes that spectatorship of others’ lives has
become paramount in our media-dominated lives.28 He argues that the concept of
voyeurism extends today to the political arena,29 suggesting that

27 House Arrest 62.
29 Calvert 10.
The treatment of politics as voyeurism is [. . .] important [. . .] because it raises questions about what information about the lives of politicians and elected officials is of legitimate concern in a self-governing democracy. It tests notions of personal privacy and ultimately forces consideration of whether there is any information about a political figure that should remain private and out of public consumption.30

Calvert’s observation is useful because it articulates the tensions inherent in the public/private doubleness of Presidential life. In Feeding Frenzy: How Attack Journalism Has Transformed American Politics, Larry J. Sabato takes Calvert’s claim a step further by explaining how this doubleness has divided members of the media, and even some politicians, today:

On one side of the line are those who defend some or all aspects of the modern press’s closer examination of public officials’ private lives. They say that the voters need the information to judge character, and that the press has no business withholding it [. . .] On the opposite side are mainly candidates but also some reporters who believe that the news media are too intrusive today, that not enough privacy is reserved for public servants. There is no direct relationship between private behavior and public performance, they insist, so why report it?31

30 Calvert 12.

Like Calvert, Sabato asks us to contemplate the media’s responsibilities in covering politicians and communicating information about them to the electorate. He also suggests that media coverage influences public conceptions of political candidates’ “character.” Sorting through the professional/personal doubleness of Presidential life, considering what information about Presidents should remain public/private, and asking what responsibilities the media has in this regard are important critical threads running through *House Arrest* and its exploration of American character.

**Character as Theme**

In the 1995 film *The American President*, Anna Deavere Smith plays Robin McCall, White House press secretary to President Andrew Shepherd (Michael Douglas). A present-day Democrat, Shepherd is a widower – his wife died of cancer during his first year in office – who falls in love with an environmental lobbyist, Sydney Ellen Wade (Annette Bening), while running for re-election. Shepherd’s popularity steadily declines as a result of the relationship. The Republicans, led by Senator Bob Rumson (Richard Dreyfuss), pounce on the President’s vulnerability by launching an all-out character assault. They intimate through the media that Wade has a promiscuous past and that Shepherd, for any number of reasons, including that Wade stayed overnight in the White House, is unfit for the Oval Office. Toward the end of the film, Smith stands behind her podium in the White House press room. She is deflecting an onslaught of character-related questions, as the President instructed, when Shepherd makes a surprise entrance and takes over the proceedings.

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Smith can be seen standing beside the President as he addresses the press corps and his television audience:

For the last couple of months, Senator Rumson has suggested that being President of the United States was, to a certain, extent about character. And although I have not been willing to engage in his attacks on me, I have been here three years and three days, and I can tell you without hesitation: being President of this country is entirely about character.33

Shepherd continues by pointing the concluding part of his speech directly toward Senator Rumson:

You want a character debate, Bob? You better stick with me, because Sydney Ellen Wade is way out of your league. [. . .] If you want to talk about character and American values, fine. Just tell me where and when and I’ll show up.34

It is appropriate that around the time Smith began working on House Arrest, she appeared in a film which explores the Presidency and is interested in notions of American character. While she did not adopt the film’s sentimental tone and fairy-tale concept, Smith would ultimately take some of the film’s topics, including national politics, sex and scandal, and the role of the media, and turn them into the stuff of her next On the Road drama.

Broader in scope and length than Fires in the Mirror and Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992, House Arrest: A Search for American Character In and Around the White House, Past and Present


is a two-act play consisting of fifty-six monologues from forty-one different characters.\(^{35}\) The majority of monologues are based on interviews conducted by Smith; others are excerpts from historical texts. Act I is divided into three thematic parts. The first part, “Cohabitation: A Visit to Jefferson’s Home at Monticello” explores the possibility that Jefferson had a sexual relationship with a slave. Second, “An Easier Time” focuses on Franklin Roosevelt, his relationship with the media, and a story about an extramarital affair. In the third part, “The Grand Deaths of the Race,” a fictional theatre troupe performs a play entitled *Our American Cousin* on the night that Lincoln was shot; throughout this play-within-the-play, modern and contemporary voices interrupt to reflect on the meaning of a President’s death. Act II consists of six thematic parts, entitled: “Bit by Bit, Drop by Drop,” “Sending the Canaries into the Mines,” “Darkness at Noon,” “Political Theater,” “Moral Slippage,” and “One Card at a Time.” The first four of these – “Bit by Bit, Drop by Drop,” “Sending the Canaries into the Mines,” “Darkness at Noon,” “Political Theater” – explore the Clinton Presidency, focusing primarily on the scandal involving White House intern Monica Lewinsky. The play concludes in the final two parts, “Moral Slippage” and “One Card at a Time,” where characters reflect on the present-day relationship between politicians and the media.

*House Arrest* examines notions of character primarily through its representations of Presidents Thomas Jefferson, Franklin Roosevelt, and Bill Clinton and sex scandals surrounding their legacies. Smith includes limited information about the Presidents’ political perspectives and achievements. Her primary focus is on their sexual activities,

whether speculative (as in Jefferson) or well documented (as in Clinton). The result is a character portrait of doubleness: the simultaneous representation of the public/professional and private/personal lives of three former Presidents. *House Arrest* embraces Suzanne Garment’s assertions that “when it comes to political scandals, America has a great tradition, full of color and vivacity,”\(^{36}\) and that the U.S. sex scandal tradition in particular is “as old as the republic.”\(^{37}\) The first President Smith explores in this regard is Thomas Jefferson. A principal story line in Act I is the consideration of whether Jefferson fathered a child by one of his slaves, Sally Hemings. Trying to gauge the accuracy of evidence is difficult work according to Dr. Eugene Foster, author of the 1998 *Report on DNA of Jefferson and the Descendants of Sally Hemings*. In a monologue entitled “Probability,” Foster points out that the available evidence cannot unequivocally determine whether Jefferson and Hemings had a child together, although it appears likely they did:

Our uh, scientific results did not prove, that Thomas Jefferson fathered any of Sally Hemings’ children, But that the information that we got taken in the context of the best available historical information makes it extremely likely.

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\(^{37}\) Garment 17.
I think that the general public does not understand that.
I think that the general public uh has come to believe that
the DNA evidence
has proved the relationship
We absolutely cannot say that.
I emphasized strongly
and in a loud voice
I emphasized strongly
that it would not be possible
for us to prove
anything
with one hundred percent certainty [. . .]
If you say well this is very likely
uh,
that’s something people don’t want
to deal with.
They want to know is it or isn’t it?38

Foster acknowledges that his findings will be unsatisfactory to some because they are based on probability, not absolute certainty. This frustrates Foster because Americans, he notes, neither care for nor understand the concept of probability. Foster’s understanding of the scientific tests contrasts sharply with the public’s. He gave advanced warning that absolute

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38 House Arrest 36.
certainty in this matter would not be possible. Yet the public failed to grasp this, before and after Foster’s results were published. These contrasting expectations and interpretations are reminiscent of the multiple meanings found in the Harlins-Du, King, and Denny videos in *Twilight*. They also reveal information about the “character” of the public, exposing its interest in scandal surrounding a political/historical figure.

Others in this section of the play reflect on the character of both Jefferson and the American public. One key example is “Unconsummated Affections/Deep Denial,” a shared monologue between Roger Kennedy, scholar, and Annette Gordon-Reed, legal scholar and author of *Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings: An American Controversy*.\(^{39}\) Smith describes this monologue in stage directions as “a constructed dialogue: These people said these words but not in each other’s presence.”\(^{40}\) Kennedy and Gordon-Reed debate the evidence or lack thereof that would suggest Jefferson and Hemings had a sexual relationship. Their interpretations suggest at least two “sides” or versions of this particular story. For his part, Kennedy repeatedly denies that any such evidence exists:

I think Jefferson wasn’t,

I think Jefferson,

as a man of words and unconsummated

a – ffections,

Ah,

there’s just


\(^{40}\) *House Arrest* 26.
not a shred,
not a shred of evidence [. . .]
That before his wife,
or after his wife there was anybody
with whom he was intimate
physically. [. . .]
I just think,
I I don’t I don’t think it’s necessary.41
Kennedy’s refusal to accept even the possibility of Jefferson’s romantic involvement with Hemings suggests that he is protecting the President’s legacy. He argues that Jefferson was a man of morals who was monogamous with his wife. Moreover, the final two lines of this passage suggest that Kennedy does not value the recent interest taken by the American public in Jefferson’s sex life, implying a kind of weakness of moral character on its part. The pursuit of this topic, he says, is pointless and should be left alone.

By contrast, Annette Gordon-Reed embraces the evidence that she believes exists and uses it to speculate widely on Jefferson’s sexual activity and character. Whereas Kennedy regards Jefferson’s sexual past as normative, Gordon-Reed forwards the possibility that it was anything but, mentioning theories that the President almost certainly had sex with Hemings, that he might have been gay, and that he masturbated frequently. In this way, Gordon-Reed calls into question Jefferson’s character, which Kennedy sought to protect, as well as Kennedy’s point of view and the character of the United States:

41 House Arrest 26.
when somebody says something like that they can say the evidence doesn’t convince them,
but to say there’s no evidence,
that person is,
not a shred,
in deep denial.
And that person has to sit back
and think,
what is it about
this story that bothers you because you’re not dealing realistically with it.
[. . .] it’s sort of like
pick your nightmare,
for historians.
I mean it’s like if there’s any intimation that he [Jefferson] was gay
Somebody will pick up the Sally Hemings story just like that.
(Snapping her fingers.)
Oh but she was the love of his life,
it’s like which is worse to be involved with a black woman or be gay?42

Gordon-Reed’s observations are important for two reasons. First, she refutes Kennedy’s claim about the lack of evidence surrounding Jefferson and Hemings. Together, their contrasting assessments are not unlike the situation found in the closely juxtaposed

42 House Arrest 28.
monologues of Charles Lloyd and Gina Rae (A.K.A. Queen Malkah) in Twilight, where the characters read multiple meanings into the Harlins-Du video. Gordon-Reed also intimates that Kennedy’s vision of the situation is impaired because of his inability to acknowledge facts. Second, Gordon-Reed criticizes the country by suggesting that Jefferson’s possible sexual involvement with a black woman and/or another man would be regarded as “nightmares.” In other words, history would be reluctant if not altogether unwilling to rewrite and sully the Jefferson narrative by opening the possibility that he engaged in interracial or homosexual relationships. From Gordon-Reed’s point of view, this does not reflect well on America’s willingness or ability to confront issues of diversity.

This criticism offered by Gordon-Reed is supported by filmmaker Ken Burns in his monologue entitled “Tea Cup.” Burns is interested in how morality shapes character, to be sure, but not necessarily as it pertains to sex. His concern instead is with the cultural climate of the period that permitted ownership of human beings:

> It doesn't matter.

> He owned her.

> Get the story straight.

> I mean he could have killed her if he wanted.

> He owned her!

> He could have done anything with her!

> He could have murdered her –

> They could have said 'Mr. President where’s Sally?'

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43 See Twilight 39-41, 42, 44-5, 46, 48.
And he could have said ‘Oh I killed her last night, she displeased me,’ and there wasn’t a law in the land that could have touched him.

The fact of whether he did or he didn’t, this late 20th century obsession with all things sexual, titillating, and celebrity-driven is an anathema to historical truth.

He owned her and we forget that fact [. . .].

Like Gordon-Reed, Burns is critical of America, particularly during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, for its blatant racism. More important to him than details of Jefferson’s possible sexual relationship with a slave is the need to reevaluate national character and the lack of progress that has been made with regard to race relations. However, modern-day values and interests have caused us to be hung up, first and foremost, on the intrigues of celebrity and sex.

Through the Jefferson-related monologues of Foster, Kennedy/Gordon-Reed, and Burns, Smith combines Clay Calvert’s theory of “politics as voyeurism” with her own treatment of history. Smith focuses her dramaturgical lens on the past, affording audiences the opportunity to be spectators and speculators on actual historical persons, i.e. Jefferson and Hemings, and alleged historical events, i.e. their sexual relationship. These four characters raise questions about what information should be made public or remain private. Annette Gordon-Reed is willing to bring all evidence and speculation out in the open, for example, while Roger Kennedy believes that the inconclusive sexual behavior of a

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44 *House Arrest* 38.
long-deceased President should be avoided. By providing these multiple perspectives, Smith asks us to peer into the past and grapple with a central tenet of “politics as voyeurism.” What information and inquiries are appropriate when it comes to matters and persons of history?

Smith moves from her exploration of Jefferson to Franklin Roosevelt, where politics, sex, and the media shape character. In a monologue entitled “How Could I Say,” journalist Walter Trohan admits he personally did not care for FDR’s personal life and that he knew the President had a mistress. What particularly bothered Trohan was the fact that when the President’s mistress became ill and had to be taken to the hospital, Roosevelt’s wife accompanied him when he visited the hospital because he was “ashamed to go in there alone.” That Roosevelt had a mistress likely would have been of interest to Trohan’s readers, perhaps influencing their opinion of the President. But Trohan never wrote about FDR’s private life because, as he points out, the climate of the day would not allow it:

ANNA DEAVERE SMITH V.O. But you never wrote about it?

WALTER TROHAN. I couldn’t (write) about it.

I couldn’t say she was his mistress –

because she was in the White House as the secretary –

and everybody knew she was the mistress –

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45 The mistress to whom Trohan refers is Lucy Mercer. Mercer was social secretary to Eleanor Roosevelt in 1914, during FDR’s service as Assistant Secretary of the Navy. In 1918, Eleanor Roosevelt discovered love letters that her husband and Mercer had written to each other, which altered FDR’s relationship with both women. Mercer married Winthrop Rutherford in 1920 and remained in contact with FDR until his death in 1945. See Resa Willis, *FDR and Lucy: Lovers and Friends* (New York: Routledge, 2004).

46 *House Arrest* 48.
but how could you say it?

They could have blasted me and I would have been a terrible character

Well I don’t know

I don’t think my paper would have printed it.47 [author’s emphasis]

Trohan’s assessment that a major newspaper like his, the Chicago Tribune, would not run such a story stands out. It suggests a kind of unwritten moral doctrine that existed in America in the 1930s and 1940s about what was acceptable behavior not from a President, but rather from the media. Trohan voices concern that his own character would have been impugned had he run a story depicting the President to be anything other than a man of morals and character. To do so would have signaled what Cornel West describes as a “breakdown in media ethics.”48 Today, however, the same doctrine to which Trohan alludes does not seem to exist. As R.W. Apple points out in his monologue, “An Easier Time,” when it comes to interaction between Presidents and the media today, there are no “unaskable” questions.49 House Arrest proves this in its treatment of President Clinton and the media frenzy caused by his sex scandals.

Before moving to Clinton, it is important to note a key dramaturgical device employed by Smith in the Walter Trohan passage cited above. In Fires in the Mirror and Twilight, Smith’s character can be discerned both in text and performance. In Fires in the

47 House Arrest 48.

48 West, Democracy Matters 36.

49 House Arrest 40.
Mirror, characters make subtle references to Smith, such as when the Reverend Al Sharpton\textsuperscript{50} and Minister Conrad Mohammad\textsuperscript{51} identify with her as an African American. There are, however, no scripted references to Smith, either in monologues or stage directions. In Twilight, Smith’s presence emerges more noticeably in the text. One character, Judith Tur, calls Smith by her first name,\textsuperscript{52} while others, such as Stanley K. Sheinbaum,\textsuperscript{53} Elaine Young,\textsuperscript{54} and Jessye Norman\textsuperscript{55} change topics mid-monologue as a result of a comment or question from Smith that is unscripted but noted in stage directions. In House Arrest, Smith’s presence becomes more overtly perceptible. Trohan’s aforementioned monologue is one of ten in which the script explicitly calls for Smith to be heard through voice-over (or “V.O.”).\textsuperscript{56} This device is the most literal example yet of Smith asserting her presence into the dramatic material. She asks direct questions to which characters respond, thus shaping the content of their monologues. In addition, the voice-over device creates textual and performative moments in which Smith exists simultaneously in double: as a physically present actor representing others, on the one hand, and as an

\textsuperscript{50} See Fires in the Mirror 29-31.

\textsuperscript{51} See Fires in the Mirror 63-7.

\textsuperscript{52} See Twilight 84.

\textsuperscript{53} See Twilight 25.

\textsuperscript{54} See Twilight 36.

\textsuperscript{55} See Twilight 100.

\textsuperscript{56} Monologues in House Arrest where Smith’s presence is scripted in voice-over include: “Clowns” (Studs Terkel) 14; “On Sally Hemings (Cinder Stanton) 30; “How Could I Say” (Walter Trohan) 47-8; “Washington Political Insider” (Alexis Herman) 98; “Making a Kind of Political Point” (Maggie Williams) 100; “Baby Huey” (President William Jefferson Clinton) 120; “Fat, Dumb and Happy” (President George H.W. Bush) 124; “Does a Tree Make a Sound” (Flip Benham) 127; “Getting Beaten Up in an Alley” (Brian Palmer) 134.
invisible God-like voice, on the other. At the same time, Smith also exists in the audience where we stand in for her as the interviewer of the characters she represents on stage. By scripting her (invisible) self into *House Arrest*, Smith becomes an omnipresent player in the drama whose character can be observed in double on the stage, as well as in an additional, third realm in the audience. This marks a momentous progression from *Fires in the Mirror* and *Twilight*, where her presence is more subtle by comparison. With *House Arrest*, Smith does not attempt to “disappear” into the characters or on-stage action, as she tried before with limited success. Rather, her character, which she asserts early and often in *House Arrest*, operates as a distancing device that points up the play’s theatricality and challenges audiences to engage with Smith and her inquiry on a higher and more critical level.

The third and final sex scandal Smith explores in *House Arrest* is President Clinton’s relationship with White House intern Monica Lewinsky. By the time this affair became news in 1997, Clinton was viewed as arguably one of the most charismatic men ever to occupy the Oval Office. Because of the media and public’s fascination, Clinton sought to create distance between his administration and reporters, as Michael K. Frisby of the *Wall Street Journal* points out in his monologue, “Bowling.” In theory, Clinton’s was a savvy plan to manage the pressures of a society obsessed with knowing about public figures. Instead of keeping the media close, as FDR did, and as George H.W. Bush did to a lesser extent (he occasionally invited journalists to the White House for bowling and socializing), Clinton tried to keep reporters at arm’s length. To say this strategy backfired is a gross

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57 For dates and information about scandals during Clinton’s Presidency, including the Monica Lewinsky affair, see Joe Conason and Gene Lyons, *The Hunting of the President: The Ten-Year Campaign to Destroy Bill and Hillary Clinton* (New York: St. Martin’s P, 2000).
understatement in light of the hoopla generated by Clinton’s private indiscretions-turned-public. However, it also failed to serve the President well even when his personal life was not the main focus of the media, as Frisby observes:

Bill Clinton never gets the benefit of the doubt because he has kep’-us-at-such-a-distance.

Okay?

He has never let us in.

He has never let –

I mean I’ve,

I’ve gotten in by kind of prying and just,

you know,

making sure that I always keep my eye on this guy.

Okay?

That’s how I’ve gotten to have a bit of an understanding with him.

Okay?

But he hasn’t made it easy, because I get rare opportunities. Okay?

I think I’ve been to what?

I’ve been to like one dinner in the White House in five years?

I work for the Wall Street Journal.

Okay?

I’ve never been to the bowling alley.

Heh, heh.
Okay.

If he cuddled – if he cuddled up to us, he’d start getting the benefit of the doubt.\(^{58}\)

In trying to protect his privacy, Clinton received only intensified scrutiny. Frisby suggests that if the President had worked harder to befriend the media by allowing freer access, the scrutiny might not have been as sharp. Frisby’s monologue suggests that as celebrity and President, Clinton was acutely aware of the media’s interest in covering his every move. His approach to managing the relationship between the media and his administration differed from that of other Presidents, which may explain why some journalists (such as Frisby) were thrown off by what was, in their estimation, an unsuitably distanced relationship.

Despite R.W. Apple’s contention that in today’s culture there are no “unaskable” questions, House Arrest suggests that some members of the media felt uneasy writing about the Clinton-Lewinsky imbroglio, or at the very least encountered those in the course of their investigations who did. Indeed, the play supports Larry J. Sabato and S. Robert Lichter’s observation in When Should the Watchdogs Bark?: Media Coverage of the Clinton Scandals that some journalists were reluctant to dwell on allegations “because of their own aversion to using sexual behavior as a measure of character.”\(^{59}\) To illustrate, Chris Vlasto, investigative reporter for ABC News, recounts in his monologue, “The Blue Dress,” how the idea of writing about the dress containing traces of Clinton’s semen that Lewinsky kept as a memento was distasteful and unfathomable to many:

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\(^{58}\) House Arrest 49-50.

The - blue - dress.

Oh I knew about it the first day and nobody wanted to touch it before
before we broke it. [...] I thought it should have been mentioned the very first day.

But
‘Oh,
we can’t bring that up!
Oh come on Chris, shut up!
You cannot talk...

We don’t want to talk about semen!
Oh no!’

And they’re goin’ on and on

‘You can’t talk about semen.
Go awaaay.”60 [author’s emphasis]

Similarly, Michael Isikoff, investigative reporter for Newsweek, reveals in his monologue, “Persistence,” that his own character was often called into question as he investigated the relationship between the President and an intern, and what many deemed a story too unseemly for print:

for this story [the Clinton-Lewinsky affair] go back to The War Room

It was the shame card that they use,

60 House Arrest 117.
‘Serious journalists don’t ask questions about stuff like this. You’re telling me you’re a tabloid reporter?

You’re asking me sleazy questions!’

Look at the way Mike McCurry describes me to Howie Kurtz in Spin Cycle!

‘That’s sleazy,’ in the Kathleen Wiley thing,

‘This other new sleazy charge being promoted by another bimbo beat reporter Mike Isikoff who goes around chasin’ sex stories how cheap and tawdry,

scum.’

They’ll think you’re scum.

They’ll make fun of you.

You’re a bimbo beat tabloid reporter.

That’s the way they use this to keep people off of this stuff."61 [author’s emphasis]

Labeled a “beat bimbo tabloid reporter,” Isikoff endured assaults on his journalistic integrity as he investigated the story. His own moral character was also attacked, as in the intimations that he was interested only in “cheap” and “tawdry” sex stories, and that he himself was “scum.” These criticisms are comparable to what Walter Trohan might have encountered had he written about FDR’s mistress, which would have made him a “terrible

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61 House Arrest 1156.
character” in the eyes of his readership and fellow journalists.62 Whereas Trohan stayed off the Roosevelt story because of the conservative climate of his day, both Isikoff and Vlasto pursued the Clinton-Lewinsky story because of the celebrity-driven climate of theirs. They pushed the boundaries of “politics of voyeurism,” bringing details of the President’s private life into public view. Despite the fact that some of their colleagues and sources – presumably the “they” that both reporters refer to – discouraged them from writing on the topic, Vlasto and Isikoff carried on out of journalistic duty and because they rightly assumed there would be an audience for the story. Tension exists between the supposed code of media conduct which Vlasto and Isikoff “violated,” according to some, and the American public’s fascination with stories involving celebrity and sex. That a plethora of journalists ultimately covered the story, sometimes in obsessive detail, speaks to the power of news-as-entertainment that Americans covet and devour.63 While information about Clinton’s sex life was used to measure his character, it also generated questions about the character of the media and public and formed the basis of a quintessential “lifie.” Smith’s representation of the Clinton-Lewinsky scandal demonstrates that Americans’ understanding of character, particularly with respect to elected officials and media, has become inextricably tied up with notions of celebrity, as Bruce E. Gronbeck points out, and also sex.

62 House Arrest 48.

Smith captures contradictory tensions in the news-as-entertainment value of the Clinton-Lewinsky story in her treatment of USA Today columnist Walter Shapiro’s two monologues, entitled “Are You Now or Have You Ever Been” and “Spinach Dip/Sad.” In the former, Shapiro reveals that as a journalist he enjoyed the scandal for the fodder it provided. In fact, until Clinton’s sexual escapades with Lewinsky became news, Shapiro doubted his choice of occupation:

First of all,

of course I’m having a good time

I mean there was a moment in December January,

where I really was actively wondering whether I had made a totally wrong career choice.

I mean here I am

growing up wanting to be a newspaper columnist,

and I really thought that how come all the good stuff like the Cold War

Joseph McCarthy, Vietnam happened on Walter Lippman’s watch,

and I get Bill Clinton and the balanced budget?

Then suddenly we had this?

And all of life changed.

But, let’s make no bones about it.

I mean

It doesn’t get any better!
I mean this is life not only imitating art

It’s doing better than art.64

Shapiro celebrates the emergence of the Clinton-Lewinsky scandal, equating its cultural importance and entertainment value with other “good stuff” such as McCarthyism, the Vietnam War, and the Cold War. Until this story broke, Shapiro believed that Clinton’s Presidency afforded only “dull” topics, such as the federal budget. But the sex scandal brought renewed interest and sense of purpose for Shapiro. His enthusiasm for writing about Clinton’s sex life was rivaled only by the public’s interest in reading about it.

In his second monologue, “Spinach Dip/Sad,” Shapiro acknowledges how the Clinton-Lewinsky scandal took over the media and, with it, the imagination of the country. Shapiro’s perspective on the matter changed as a result, and he no longer expresses enthusiasm for covering the sordid story:

Coming back from Washington the night the Starr report came out, having gotten from Kinko’s copy shop.

It was kind of nice to just sort of be the center of attention at dinner with close friends and they would say something and I would say, ‘Not exactly. Let me show you footnote four hundred thirty-two; the one about spinach dip.’

But now

that we’re in for the long haul with this

the whole thing

64 House Arrest 110-11.
having now chortled about how wonderful it is,

The whole thing is sad.

The whole thing is sad.\(^{65}\)

Shapiro admits that he relished his position as privileged member of the media. As an insider, he was able to boast his access to *The Starr Report*\(^{66}\) before it became widely available to the public. However, further reflection on the scandal and the media frenzy it generated suggests remorse on his part. Indeed, Shapiro’s repeated claim that “the whole thing is sad” is key. First, his expression – “the whole thing” – refers to more than Clinton’s relationship with Lewinsky; it also implies the media’s coverage and public’s fascination with the story. At the same time, by labeling the situation “sad,” Shapiro in effect describes the character of the President, media, and American public. In fact, his real lamentation seems to have more to do with the media and public. He regrets that Clinton’s sex life has become a “lifie” – which, ironically, is exactly what Shapiro initially longed for. Echoing Calvert’s notion of “politics as voyeurism,” Shapiro’s use of “sad” suggests that personal matters such as a President’s sex life should remain private.

Smith’s treatment of the Clinton-Lewinsky scandal also reveals a doubleness of language. In much the same way as Monique “Big Mo” Matthews,\(^{67}\) Anonymous Lubavitcher Woman,\(^{68}\) and Rabbi Shea Hecht\(^{69}\) in *Fires in the Mirror*, and Sergeant Charles

\(^{65}\) *House Arrest* 114.


\(^{67}\) See *Fires in the Mirror* 47-50.

\(^{68}\) See *Fires in the Mirror* 13-5.
Duke, Josie Morales, Charles Lloyd, and Judith Tur in Twilight, several monologues in House Arrest support Henry Louis Gates, Jr.’s claim that language possesses double or multiple meanings for knowing audiences. These monologues have to do with how Clinton’s use of language was perceived during the Lewinsky brouhaha. For example, in “Are You Now Or Have You Ever Been,” Walter Shapiro recalls how Clinton, during a pair of television interviews which took place shortly after the story broke, described his interaction with Lewinsky. Clinton’s choice of words left open the possibility for multiple interpretations of exactly what did or did not happen, as Shapiro notes:

The day that Clinton first responded to the scandal
I guess it was a Wednesday
and I just remember just watching those interviews,
The Jim Lehrer interview and the Mara Liasson interview
and you know just watching so closely with my colleagues
you know every
you know every single verb tense,
uh you know

69 See Fires in the Mirror 115-7.
70 See Twilight 53-5.
71 See Twilight 49-52.
72 See Twilight 39-41.
73 See Twilight 84-6.
for example
I think
in one of the
interviews
Clinton kept saying
‘I am not having an affair with Monica Lewinsky’
or ‘I’m not having an affair’
which of course would lay open another double entendre
the issue had he had an affair?\textsuperscript{75}

Shapiro’s observation of a “double entendre” suggests that Clinton’s language purposefully
invited multiple meanings. One audience (i.e. the public) might conclude that Clinton
denied having any prior or current sexual involvement with Lewinsky. At the same time,
though, a knowing audience, such as Shapiro and his colleagues (i.e. those who paid
especially close attention to Clinton’s exact choice of words and verb tenses) observed a
very different meaning: that Clinton was being purposefully vague in his language, failing
to explicitly address or admit to any past indiscretion or guilt. The President employed this
strategy as a defense mechanism to control perceptions about his private life and, indeed,
his character.

Similarly, David Kendall, an attorney for President Clinton during the Lewinsky
saga, explains how different audiences perceived a double meaning in Clinton’s now-
infamous use of the expression: “It depends on what the meaning of ‘is’ is.” Clinton

\textsuperscript{75} *House Arrest* 110.
uttered these words during grand jury testimony that was later published in The Starr Report, portions of which were videotaped and broadcast on network television. In a monologue entitled “Is Is,” Kendall describes what the President actually meant by this expression, and how it has been misinterpreted by the media and public:

I thought that the actual, that

if you could ever get anybody back to what he was saying,

they would understand that it was not so silly – to say

‘It depends on what the meaning of is is.’

He was retrospectively parsing what his lawyer was saying.

His lawyer – was, there is no sex.

He said look,

And what he was asked,

‘Wasn’t your lawyer wrong and misleading the court?’

he said ‘No,

it depends on what the meaning of is is.’

What the President was saying was,

when my lawyer said there is no sex he had been speaking of the present.

That was an accurate,

that was an accurate
quote.

If however he meant there had never been anything,

putting aside the meaning of sex,

if there had been anything amorous there

he would have been wrong.76

Kendall acknowledges the confusion that the President’s language resulted in and tries, in a manner that might arguably be described as convoluted as Clinton’s original remark, to explain the meaning of the comment. The President’s statement was widely misunderstood and perceived to be an example of his dodging admission of any guilt. Kendall, however, as part of the knowing audience, forwards a different interpretation, further revealing how Clinton’s words are open to multiple meanings. It is worth noting that Kendall’s interpretation of Clinton’s remark is not unlike Charles Lloyd’s interpretation of the Harlins-Du video in Twilight. Both men are lawyers who seek to create interpretations of evidence (a videotaped shooting in Lloyd, a deposition in Kendall) that benefit their respective clients. In other words, their ability to be a knowing audience for the material in question is informed by their desire to prove their clients’ actual intent or meaning.

We also see the inherent doubleness of language at work in an untitled monologue that opens the section of House Arrest called “Political Theater.” The monologue is an example of Smith’s use of an historical text, as opposed to an interview she conducted. The character is the Office of the Independent Counsel, who reads a portion of Clinton’s grand jury testimony given on August 17, 1998. Counsel speaks into a microphone, so as

76 House Arrest 112.
to recreate the feel, sound, and experience of the testimony itself, reading directly from a
transcript. Counsel urges Clinton to agree to the meaning of words or phrases, despite the
fact that Clinton has repeatedly refused to comply:

All I really need for you, Mr. President –

- is to say
- I won’t answer under the previous grounds, or to answer the
question, you see, because we only have four hours, and your
answers –
- have been extremely lengthy.
The question is, if Monica Lewinsky says that while you were in
the Oval Office area you touched her breasts, would she be lying?
If Monica Lewinsky says that you used a cigar as a sexual aid with
her in the Oval Office area, would she be lying? Yes, no, or won’t
answer?
If Monica Lewinsky says that you had phone sex with her, would
she be lying?

Let me define phone sex for purposes of my question...77

At the end of this passage Counsel acknowledges that Clinton has refused to answer
questions about specific acts because, much like the word “is,” the meaning of a phrase like
“phone sex” could have multiple meanings and, therefore, be open to a myriad of
interpretations. Consequently, if Clinton were to admit that he did or did not engage in

77 House Arrest 118-9.
phone sex with Lewinsky, different audiences might easily – and dangerously, from his perspective – arrive at different conclusions about what that actually entailed. Counsel tries to forward a specific definition for Clinton to accept or reject but Clinton declines, as it may not be shared or understood by others. In Clinton’s view, to accept Counsel’s language or definition(s) would only increase the likelihood of his being misrepresented in the media and/or misunderstood by the public.

In examining sex scandals surrounding Presidents Jefferson, Franklin Roosevelt, and Clinton, Smith shows how sex, celebrity, and the media have been used to measure the “character” of three men who have occupied the Oval Office at different junctures of American history. Before considering how *House Arrest* paradoxically celebrates and critiques this process, and the impact this paradox has on Smith’s conclusions regarding character, it is useful to observe a final but central point the play makes about how race, class, and gender shape the insider/outsider dynamic of national politics and the culture of Washington, D.C.

**Race, Class, and Gender**

Given Smith’s interest in matters of race and class, as evidenced by *Fires in the Mirror* and *Twilight*, it would perhaps seem uncharacteristic if she failed to address these topics in *House Arrest*. In exploring a trio of high-profile sex scandals, Smith’s primary focus is on the Presidents involved, with a parallel focus on the role of the media. Relatively little attention is paid to the women associated with these stories: Sally Hemings (Thomas Jefferson), Lucy Mercer (Franklin Roosevelt), and Monica Lewinsky (Bill Clinton). Some
characters do call attention to the women, such as when Annette Gordon-Reed and Ken Burns discuss the socio-political ramifications of Hemings's African American heritage. Gordon-Reed and Burns suggest that what is of particular interest in the Thomas Jefferson saga is not only that the President might have had extramarital affairs, but that he might have done so with an African American woman. It is Hemings's racial identity that makes the story especially intriguing or, to quote Gordon-Reed, “nightmarish” for historians. The other two women also occupy low social status – Lucy Mercer was a secretary, Monica Lewinsky an intern. While Mercer and Lewinsky are not dealt with explicitly, and Hemings is essentially only referenced, it is worth noting that their experiences are paralleled in Act II, where Smith reinforces how race, class, and gender factor into political outsider-ness through monologues from three contemporary African American women. These monologues demonstrate how each woman’s identity has impacted their status in U.S. politics. They also reveal the hand that the media, in exposing private character to the public, has had in debilitating each woman’s political insider status.

The first such character is Anita Hill, a Professor of Law who brought charges of sexual harassment against Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas, also an African American, during his Senate confirmation hearings. In her monologue entitled “House Arrest,” Hill explains that the media attention brought on by her allegations stripped her of privacy and challenged her integrity. These changes followed her home to Norman, Oklahoma, where she no longer feels comfortable and cannot escape scrutiny and questions about her character:

I feel like I have,
a very limited space

and it’s really limited to my physical home

but

just the house,

just the house. [. . .]

what I thought was my home in some ways has been
taken away from me by these myths that go around.

So even in the town that I thought was my home

I can’t go in and be completely anonymous,

and completely relaxed.

I still have to

deal with the question about who I am and what I’m doing here.\textsuperscript{78}

Even beyond Washington, D.C., Hill’s life has completely changed because of her experience of sexual harassment with a prominent political figure. As a female and African American, she has become a public/professional pariah, which has carried over and negatively affected her private life and personal character.

Maggie Williams, former Chief of Staff to First Lady Hillary Rodham Clinton, undergoes a similar character-changing experience because of her association with President Clinton. In a monologue entitled “Lie Detecting,” Williams struggles to comprehend how it came to be that she ever had to take a lie detector test:

I don’t know if you’ve ever taken one

\textsuperscript{78} House Arrest 102.
Well

you know

it’s like going to the electric chair [. . .]

I mean I kept thinking you know the whole time

when I was taking the lie detector test

and you sit in a chair and you think,

‘Now what did I do in my life to get to the place

where I’m taking a lie detector test?’

In another monologue entitled “Making a Kind of Political Point,” Williams suggests that she had to take the lie detector test not because Clinton’s political enemies were looking for any specific information from her, but rather because they wanted to make the President look bad. In response to a question from Smith about her initial expectations of coming to work in Washington, D.C., Williams describes how the relentlessness of the media and American politics has negatively affected the President and First Lady, as one might expect, and also Williams herself:

I didn’t think [in coming to Washington] that I would be having to defend my integrity?

And,

Also the idea,

79 House Arrest 91.
that you have people, chipping away,
at you know
this person that
you, and
your mother, and your father,
and all these other people have worked so hard to help
create –
And in an instant,
they can
uhm,
I didn’t think
that I would be wasting so much
time.80

The “chipping away” process to which Williams refers is no doubt a joint effort between the Clintons’ political opponents and the public and media’s obsession with celebrity and scandal. Her suggestion that this process and all that comes with it (i.e. lie detector tests) is a “waste of time” speaks to the crippling effect that “politics as voyeurism” has wrought on the American system.

Finally, in “Washington Political Insider,” Alexis Herman, U.S. Secretary of Labor under President Clinton, finds it ironic that she has been labeled an “insider” by the media

80 House Arrest 101.
and other Washingtonians. She feels this way because of her identity as an African American woman:

There was a real possibility that I wouldn’t have gotten through you know.

you know,

the feeding frenzy.

And then the funniest thing to me was that somehow I was labeled a ‘Washington Insider.’

That was really, you know that was really funny to me.

I’ve always felt you know as a black woman,

you know,

you’re on the outside looking in, trying to bring down the walls, bring down the barriers
to be in the room to get to the table,

you know.81

81 *House Arrest* 92.
As a member of the Clinton cabinet, Herman managed to achieve legitimate insider status within American politics, something few women, African American or otherwise, have done before. She explains how difficult it has been for African Americans to be successful, as evidenced by a long story she tells about her father’s encounter with the Ku Klux Klan when Herman was only a child. She concludes her monologue by suggesting there is still much progress to be made in this country with respect to politics and race:

ANNA DEAVERE SMITH V.O. You grew up in the south with the Klan, and had some personal run-ins with them. We don’t have the Klan the way we did when you were a child. In a word, what do we have now?

ALEXIS HERMAN. You say, In a word?

You know, unfortunately, almost the absence of the visible and the tangible leaves the impression that the problem isn’t there, that the issues are not there, you know. And so I think what you have is this false sense, really, now that everything is okay, you know,

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82 Herman’s struggle to obtain insider status in Washington, D.C. as an African American woman in many ways parallels the difficulties that Anna Deavere Smith encountered in researching and presenting House Arrest. I explore this further in the “Critical Response to Smith in Performance” section of this chapter.
because you don’t have the Klan.

So the flip side of that

is this immediate conclusion that it’s no longer a problem, when it

still is.83

Herman’s observation illuminates the issue of racial problematization articulated by bell
hooks and Cornel West.84 While Herman discusses problematization in the context of the
Klan, Smith’s inclusion of the monologue extends the matter to the realm of professional
politics. Herman suggests that it is dangerous to assume racism does not exist in America
today, even in its most insidious forms, simply because the Klan does not exist as it once
did. Smith’s dramaturgy implies that it is equally folly to conclude the history of exclusion
based on race and gender in U.S. politics has been erased because an African American
woman has risen to the status of cabinet secretary. This is comparable to bell hook’s
assertion that minority representation among network news anchors should not be taken
as a sign that racism does not exist. Even when African American women do achieve
recognition and power in politics, it often has a way of backfiring, as evidenced by Anita
Hill and Maggie Williams. Herman’s monologue is a reminder of the perils of
problematization and how the character of race/politics has shaped American history.

Smith juxtaposes her treatment of three women (Hemings, a slave; Mercer, a
secretary; and Lewinsky, an intern) with a trio of African American women (Hill, a


84 See hooks, Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics (Boston: South End P, 1990).

professor; Williams, a political chief of staff; and Herman, a cabinet secretary) to reveal how women, on the basis of race, class, and/or gender, have been relegated to outsider status within the American political structure. Although there appears to be a progression of social advancement from slave/secretary/intern to professor/chief of staff/cabinet member, Smith’s paralleling of these women demonstrates how upon closer scrutiny each was transformed into a political outsider. These women were at one time insiders with intimate connections to the Presidency, largely invisible to the public eye. However, association in sex scandals with male political figures, as in Lewinsky and Hill, brought a glare of media publicity that stripped them of their political intimacy and invisibility, made them iconic figures, and rendered them political outsiders. Race and gender were important contributing factors in similar transformations experienced by Williams and Herman. In this way, House Arrest illuminates how “character” extends beyond (male) politicians and the Oval Office. More than a matter of politics and sex, character also has to do with race, class, and gender. By drawing a dramaturgical parallel between the lives and socio-political experiences of these six women, Smith incorporates important elements of diversity in her representations of character.

Paradox of Critique

As Smith’s treatment of scandals involving Presidents Jefferson, Franklin Roosevelt, and Clinton suggests, the American media and public have long measured “character” by Presidents’ public and private personas. Interest in the latter has developed steadily, or at least become more apparent, over time. This has resulted in modern-day “politics as
voyeurism,” a culture where Presidents are scrutinized in and beyond the Oval Office.

Today, when scandal plays as the ultimate in reality television programming, *House Arrest* raises questions about moving beyond sex scandals and other “lifies” in order to use the idea of “character” more effectively. Larry J. Sabato sees it as the media’s responsibility to implement this kind of change:

> Journalists ought to put more emphasis on public character than private character, for the former is at least as revealing of an individual’s make-up as bedroom behavior. [..] The two most telltale indicators of public character are surprisingly little explored: how the candidate relates to his or her working associates and peers, and how he or she deals with staff. [..] If the press is willing, the staff room can substitute for the bedroom in investigating the nature of candidates’ characters, and it can add a political dimension not found in the boudoir.85

Sabato points out “layers” of character in political candidates that have gone generally unnoticed by the media. The media, he contends, might provide a more complete and useful representation of candidates’ character by shifting the focus of analysis and critique from the private bedroom to the public staff room. Bruce E. Gronbeck concurs with this line of thinking, arguing that we ought to

> enlarge our understanding of ‘character.’ We must return to the ideas lying beneath its originary meanings – to the marks of community commitments that are visible in someone’s behavior and discourse. We must rid ourselves

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85 Sabato, *Feeding Frenzy* 220-1.
of a narrow, merely moralistic understanding of character and construct in its place a concept big enough for even the Clintons to fit in.\textsuperscript{86} Gronbeck follows Sabato in his call for a broader understanding of character that accommodates, if not emphasizes, a candidate’s public doings, as opposed to his or her private affairs. Using sex as a barometer of character reduces the meaning of the word to a moral concept, a notion echoed by a number of characters in \textit{House Arrest} including Roger Kennedy and Annette Gordon-Reed. Adopting an understanding of character that takes into account public/visible behavior and discourse would create richer and more complete understandings.

Some media critics, however, such as Charles S. Clark, doubt that such a change can or will occur. Clark believes that “to many political and journalistic observers, sex habits will continue to be seen as an indicator of character, and hence fair game for the press.”\textsuperscript{87} \textit{House Arrest} illustrates that insofar as it is representative of a President’s character, sex has become “fair game” not only for journalists but for dramatists as well, including Smith. There is an overwhelming sense in the play that America has regressed in terms of the media’s increased scrutiny of Presidents’ private lives and the pleasure the public takes in learning about their misfortunes. A paradox exists in that Smith, by virtue of having made a trio of Presidential sex scandals the subject of her drama, criticizes Americans’ obsession with tabloid sensationalism and, at once, feeds that obsession. Moreover, Smith’s


\textsuperscript{87} Clark, “Politicians and Privacy” 184.
treatment of “character” in *House Arrest* is tied more closely to notions of sex and morality than visible public doings.

While Smith’s dramaturgy celebrates sex and scandal, it simultaneously critiques media invasiveness. To illustrate, Brian Palmer suggests in his monologue, “Getting Beaten Up In An Alley,” that he would have to deliberate if forced to choose between saving the President’s life or capturing the moment of his death in a photograph. Palmer reveals how journalists are often more interested in sensational stories, such as a President’s assassination, than moral responsibility. Peggy Noonan, Presidential Speech Writer for Presidents Ronald Reagan and George H.W. Bush, echoes the relentless nature of today’s media in her monologue, “Asylum,” by contrasting the media with the historical experience of visitations to homes of the mentally ill:

> You remember in the 18\(^{th}\) century,

> in the 18\(^{th}\) and 19\(^{th}\) century

> in the finer and more refined circles of England

> it became habit to go to um,

> homes for the mentally ill and go see the people there and be very

> moved by their predicament?

> It was a weird

> sort of thing –

> You wanted to go see the mad people and then feel.

> Then I’m going to show all your friends

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88 *House Arrest* 134.
‘See how compassionate I am.’ [ . . . ]

I am deeply moved

by the misery around me. [ . . . ]

The press is the exact opposite of that.

They don’t they want to go to the insane asylum and make

the crazy people cry!

They want to go to the insane asylum with a fork and say, ‘Hey,

how’d you like that Dole?’ (Makes a gesture: sticking the fork.)

‘Hey Clinton,

what did you mean about Susan McDougal and her

and her uh legal bills?’

Noonan’s observations are useful on two fronts. First, she notes how public acts can be understood as performances. The English who visited the mentally ill did not do so for the sake of actually being compassionate. Rather, they visited asylums for the opportunity it presented to appear to be compassionate. In this way, what they have in common with politicians today is both are acutely aware that public actions are scrutinized and judged regardless of the intentions behind them. Second, Noonan contends that the media’s invasiveness harms political leaders. The metaphor of the press jabbing a fork into a candidate is apt, intimating that journalists poke and prod politicians. Noonan offers perspective on how far the media is willing to go in its coverage of Presidents’ public and

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89 House Arrest 56.
private lives, and the (negative) consequences this has not only on politicians themselves but the larger political system as well.

President Clinton, in a monologue entitled “Baby Huey,” expounds on the pressures of media and politics to which Noonan alludes and is at the heart of Smith’s dramaturgical investigation:

The political press has this image,
that the presidency is so all-powerful
that none of the presumptions
should apply.
No presumption of innocence.
No presumption that some techniques
and things are off-
balance.
I think we really ought to ask ourselves,
Do we want to put our public officials in the position
of basically having to bankrupt themselves just to survive in office?
And I just think it’s-gotten-out-of-whack.
I think that the thing is seriously-out-of-whack.[...] So
what I’m saying is
Ya know, we’re fine.
We’re standing here.
We’re showing up for work.

We’re fine,

Bad for America.

Bad for the system.

Makes good people less willing to run.

And it corrupts the search for the truth.\(^\text{90}\)

Clinton’s monologue, one of the lengthier in *House Arrest*, is the result of an interview Smith conducted with the President on 29 October 1997.\(^\text{91}\) His riff on the state of American politics, the role of the media, and the public’s fascination with the private lives of Presidents was prompted by a single question from Smith: “Do you think you are treated like a common criminal?”\(^\text{92}\) That a simple question prompted such an involved response is telling. It hints at Clinton’s frustration with the current relationship between politicians and media and the damage done to American politics because of this relationship. These sentiments are echoed by Larry J. Sabato:

> The abuses visible during feeding frenzies damage the political fabric of America by cheapening public discourse, trivializing the campaign agenda, breeding cynicism, and discouraging able people from seeking public office.\(^\text{93}\)

\(^{90}\) *House Arrest* 120-2.

\(^{91}\) This interview took place after the Whitewater hearings but before the Lewinsky scandal.


\(^{93}\) Sabato, *Feeding Frenzy* 23.
Smith is aware of inherent tensions between the Presidency and the media. Through her inclusion of monologues by Palmer, Noonan, and Clinton, she offers a critique of how far the present-day situation has spun out of control. At the same time, however, by building her drama around private matters such as Presidents’ sex lives, she also participates in sensationalism. In other words, *House Arrest* is a kind of “feeding frenzy” of its own. This paradox is paralleled in Peggy Noonan’s “Asylum” monologue, where she describes the character of today’s media:

You know those old arrival

*shipping* news kind of videos from Movietone?

Do you remember the one with the Queen and King of England coming down the *plank*?

And some some of the photographers start yelling, ‘Hey Queen this way!’

That’s what journalism is,

at its worst and still at its best!

‘Hey-Queen-look-this-way,-hey-King-over-here’-click-click.  

*House Arrest* critiques the reality that American politics has become a kind of walking-of-the-plank. At the same time, it paradoxically celebrates this fact by snapping pictures, the “click-click” to which Noonan refers, of Presidential privacy and making them available to the public. By bringing these photographs to life in theatrical performance, Smith affords

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94 *House Arrest* 56-7.
us the opportunity to vicariously relive these “lifies” and satiate our own appetites for entertainment, celebrity, and scandal.

Gary Hart, a candidate for President in 1998 who withdrew his candidacy amid a sex scandal of his own, captures the essence of “politics as voyeurism,” the questions it raises about public/private information, and the paradox of Smith’s dramaturgical critique. In his monologue, “Look in Windows,” Hart spells out a series of questions which are fundamental to the critical inquiry behind *House Arrest*:

I think what political journalism in the late 20th century wants is control. [. . .]

So that’s the issue

What is the meaning of language?

It’s: what is the power, what is the control of the political process? [. . .]

Who decides who will run for office in this country?

That’s what it’s about.

And who decides what is moral and immoral?

And how do you know what goes on in someone’s house?

How do you know what goes on in someone’s personal life?

You can’t.

You can’t.

That’s the simple point.

You can speculate.

You can spy.
Smith does her part to critique the ways in which the media has controlled how politics is covered. At the same time, despite the fact that there are things we can “never know,” such as whether Thomas Jefferson fathered a child by one of his slaves, or exactly what happened in the Oval Office between the President and an intern, it does not stop Smith from “looking in the windows” herself. She dramatizes private aspects of Presidential behavior and, in the same breath, critiques the media which seeks to do the same. Ironically and paradoxically, as Hart points out, this is a difficult if not impossible road for both to hoe.

By the end of the play it is clear that Smith has affirmed George Stephanopoulos’s maxim: Presidents can do whatever they want, but “the deal” is we see everything they do. Does House Arrest ask us to ignore the consequences of this political arrangement? What are we to do with what has been uncovered about the premium Americans place on celebrity and the dubious moments of our nation’s past? The answers to these questions, like the conclusions of the play, are fluid. The situation at the end of House Arrest is akin to the one Penny Kiser describes in her Act I monologue, “Justice Is In One Scale.” Kiser, a

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95 House Arrest 54-5.
tour guide of Thomas Jefferson’s Monticello home, recalls Jefferson’s plan, as outlined in his *Notes on the State of Virginia*, for slaves to be freed by 1800. Believing in 1800 the country was not ready for such a dramatic change, Jefferson did not free his own slaves, saying it would have been like “abandoning” his own family.  

There is also a sense of abandonment at the end of *House Arrest*. While neither *Fires in the Mirror* nor *Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992* have “happy” or “tidy” endings, they do provide perspective. In both plays we are asked at the end to reflect on where individuals and cultures are coming from, reasons for their anger and suspicion of others, and possibilities for how those communities might move forward. Conversely, there is emptiness at the end of *House Arrest* which requires our attention but that even the playwright seems unsure how to fill. Perhaps it is because *House Arrest* does not deal with a singular event, such as the Crown Heights or Los Angeles riots, that it lacks a similar concluding effect or message. But this is not necessarily a flaw in Smith’s dramaturgy. By navigating through roughly 200 years of American history, the premise of *House Arrest* is more sprawling than either *Fires in the Mirror* or *Twilight*. It follows that the play’s outcome reflects this expansive ambition. What we are left to grapple with is the disturbing impression that American politics is defined by celebrity, scandal, and news-as-entertainment. Smith strives for the opposite of this in *House Arrest*. But in her search for truth and character, she also falls prey to the vicious paradox that she critiques.

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*House Arrest* 22-3.
Critical Response to Smith in Performance

In each of its stage versions, including the November 1997 Arena Stage, Washington, D.C., April 1999 Mark Taper Forum, Los Angeles, and March 2000 Joseph Papp Public Theater, New York City, productions, *House Arrest* failed to earn the critical acclaim of *Fires in the Mirror* and *Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992*. In fact, it generated a staggering amount of negative criticism. This alone distinguishes *House Arrest* from Smith’s previous two works which, by comparison, were roundly praised and seldom criticized. Critics observed a range of problems with *House Arrest*, including its lengthy running time (each of the aforementioned productions exceeded three hours), differing cast sizes (ranging from one to fourteen actors), elaborate production values, and a general lack of direction and purpose. The most common criticism, however, had to do with what many deemed the play’s overly ambitious and discombobulated script. *House Arrest* was weighted with plenty of critical baggage long before its New York City premiere. Even when Smith finally performed all the roles herself, which she did at the Public Theater, the play still could not escape the shadows of negative criticism that followed it from Washington, D.C. and Los Angeles.

Under the title *House Arrest: First Edition*, the play opened at Washington D.C.’s Arena Stage, Kreeger Theater, on November 7, 1997. The production was directed by Mark Rucker and presented with a cast of fourteen actors, not including Smith. As the title suggests, the play was presented as a work-in-progress. This did not slow critics, however, from pointing out problems. Roy Proctor of the *Richmond Times Dispatch* called the play
“exceedingly diffuse” and remarked that it “doesn’t examine much of anything.” He observed other flaws, including the script, the cast’s struggle to present the dramatic material, and the overall point of Smith’s endeavor:

In these monologues, Smith is in her interview-and-edit mode. [. . .] The lines may look good on paper, but they often defy the efforts of the mostly youthful and definitely competent performers to endow them with life. The play Smith wrote meshes poorly with the interludes in which the same actors perform the monologues based on real-life sources. [. . .] As a whole, ‘House Arrest’ makes little point, much less a compelling point.

Writing in Variety, Paul Harris noted an apparent change in Smith’s attitude as a playwright from Fires in the Mirror and Twilight. Like Proctor, he also located problems in the script:

Playwright Anna Deavere Smith is angry, cynical and wordy in ‘House Arrest: First Edition,’ her latest thought-provoking journey into the American psyche. [. . .] The result is a lavish and sometimes self-indulgent exercise that is most noteworthy for its scope, elaborate staging and defiantly disjointed book. [. . .]99

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98 Proctor C4.

Harris remarked further that there is “precious little levity” in the show which, combined with its running time of three hours and fifteen minutes, complicates the ability of audiences to understand and enjoy the production.¹⁰⁰

Writing in the Washington Post, Lloyd Rose was disappointed that House Arrest failed to live up to the expectations set by the style and quality of Smith’s previous work:

Anna Deavere Smith’s ‘House Arrest: First Edition’ [. . .] has been frankly publicized as a work-in-progress, so audiences should not expect a polished, finished work. And they won’t get one. [. . .] ‘House Arrest’ plays like a first draft – overlong, inchoate, unfocused, dull. This isn’t the sort of uninformed mess whose final brilliance is evident in its very chaos, either. Anyone who was blown away by Smith’s amazing ‘Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992’ should approach this newest work with a different set of expectations.¹⁰¹

Rose further suggests that despite Smith’s absence from the cast, the ailments from which House Arrest suffers have more to do with the script than the actors. He sees room for improvement, though, which he hopes will be made as the play continues to grow:

You can see how Smith is trying to draw everything together into a meditation/exploration on the press, privacy and power, and in time she may well succeed. [. . .] Possibly ‘Twilight’ was this murky and boring at a

¹⁰⁰ Harris 73.

similar point in its development. Arena and its co-producers have taken an admirable risk and placed a bold bet on the future. But the future is later for 'House Arrest,' and its present has been put in front of an audience too soon.\textsuperscript{102}

Though he admires her previous work and talents as an actor, Rose does not believe that Smith’s joining or even replacing the cast at this point would solve fundamental weaknesses in the play. Nevertheless, he believes the script may well be improved in time. Others echoed this sentiment, including Dan Hulbert of the Atlanta Journal and Constitution, who described the play as

\begin{quote}
the most ambitious - and, at moments, the most brilliant - exploration of the national psyche since Tony Kushner’s ‘Angels in America.’ It has enough intelligence, theatricality, problems and sheer mess for three works-in-progress.\textsuperscript{103}
\end{quote}

Hulbert’s is a backhanded compliment of sorts. He praises the play for its potential but points out that it has plenty of room for improvement. Nelson Pressley took a similar approach in the Washington Times, observing that Smith covers too many topics. Still, he remains hopeful that Smith may ultimately reshape her material into the stuff of a dramaturgically effective and politically relevant drama:

\begin{quote}
At present [House Arrest] is a fascinating (if disjointed) intellectual adventure that sprawls and rambles through fact and fiction, past and present tense. [.
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{102} Rose, “‘House Arrest’: Too-Early Release” C01.

The play isn’t as random as it looks. The links between the actors, the journalists, the policy-makers and the nobodies are there, but they are currently oblique. As the show grows and these connections come into sharper focus, ‘House Arrest’ may shape up as the most important show Anna Deavere Smith has created.104

As these reviews illustrate, pervading critical response of the Arena Stage production is the overriding sense that House Arrest lacks the dramatic poignancy and clarity of purpose of Fires in the Mirror and Twilight. Comparing these two previous works to House Arrest became a defining characteristic of the play’s critical reception. In making these comparisons, many critics found House Arrest to be an awkward and disappointing departure from Smith’s earlier efforts.

Critics of the production that opened on April 9, 1999 at the Mark Taper Forum in Los Angeles, which was entitled House Arrest: An Introgression and included a cast of twelve actors under Smith’s direction, by and large echoed the negative sentiments expressed by their Washington, D.C. counterparts. David Mermelstein of Variety observed both textual and performance problems. He argued that Smith’s work here, much unlike Fires in the Mirror and Twilight, is confusing:

[Smith’s] previous forays onto the stage [. . .] made audiences sit up and listen to a host of communal concerns in shows that were as much distinguished by Smith’s unique talents as a monologist as by the social

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issues she sought to illuminate. But that focus and Smith’s incredible talent for mimicry are largely absent from her latest effort [. . .]105

Mermelstein also points out how the script confuses audiences by virtue of its multiple topics:

‘House Arrest’ brims with ostensibly comprehensible ideas that are in fact abstruse and slippery in this context – which may, of course, be Smith’s point. Nevertheless, there’s nothing original about meditations on race relations in this country and the changing nature of American leadership. Yet Smith, who has plenty to say about these issues, just can’t make sense of them.106

Mermelstein does not share the optimism expressed by Nelson Pressley that House Arrest can or will improve. He does, however, go on to make the important suggestion that what the L.A. production is missing is Smith as solo performer. Mermelstein comments that the “simple concept” of Fires in the Mirror and Twilight – i.e. Smith’s one-woman “impersonations” of real people whom she interviewed – is regrettably absent here.107 It may not completely redeem the production, he notes, but if Smith could figure out how to incorporate that conceptual strategy which was so successful in Fires in the Mirror and Twilight, House Arrest might yet find success.


106 Mermelstein 57.

107 Mermelstein 57.
In a similar vein, Jory Farr as the Press Enterprise observed in the script the “enormity of what the playwright was trying to accomplish” but concluded the text was in disarray. Farr notes that Smith instituted a post-show “talk back” with her Los Angeles audience following each performance. Even this, however, did not clarify matters entirely:

It’s clear that Smith, a wonderful actor, is going after something epic with ‘House Arrest’ but ran into difficulties. [. . .] And as can happen when artists try to draw on the politics of the moment, real events outran her. As a result, the Mark Taper Forum has presented a piece in a limited run as a work-in-progress, with a ‘second act’ that involves audience participation and a panel of intriguing people. [. . .] But ‘House Arrest’ needs far more than audience participation. For the piece to come together – and it could – Smith will have to separate what’s timeless from what’s merely topical. More than that, she’ll have to find the unifying story that’s needed to bring so many disparate threads together.

Farr’s observation is important because it introduces a key problem that Smith encountered while developing the play. House Arrest was originally written before the Bill Clinton-Monica Lewinsky scandal broke and before DNA evidence of Jefferson’s possible involvement with Sally Hemings surfaced. In response to these “events,” Smith delayed production to perform research and incorporate these sagas into the play. While Smith

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109 Farr F10.

Critics who enjoyed these initial opportunities to respond to *House Arrest* in Washington, D.C. and Los Angeles raised questions about the coherency and playability of the text. In offering criticism and expressing their hope (or lack thereof) for a better script upon further development, they also pointed to Smith’s body of work. Many suggested that while *House Arrest* differs widely from *Fires in the Mirror* and *Twilight*, the fact that Smith is behind all three works makes it likely that *House Arrest* could potentially achieve the clarity and poignancy of its predecessors. By the time *House Arrest* opened in New York on March 26, 2000 at the Public Theater, Smith was no longer “behind” the production. Instead, she was now front and center. The casts of fourteen (Washington, D.C.) and twelve (Los Angeles) had been replaced with a cast of one: Smith. The idea for Smith to perform every role herself came from Public Theater producer George C. Wolfe. Wolfe explained his rationale by referring to Smith’s acting style and the previous stage versions of *House Arrest*:

[Smith] has crafted this extraordinary technique – art form – of both embodying a person and illuminating their language. I saw a lot of talented actors playing the roles, and they were acting the roles in a way that you were witnessing the emotion instead of in a way that the language was swirling up and popping around you.\footnote{George C. Wolfe, qtd. in Pogrebin, “Ms. Smith, Alone Again, Is Going to Washington” 11.}
Gordon Davidson, Artistic Director of the Mark Taper Forum, concurred with Wolfe. Davidson, who initially approved of Smith’s decision to cast multiple actors, ultimately realized the importance of Smith as solo performer in illuminating the meaning(s) of the play for audiences:

Because of her particular interviewing technique, the audience becomes Anna – they sit in for her because Anna is talking to them as if she were asking the questions. She creates a level of reality. When you have actors doing it, it removes it one more step. They were second generation and it lost something.  

Echoing Elinor Fuchs’s notion of “standing in,” Davidson reinforces the importance of the relationship between Smith and her audience. Because audiences stand in for Smith, multi-actor performances, or even solo performances by actors other than Smith for that matter, cannot fully capture or replicate the immediacy of her original interview with the characters represented in the play. Smith’s presence is imperative to ensuring that “character” is successfully communicated from the stage to the audience. Wolfe and Davidson imply as much, and Robin Pogrebin, writing in the New York Times, asserts this directly:

The journey [from multi-actor casts to Smith as solo performer] would seem to involve a message: that Ms. Smith, 49, was meant to perform her own

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work, whether she wants to or not, and that whatever particular blend of
inquisitiveness and insight she brings to the process of drawing people out
in interviews is ultimately essential to bringing those people to life
onstage.\textsuperscript{114}

Like Wolfe, Davidson, and Pogrebin, some critics of previous productions of *House
Arrest* suspected that such a casting change might improve the production. Critics of the
Public Theater production did little to confirm those suspicions, however. On the whole,
most found the play too lengthy, confusing, and unsure about its point and purpose. To
illustrate, Edward Karam of the *Times* remarked that

*[House Arrest] covers a lot of ground, and it’s not always clear what Smith is
going at. The evening starts with a strong segment on Jefferson [. . .] but it
grows increasingly diffuse. [. . .] The final comments of Studs Terkel suggest
that Smith’s concern is the growing trivialities that obscure the nation’s
business, but that observation comes too late to boost one’s flagging
interest.\textsuperscript{115}

In a similar way, Charles Isherwood of *Variety* explored the script’s shortcomings and how
they impact Smith’s ability to perform the piece. Isherwood argued that Smith’s solo
performance ultimately benefits the play, but only to a point. The production still suffers
from confusing dramaturgy:

\textsuperscript{114} Pogrebin, “Ms. Smith, Alone Again, Is Going to Washington” 11.

\textsuperscript{115} Edward Karam, “Bleakly Drawn from Life,” rev. of *House Arrest: A Search for American Character In and
Around the White House, Past and Present*, perf. Anna Deavere Smith, dir. consultant Jo Bonney, Joseph Papp
this enormously talented writer-performer doesn’t succeed in turning her material into a cohesive and cogent work of theater. [...] ‘House Arrest’ is unfocused and discursive, but Deavere Smith has a naturally vibrant stage presence that gives an arresting human dimension to this sometimes unwieldy show. [...] The solo format has likely improved the piece – the single performer gives the show a sharp focus the writing eschews, even if it places heavy demands on Deavere Smith.\textsuperscript{116}

Smith’s presence eases some of the play’s textual problems (the “eschewed writing”) but it does not eliminate them. Consequently, according to Isherwood, the production is “theatrically flaccid” and remains in need of “sharper definition.”\textsuperscript{117}

Michael Feingold of the \textit{Village Voice} observed similar textual and performance-related problems. Regarding the script, he noted that

\textit{House Arrest} roams through a great many matters [...] surfing through American history like a giant web, declining to settle on any central topic, and even straying far from its ornate, carefully noncommittal subtitle [...] [Smith] doesn’t always forge the links to guide an audience through her digressive, data-crammed event. [...] The material’s hard to process because so many purposes are at work. [...]\textsuperscript{118}


\textsuperscript{117} Isherwood 50.
According to Feingold, the lack of focus evident in Smith’s playwriting also carried over to the show’s overly elaborate production values and, surprisingly, Smith’s acting style:

As compared to the tight focus and repose of even the jumpiest moments in *Twilight: L.A.*, the barrage seems blurry; so, for once, does Deavere Smith’s acting, which, particularly in the historical documents, tends to lapse into a generality surprising in an artist whose principal gift is her scrupulousness of detail.119

Writing in the *Associated Press*, Michael Kuchwara followed Feingold in criticizing the play, describing it as “exhausting” and “not as focused” as her previous works.120 Kuchwara also remarked that the production is “top-heavy with props, slides, costume changes and busy bits of scenery, forever trundling on and off stage,” suggesting that the pace of the show was too slow.121 For both Feingold and Kuchwara, Smith strayed too far from the focus and simplicity that defined *Fires in the Mirror* and *Twilight*.

It is not much of an exaggeration to suggest that nearly every review of *House Arrest* alluded in one way or another to Smith’s previous two plays. Indeed, *Fires in the Mirror* and

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119 Feingold 73.


121 Kuchwara, “An Exhausting One-Woman Expedition In Search of the American Character.”
Twilight established a set of expectations among critics that House Arrest failed to meet. To demonstrate this point further, Steven Winn of the San Francisco Chronicle noted that

For all its historical range, the show is often bluntly reductive. Unlike ‘Fires in the Mirror’ and ‘Twilight,’ which transformed specific events into wide-ranging dramatic inquiries on race, justice and other social issues, ‘House’ shrinks its huge subject down to formulaic analysis, isolated set speeches and overworked juxtapositions.\(^{122}\)

Winn admired how Fires in the Mirror and Twilight centered round a specific event. By comparison, he finds House Arrest flawed because it fails to give focus to a subject that is too ambitious. The “whopping topic,” as Nelson Pressley called it in his review of the Arena Stage production, is simply too much for Smith to “throw her arms around.”\(^{123}\)

Ben Brantley of the New York Times offered similar criticism, suggesting that House Arrest differs from Smith’s previous efforts by virtue of its broad scope and seemingly unintelligible purpose:

Unlike her earlier works [. . .] ‘House Arrest’ isn’t anchored to one particular historical moment. And it has a more rambling, ruminative style, without the same cohesive passion [. . .] The work’s subtitle [. . .] gives some indication of its daunting breadth of focus. [. . .] [Smith is] a wanderer in an


immense forest of facts and ideas who, somewhere along the way, lost her compass. Brantley also picks up the criticism articulated by Jory Farr of the Mark Taper Forum production, observing that the events and characters upon which *House Arrest* is based are relatively timely but not timeless. When, in March 2000, the play opened in New York City, “Monica-gate” was already nearly three years old. As such, Brantley notes problems with the incredible amount of dialogue, in print and on the air, that has already been generated by the subjects addressed here. The events leading up to and surrounding the impeachment of President William Jefferson Clinton have been examined from so many angles, personal and polemical, that both vertigo and subject fatigue set in long ago. [. . .] The question arises as to whether what is already a hall of mirrors can benefit from yet another reflective surface.

Echoing Farr, Brantley goes on to suggest that flaws in the dramatic material cause problems with Smith’s acting; she embodies her different characters well but offers little insight into them. Brantley’s critique of Smith’s acting, similar to the criticism offered by Michael Feingold, stands out. Some used the occasion of *House Arrest* to critique not only the play and Smith’s acting style but also her character. Various critics suggested that *House

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125 Brantley E1.

126 Brantley E1.
Arrest was evidence of Smith’s self-absorption and interest in her own work. Both Paul Harris of Variety and John Simon of New York Metro called the play “self-indulgent.” Michael Kuchwara wondered if Smith had become “maybe too enamored with her own research.” Perhaps the most scathing attack came from Andrew Ferguson of the Weekly Standard, who doubted the financial support that Smith received from public and private sponsors to research and produce House Arrest, which Ferguson called a “mess” and “hard to follow,” was ultimately worthwhile. Ferguson remarked that by the play’s bittersweet close […] only questions of what, precisely, House Arrest is supposed to be about, and why, more to the point, the vast institutional resources of American do-goodery have been mobilized to support a woman of such modest gifts.

While it rarely assumed this harsh tone, the fact remains that criticism of House Arrest was decidedly negative. Both the script and Smith’s performance were viewed as problematic if not altogether flawed. In this way, Ferguson’s tongue-in-cheek observations that Smith “seems never to have gotten a bad review” and that she “cannot cross a street in New York

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128 Kuchwara, “An Exhausting One-Woman Expedition In Search of the American Character.”

129 Ferguson, “Ms. Smith Comes to Washington” 31.

130 Ferguson 31.
City without being nominated for a Tony or an Obie" point up how Smith had heretofore been universally praised and how comparisons to her previous efforts informed critical response to *House Arrest*. The overall negative criticism surrounding *House Arrest* reveals that by the time Smith performed the play in New York City, even her much-celebrated virtuosity as a solo performer, which George C. Wolfe wagered would enhance the piece, could not elevate it to the critical heights of *Fires in the Mirror* and *Twilight*.

That Smith’s character also was called into question highlights the difficulty she had with *House Arrest*. As a female, African American, and non-Washingtonian, Smith frequently encountered obstacles gaining “inside” access to politicians. Partly, of course, this had to do with the nature of Washington, D.C., where politicians are wary about speaking with reporters for fear that their words will be mishandled or used against them. Whereas her interview subjects in Crown Heights and Los Angeles answered her questions directly, Smith noted that “in Washington, everybody rephrased my questions.” Her research difficulties were not attributable only to the political culture and secretive nature of Washington, D.C., however. They were also due to the ways in which Smith was as an outsider in a world where insiders are privileged.

The numerous hurdles she faced in researching *House Arrest* forced Smith to grapple with her own sense of double consciousness. On the one hand, Smith was all too aware of her outsider status in Washington, D.C., which she points out:

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131 Ferguson 31.

It’s been hard, hard, hard. This feels a lot more dangerous to me than it did walking around the riot-torn environment in south-central Los Angeles.

Every other piece I’ve made is about me being in the margins, which is where I belong. I don’t belong in D.C. I don’t fit the profile. I’m not a politician, a policy wonk or a journalist. I’m an artist [. . .].

Smith felt she did not belong in Washington, D.C. because of who she is (an artist) and who she is not (politician, policy wonk, or journalist). In another interview, she expressed how her identity as an African American woman further added to the outsider status she experienced in researching and performing the play:

In acting school we are told to play the play as if it were the first time.

When I played Clinton, and ultimately when I played the entire play *House Arrest*, I began to play it as if it were the last time I would ever speak in public again. It was from that place that I began to get a feeling of what is at stake in the very powerful position of president of the United States. It was my only way in. As an African-American woman, I am actually not predisposed to know much about power. I am predisposed to identify with, and know a lot about, powerlessness. I was, from the outset, more comfortable playing an incarcerated child murderer, one who would be considered the lowest of the low, than I was playing the president of the United States.

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As these two quotes suggest, Smith was acutely aware of herself as an outsider throughout the development and production of *House Arrest*. At the same time, she was also made aware of how politicians, journalists, and other Washington, D.C. insiders viewed her as such on the basis of her multiple identities. Some refused to speak with her at all. Some, such as ABC’s Cokie Roberts, for instance, spoke with Smith but refused to go on record.\(^{135}\) Smith was also received coolly by journalists when, as part of her research, *Newsweek* made her its White House correspondent in July 1996, sending her to cover President Clinton’s re-election campaign. Smith flew aboard Air Force One, which journalists from other news organizations reportedly resented. It prompted Maureen Dowd of the *New York Times* to call *Newsweek* “absurd” for “assigning the writer and actress [. . .] to cover a news story.”\(^{136}\) Dowd went on to suggest that “if Smith was looking to document the fecklessness of the press, what better evidence than her own instant and bizarre accreditation?”\(^{137}\) *Newsweek*’s apparent disregard for Smith’s non-journalist, outsider status caused a stir among media members when Smith was afforded privileged access to a President. This response only heightened Smith’s awareness of herself as an outsider within the Washington, D.C. community. It is not difficult to understand, then, the challenges she encountered with *House Arrest*, even before the play was staged. In her research alone she struggled with issues of outsider-ness that, in a twist, Smith herself was very much part

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\(^{134}\) Anna Deavere Smith, qtd. in Kahn, “For Anna Deavere Smith, Life is a Character Study” C1.


\(^{137}\) Dowd A23.
of. Taking Smith’s multiple identities into account reveals how the experience reawakened her own sense of double consciousness, changed her attitude about the culture of American politics, and gave her first-hand experience with doubleness of language, which Smith describes:

I’m less innocent [after *House Arrest*], less optimistic about the potential of public space to change something. The chance anything we say will be pushed out of context is so real, and I don’t think I understood that before. If I had an interview I worried I might embarrass my mother or make my academic friends think I was stupid. Now I just accept what I say is going to be distorted.\(^{138}\)

Even more than Crown Heights or Los Angeles, Washington, D.C. illustrated for Smith how words and events have multiple meanings in and of themselves, and how those meanings can be easily distorted when communicated through the media. In *House Arrest*, both Smith and the diverse range of characters she represents are subject to this often harsh reality. Put another way, they are in a kind of house arrest of their own, not unlike Presidents, where words and actions remain under intense scrutiny and open to multiple interpretations.

Following her play which celebrates and critiques the union of politics, celebrity, and media, Smith became a bona fide mainstream celebrity herself. In 2000, she took a recurring role on NBC’s prime-time White House drama, *The West Wing*. Smith plays Dr. Nancy McNally, National Security Advisor to President Josiah Bartlet (Martin Sheen). The

\(^{138}\) Anna Deavere Smith, qtd. in Kahn, “For Anna Deavere Smith, Life is a Character Study” C1.
role turns upside-down Smith’s real-life experiences of outsider-ness as an African American woman in the political arena. As McNally, she assumes a position of tremendous authority, advising the President on such matters as countering terrorist attacks and taking up arms against foreign enemies. Smith has remarked that she is very fond of being on network television and it has made her more recognizable.\textsuperscript{139} It may be as much her newfound, expanded celebrity as it is her representation of a powerful African American female in the heart of Washington, D.C. that has made the experience so enjoyable and rewarding. Or perhaps it is that in reaching a popular television audience, Smith is discovering a new, creative way to broaden her search for American character.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

“The mission of my adult life is how to cause communication across boundaries of difference, and how to use art as part of that mission.”

The purpose of this dissertation is to provide a critical study of Anna Deavere Smith’s acclaimed series, On the Road: A Search for American Character. Focusing on the project’s thirteenth, fourteenth, and fifteenth installments, Fires in the Mirror: Crown Heights, Brooklyn and Other Identities, Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992, and House Arrest: A Search for American Character In and Around the White House, Past and Present, respectively, this study demonstrates how diversity and doubleness serve as the foundation of Smith’s dramaturgical investigation into the relationship between language, community, and character.

Smith has interviewed a wide range of individuals across the country. Her focus has been on persons whose voices have gone largely unheard within local communities, such as Crown Heights or Los Angeles, and/or the broader community of the United States. In

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collecting, editing, and performing verbatim excerpts from interviews with white, African American, Korean, Latino, and Jewish women and men, Smith’s interest in cultural diversity has played a crucial role in fulfilling the mission of *On the Road*: to make connections between the seemingly disconnected and spark productive discussion about matters of race. At the same time, doubleness must be seen as an equally important element in both text and performance. Just as the vital role of double consciousness among characters and the inherent doubleness of language and events are crucial to reading the plays, the simultaneous (double) presence of the performer and performed is essential to reading Smith’s work in production. Indeed, recognizing Smith’s presence and how her character generates meaning is a crucial step in understanding this trio of documentary plays.

Smith’s ability to immerse herself into riot-torn communities and volatile situations, gather detailed information and multiple perspectives, and fashion dramas from interviews is an attribute for which she has received much praise in both theatrical and political circles. Carol Martin argues that it is Smith’s unique presence which allows for diversity to be represented and fruitful conversation to take place across boundaries of difference:

> 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 the chance to speak as if to each other - in much the same way a ‘spirit doctor’ brings ancestors or other

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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.³

Martin’s observation is useful because it suggests that without Smith’s mediating presence, it is unlikely that persons living in tension-filled communities, such as African Americans and Hasidic Jews in Crown Heights, would ever communicate successfully, if at all, with one another. Smith’s work is progressive and powerful because it allows a community to see itself and its members to engage in conversation about issues and identities considered “other.”

While Martin does not frame Smith as a neutral and objective figure, plenty of critics who responded to *Fires in the Mirror* and *Twilight* made this leap. Smith has often been praised for maintaining a certain critical distance throughout her creative process. Reading Smith as neutral and/or objective, however, signals an incomplete analysis of the work at best or total misjudgment at worst. As interviewer, editor, playwright, and performer, Smith exerts tremendous control over what material is presented to audiences and how. Despite the fact that she incorporates a diverse array of characters and a multiplicity of perspectives, and even her claim that she merely represents character by repeating what somebody has said to her, Smith cannot help but bring her own values to the text and performance, as Ryan M. Claycomb observes:

> [Smith] hides her own subjectivity in both the guise of objectivity and in the multiplicity of voices she embodies [. . .] Smith implicates her audience in

radical political activity not through the substantial rhetoric of her own words, but in the formal positioning that forces them to grapple with difference. [...] Smith’s rhetoric chooses sides while seeming not to, and at the very least, she employs an implicit value structure that gives greater voice to the disempowered than the empowered, which is itself a political shift from the norm. This shift, then, represents a de facto stance, perhaps less importantly on the crises themselves, but clearly on how these crises should be approached.4

As Claycomb points out, by virtue of constructing plays in which audiences must confront issues of difference, Smith’s dramaturgy is necessarily, and politically, charged. In conducting interviews with the persons she did and editing their verbatim responses in the manner she has, Smith’s fingerprints on the dramatic material are evident. Far from being apolitical or objective, her work offers a distinct point of view from which the Crown Heights and Los Angeles riots and the relationship between the American Presidency and the media should be seen: that is, from the perspective of the unseen/unheard. This approach is not inconsistent with Smith’s intentions for On the Road. Indeed, Smith has remarked that in investigating and re-presenting an event, she focused on “what didn’t happen”5 and tried to tell the story “from various points of view and to find things the media didn’t.”6 In this way, Smith creates what Henry Louis Gates, Jr. calls

4 Ryan M. Claycomb, “(Ch)oral History: Documentary Theatre, the Communal Subject and Progressive Politics,” Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism xvii.2 (Spring 2003): 115.

counternarratives, or “the means by which groups contest [. . .] dominant reality and the fretwork of assumptions that supports it.” By telling stories that went untold and giving voice to characters that went unheard, Smith offers alternative, lesser-known points of view and challenges commonly held assumptions about such events as the Crown Heights and Los Angeles riots. This stands in stark contrast with much of the critical response surrounding *Fires in the Mirror* and *Twilight*, where a number of critics failed to account for Smith’s shaping of the individual stories and infusing meaning into the plays’ broader narratives.

*On the Road* was born out of Smith’s goal to experiment with language and character, and her desire to pursue an anti-Method approach to acting that would allow her to travel from “self” to “other.” Smith has described her performance style in the following way:

> It’s not psychological realism. I don’t want to own the character and endow the character with my own experience. [. . .] What I’m ultimately interested in is the struggle. The struggle that the speaker has when he or she speaks to me, the struggle that she or he has to sift through language to come through. Somewhere I’m probably also leaving myself room as a performer to struggle and come through.\(^8\)

The “room” to which Smith alludes is the space where her own character becomes an integral part of the text and performance. She is not only the facilitator of conversations

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\(^8\) Anna Deavere Smith, qtd. in Carol Martin, “Anna Deavere Smith: The Word Becomes You” 52.
across boundaries of difference that she seeks to engender. Smith is a integral part of those conversations. This is evident in the theatricality of the plays, particularly those moments where characters call to her and when Smith asserts her own presence and identity. These moments of double vision, according to Rachel Kranz, where “we have the illusion of seeing the people she portrays, and yet know that we are seeing only her,”9 heighten our sense of standing in for Smith. This further emphasizes that Smith is hardly invisible or neutral in her work. On the contrary, behind the characters and technical virtuosity of her performance lurks an equally important character who generates critical meaning: Smith herself.

Smith’s methodology involves repeating words exactly as they were said to her, capturing the interviewee’s vocal patterns and physical mannerisms. This tactic does not render Smith impotent, an empty and neutral vessel through which the character may travel. Rather, she brings to bear her own understanding of the character and his or her point of view in performance, informed by her experience of having conducted the interview. This is a critical reason why some believe Smith is the best performer of her work. Furthermore, as Tania Modleski notes, “repetition is always repetition with a difference.”10 By selecting only verbatim portions of interviews and then editing these together, Smith brings a level of meaning to the monologues that would not exist if they

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stood alone and in their entirety. By repeating the speeches as she does, Smith necessarily adds a level of “difference” to the work.

On the Road: A Search for American Character project has made significant contributions to social and political progress and theatrical experimentation in the United States for more than two decades. Anna Deavere Smith has become a towering figure in contemporary American theatre whose work is regularly anthologized and studied in theatre curricula. Her celebrity has catapulted her to new projects as well, including film and television. But that her roots remain squarely in the theatre is supported by the new project she has in mind. Following House Arrest, Smith accepted an invitation to join the faculty of the Yale University Medical School and create a piece based on her interviews with physicians, hospital administrators, and patients. The play remains in development and Smith, in a presentation made to approximately 400 undergraduate and graduate students at The Ohio State University in April 2005, remarked that it will be about “what happens to our bodies between the time we are born and the time we die.” Whatever shape or form the play ultimately takes, its scope will clearly be broad, not unlike House Arrest. In focusing on the most fundamental aspects of the human experience – life and death – Smith will explore the character of the caring culture in America. It is an appropriate next step in her evolution as an artist, particularly in light of her commitment to exploring how language reveals character and how individuals do and do not communicate with one another during times of crisis and change.

The plays that constitute the *On the Road* project remain difficult to categorize. From performance art to journalism to anthropology, the various labels which have been assigned to Smith aptly reflect the diverse nature of her dramas. Perhaps Clyde Taylor best captures the multifaceted essence(s) of Smith’s playwriting:

[Smith’s plays] are one-person theater pieces, but they are not one-person theater pieces either. They convey information rather like a documentary film, but differently. They resemble perhaps a journalistic collage, but they are not quite that either. They approach political analysis, but then they do something else. [. . .] a fascination with storytelling is part of the mix; there is poetry; and there is a love of language [. . .]\(^{12}\)

The acting editions of *Fires in the Mirror: Crown Heights, Brooklyn and Other Identities*, *Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992*, and *House Arrest: A Search for American Character In and Around the White House, Past and Present* acknowledge the slipperiness of categorizing the plays. On the back covers of each text, Dramatists Play Service includes an unusual notation for potential producers of the plays: “1W (Flexible Casting).” This is the publisher’s way of indicating that cast sizes may vary from one woman, a la Smith, to any variable combination of male and female actors. The “1W” looms large, of course, as some have argued that Smith has given definitive performances of the plays. At the same time, though, the “Flexible Casting” echoes in a more freeing way the diversity inherent in Smith’s dramaturgy. Hers is a study of the multiplicity of ways that Americans of different ages, genders, races, ethnicities, cultures, and religious backgrounds think, behave, and

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speak to one another. Together, “1W (Flexible Casting)” recognizes Smith’s crucial role in
this inquiry and, at once, encourages new possibilities and further exploration by others.
More than a mere casting suggestion, this unique notation confirms that Anna Deavere
Smith’s search for American character is ongoing. It is flexible. It is in motion. It is on the
road.
APPENDIX A

CHRONOLOGIES
August 19, 1991

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

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

August 20

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

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

  - Yosef Lifsh leaves the United States for Israel.

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

August 21

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

  - Rioting continues and several stores are looted.

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

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1 Published in the 1993 Anchor Books edition of *Fires in the Mirror: Crown Heights, Brooklyn and Other Identities*.
• New York mayor David Dinkins and New York police Commissioner Lee Brown visit Crown Heights to urge peace, but both are silenced by rocks and bottles and insults.

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

**August 22**

• Rioting continues.

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

**August 24**

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

**August 26**

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

**September 5**

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

**September 17**

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

**January 26, 1992**

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

**April 5**

• Lubavitchers demonstrate outside City Hall to mourn Yankel Rosenbaum and demand more arrests in connection with his slaying.
April 13

- Brooklyn district attorney Charles Hynes says that it is unlikely there will be more arrests in connection with the death of Yankel Rosenbaum.

October 29

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


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

October 30

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

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

November 15

- Despite Governor Cuomo’s assertion that Mayor Dinkins is being unfairly blamed for Rosenbaum’s death and the unrest in Crown Heights, the Hasidic community continues to harshly criticize the mayor for his handling of the riots.

November 17

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

November 25

- In a locally televised speech, Mayor Dinkins defends his role in the Crown Heights disturbances.
December 3

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

April 30, 1993

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

July 21

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

TIME LINE, MARCH 1991-OCTOBER 1993

1991

March 3

- Los Angeles Police officers beat, subdue, and arrest Rodney G. King. George Holliday, a resident of a nearby apartment, captures the beating on videotape and distributes it to CNN and other stations; it is soon seen around the world.

March 6

- Police Chief Daryl F. Gates calls beating an “aberration.” Community leaders call for Gates’s resignation.

March 7

- King is released after the district attorney’s office announces there is not enough evidence to file criminal charges.

March 15

- Four Los Angeles police officers – Sergeant Stacey C. Koon and officers Laurence M. Powell, Timothy E. Wind, and Theodore J. Briseno – are arraigned on felony charges stemming from the King beating.

March 16

- A store security camera records the fatal shooting of fifteen-year-old Latasha Harlins, an African-American girl, by Korean-American Soon Ja Du in a South Los Angeles liquor store.

March 26

- The four police officers charged in the King beating plead not guilty. Soon Ja Du is arraigned on one count of murder.

March 28

- Records show that $11.3 million was paid to victims of police brutality by the city of Los Angeles in 1990 to resolve police abuse cases.

April 1

- In response to the King beating, Mayor Tom Bradley appoints a commission, headed by former deputy secretary of state Warren Christopher, to investigate the Los Angeles Police Department.

April 4

- The Los Angeles Police Commission places Gates on sixty-day leave.

April 5

- The city council orders the reinstatement of Gates.

April 7

- Gates takes disciplinary action against the four criminally charged officers. He fires probationary officer Timothy Wind and suspends the other three without pay.

May 10

- A grand jury decides not to indict any of the nineteen officers who were bystanders at the beating. The police department later disciplines ten of them.

July 9

- The Christopher Commission report is released; it suggests Gates and the entire Police Commission step down.

July 10

- Gates strips Assistant Chief David D. Dotson of his command after he complained openly of the chief’s record in disciplining officers.

July 16

- The Police Commission orders Gates to reinstate Dotson.
July 22

- Gates announces he will retire in 1992.

July 23

- The State Second District Court of Appeal orders the trial of the four LAPD officers moved out of Los Angeles County.

September 30

- The prosecution in the Soon Ja Du-Latasha Harlins trial begins its case.

October 1

- The police commission approves the vast majority of the 129 reform recommendations issued by the Christopher Commission.

October 11

- The jury in Soon Ja Du’s case returns a verdict: Du is found guilty of voluntary manslaughter.

November 6

- The Los Angeles City Council approves spending $7.1 million to settle claims of police brutality and excessive force. Total payments for the year exceed $13 million.

November 15

- Compton Superior Court Judge Joyce A. Karlin sentences Soon Ja Du to five years probation, four hundred hours of community service, and a five-hundred-dollar fine for the shooting death of Latasha Harlins. State Senator Diana Watson said, “This might be the time bomb that explodes.”

November 26

- Judge Stanley M. Weisberg chooses Simi Valley in neighboring Ventura County as the new venue for the trial of the officers charged in the King beating.

November 29

- LAPD officers fatally shot a black man, prompting a standoff with more than one hundred residents of the Imperial Courts housing project in Watts.
1992

February 3

• Pretrial motions begin in the trial of the four LAPD officers accused of beating Rodney King.

March 4

• Opening arguments begin in the King trial. None of the twelve jurors is African-American.

March 17

• Prosecuting attorneys rest in the King trial.

April 3

• Officer Briseno testifies that King never posed a threat to the LAPD officers.

April 16

• Willie L. Williams, police commissioner in Philadelphia, is named to succeed Gates.

April 29

• The jury returns not-guilty verdicts on all charges except one count of excessive force against Officer Powell; a mistrial is declared on that count alone. The verdict is carried live on television. Over two thousand people gather for a peaceful rally at First AME Church in South-Central Los Angeles. Violence erupts. Police dispatches relay reports of head wounds, vandalism, and burglary in an ever-widening radius. Reginald Denny is yanked from his truck cab and beaten unconscious at the intersection of Florence and Normandie; the incident is captured on video. Mayor Bradley declares a local emergency. Governor Pete Wilson calls out the National Guard. Fires break out over twenty-five blocks of central Los Angeles.

April 30

• Bradley imposes a curfew for the entire city. Restricts the sale of gasoline, and bans the sale of ammunition. The Justice Department announces it will resume an investigation into possible civil rights violations in the King beating. Retail outlets are looted and/or burned in South Los Angeles, Koreatown, Hollywood, Mid-Wilshire, Watts, Westwood, Beverly Hills, Compton, Culver City, Hawthorne, Long Beach, Norwalk, and Pomona.
May 1

• More than a thousand Korean-Americans and others gather at a peace rally at Western Avenue and Wilshire Boulevard.

May 2

• Clean-up crews hit the streets and volunteers truck food and clothing into the hardest hit neighborhoods. Thirty thousand people march through Koreatown in support of beleaguered merchants, calling for peace between Korean-Americans and blacks. Mayor Bradley appoints Peter Ueberroth to head the Rebuild LA effort. President Bush declares Los Angeles a disaster area.

May 3

• The Los Angeles Times reports 58 deaths; 2,383 injuries; more than 7,000 fire responses; 12,111 arrests; 3,100 businesses damaged. The South Korean Foreign Ministry announces it will seek reparations for Korean-American merchants who suffered damages during the unrest.

May 4

• With troops guarding the streets, Los Angeles residents return to work and school. Twenty to forty thousand people have been put out of work because their places of business were looted or burned. In violation of long-standing policy, LAPD officers cooperate with the Immigration and Naturalization Service and begin arresting illegal immigrants suspected of riot-related crimes. Suspects are turned over to the INS for probable deportation.

May 6

• President Bush receives a telegram from Representative Dana Rohrabacher (Republican, Huntington Beach) demanding quick deportation of illegal immigrants arrested during the riots.

May 8

• Federal troops begin to pull out from Los Angeles. The Crips and Bloods (the two major gangs in Los Angeles) announce plans for a truce.
May 11

- Los Angeles Board of Police Commissioners appoints William H. Webster, former director of both the FBI and the CIA, to head a commission to study the LAPD’s performance during the civil unrest.

May 12

- Damian Williams, Antoine Miller, and Henry K. Watson are arrested for the beating of Reginald Denny on April 29. Gary Williams surrenders to police later that day. They quickly become known as the L.A. Four.

May 16

- Led by mayors of many of the nation’s largest cities, tens of thousands of protesters demonstrate in the nation’s capital demanding billions of federal dollars in vast urban aid.

May 19

- A mistrial is declared in the case of a Compton police officer accused of fatally shooting two Samoan brothers a total of nineteen times, mostly in their backs. The jury was deadlocked nine to three in favor of acquittal.

May 21

- Damian Williams, Henry K. Watson, and Antoine Miller are arraigned on thirty-three charges for offenses against thirteen motorists at the intersection of Florence and Normandie, including the attack on Reginald Denny. Bail is set at $580,000 for Williams, $500,000 for Watson, and $250,000 for Miller. None is able to post bail.

May 25

- Korean grocers and leaders from the Bloods and Crips meet to discuss an alliance.

May 30

- Chief Gates steps down. Willie Williams is sworn in.

July 7

- Korean-American protesters are pelted with office supplies tossed from city hall windows during seventeenth day of protests over poor treatment from government officials since the riots.
September 24

- Mayor Tom Bradley announces that he will not seek reelection the following June.

October 17

- The Webster Commission reports that deficiencies in the LAPD leadership led to failure to respond quickly to April’s civil unrest.

November 10

- The trial date for defendants in the Reginald Denny beating is set for March 15, 1993.

November 17

- The Black-Korean Alliance members vote to disband.

December 14

- The intersection of Florence and Normandie flares again as the Free the L.A. Four Defense Committee protests at the site of Denny’s beating.

1993

January 22

- Superior Court Judge John W. Ouderkirk dismisses ten charges against the defendants in the L.A. Four case, including charges of torture and aggravated mayhem. The charges of attempted murder stand.

February 3

- The federal civil rights trial against the four police officers begins.

April 7

- Judge Ouderkirk grants the defense in the Reginald Denny case additional time for preparation.

April 17

- The verdicts are returned in the federal King civil rights trial. Officers Briseno and Wind are acquitted. Officer Powell and Sergeant Koon are found guilty of violating Rodney King’s civil rights.
May 21

• Peter Ueberroth resigns as cochairman of Rebuild L.A.

August 4

• Sergeant Koon and Officer Powell are each sentenced to thirty-month prison terms.

August 19

• The much-anticipated Reginald Denny beating trial begins in Los Angeles. Damian Williams, twenty, and Henry K. Watson, twenty-nine, are charged with a list of crimes including attempted murder of Reginald Denny and others in South Central near the corner of Florence and Normandie.

September 28

• Final arguments begin in the Denny trial.

October 11

• Judge Ouderkirk dismisses a juror for “failing to deliberate as the law defines it.” The juror is replaced with an alternate.

October 12

• Judge Ouderkirk removes a second juror, who asked to be excused for personal reasons, from the jury in the Reginald Denny trial.

October 18

• Damian Williams and Henry Keith Watson are acquitted of many of the counts against them.

December 7

• Damian Williams sentenced to a maximum of ten years in prison for attacks on Reginald Denny.
APPENDIX B

HOUSE ARREST INTERVIEWEES
“The following people were interviewed for this project. Although many of them are not included in the text of *House Arrest: An Introgression*, their words and time are appreciated and helped influence how the work was formed.”

Jill Abramson  
Bella Abzug  
Rosalind Allen  
Jonathan Alter  
Eric Alterman  
Professor Martin Anderson  
R.W. Apple  
Kenneth J. Arrow  
Leo Artalejo  
Bernard Asbell  
William C. Ayers  
Dr. Gloria Jackson Bacon  
Bernard Bailyn  
Peter Baker  
Russell Baker  
Sol Balcourta  
Vera Banton  
Shadi Bartsch  
Gary L. Bauer  
Rita Beamish  
Paul Begala  
Flip Benham  
William Bennett  
Rebecca Benoit  
Richard L. Berke  
Tom Bettag  
Homi Bhabha  
Jayne Biehn  
France B. Black  
Anthony Blankley  
Stacy Bloom  
David Bode  
Sophie Bouchet  
Ben Bradlee  
Bill Bradley

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1 This note, and the list of interviewees, was originally published in the program for the Mark Taper Forum’s production of *House Arrest: An Introgression* (Los Angeles, April 1999). It was subsequently reprinted in the *Playbill* for the Joseph Papp Public Theater’s production of *House Arrest: A Search for American Character In and Around the White House, Past and Present* (New York City, March 2000).
Ed Bradley
David Brady
Rita Braver
Karen Breslau
Alan Brinkley
Donna Britt
David Broder
Richard Brody
William C. Brown
Rebecca Brown
Bay Buchanan
Cynthia Burgess
Johnnie M. Burgess
Mayor Dennis R. Burian
Ken Burns
President George Bush
Judith Butler
Minnie Butler
Michael A. Caddell
Manuela Cadena
Blese Canty
Diana Carlitz
Graydon Carter
James Carter
President Jimmy Carter
James Carville
Red Cavany
Sister Cornelia Chavers
Masazuma Chaya
Farai Chideya
Eleanor Clift
President Bill Clinton
Rev. William Coleman
Jean Francois Conte
Toni Cook
Wanda Cornish
Katie Couric
Professor Maurice Crane
Michael Deaver
Mollie Dickinson
Ralph Dileone
E.J. Dionne
Bernadine Dorn
Bob Dole
Sam Donaldson
Sister Judy Donovan
Natalie Duhamel
Michael Dukakis
Barbara Ehrenreich
Osborn Elliot
Francesca Engler
Molly Engler
Ignacio Escandon
John Esquivel
Mark Fabiani
Susan Faludi
Robert Felder
Dr. Marc Feldman
Howard Fineman
Marlin Fitzwater
Patrick Flack
James Flournoy
Andre Fontaine
Dr. Eugene Foster
Matthew Francis
Barney Frank
Michael Frisby
Rose Garcia
Leonard Garment
David Gergen
Jack Germond
Carolyn Gitteridge
Doris Kearns Goodwin
Annette Gordon-Reed
Don Graham
Dennis Green, Jr.
Dennis Green, Sr.
Jeff Greenfield
Jennifer Grossman
Lani Guinier
Thomas Gutierrez
Albert Hale
Norman Hammond
Gary Hart
Tom Hayden
Tee Henderson
Alexis Herman
Jane Hickie
Anita Hill
Christopher Hitchens
Deacon John Hodge
Lilia Holguin
Amory Houghton
Priscilla Dewey Houghton
Dolores Huerta
Arianna Huffington
Al Hunt
David Henry Hwang
Gwen Hill
Michael Isikoff
Bessie Jackson
Jesse Jackson, Jr.
The Rev. Jesse Jackson
Paulette Jenkins
Peter Jennings
Barbara Johnson
Latonda Johnson
Jackie Judd
Marilyn Katz
David Kendall
David Kennedy
Roger Kennedy
Larry Kidwell
Dan King
Randall J. King
Penny Kiser
Ted Koppel
Amy Kostanecki
Bernard Kouchner
William Kristol
Charles Lambroschini
Gwen Knight Lawrence
Jacob Lawrence
Anastacia Ledesma
Cynthia Levering
Ann Lewis
John Lewis
Leon Litwack
Henry Lopez
Marie Lopez
Rose Lopez
Dwight Lowe
Robert Maass
Rev. Terrance Mackey
Gaetana Mammo
Jane Marcus
Yolanda Martinez
Pablo E. Matta
Jane Mayer
Kevin McCarthy
Dr. Francine McCauley
Claudia McClain
Mike McCurry
Michael McQueen
Lucien Melese
Tanya Melich
David C. Mendoza
John Metz
Cheryl Mills
Janice Mirikitani
Andrea Mitchell
Louis P. Montague
Donald Moore
Edmund Morris
Bill Moyers
Verna Mullen
Ammie Murray
Lissa Muscatine
Dee Dee Myers
Susie Nam
David Nash
Bill Nelson
Ken Noble
Christine Nollen
Peggy Noonan
Charlotte Northern
Ann Northrup
Kristene O’Dell
Christine O’Donnell
Lisa Ann M. Omoto
Erique Orsenna
Manny Pacillas
Nell Painter
Brian Palmer
Marianna Parroquin
Hernan Pazmino
William Peck
Charles Phan
Bill Plante
Maricela Ponce
Betsy Porch
Jody Powell
Cy Prince
Todd Purdum
Paul Rabinow
Bonnie Raitt
Robert Redford
Ralph Reed
Ann Richards
Sherri Rideout
Jeanette Riel
Paul Rivas
Marla Romosoh
Andy Rosenthal
Robert Saentz
Nabeebah Sakur
Monica Samuels
Phyllis Schlafy
Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr.
Sunny Schwartz
Tanya Selvaratnum
Donna Shalala
Walter Shapiro
Stanley Sheinbaum
Rev. Louis Sheldon
David Shipley
Deacon Willie Simmons
Rev. J.T. Simmons
Sandra W. Smith
Terry Smith
Olympia Snowe
Alicia Solis
Susan Sontag
Gene Sperling
Art Spiegelman
Butch Spires
Robin Sproul
Lucia (Cinder) Stanton
Gloria Steinem
George Stephanopoulos
Gunther Stock
Tyboria Stones
Lt. Summerville-Jones
Rich Tafa
Sheila Tate
John Taylor
Bob Teague
Studs Terkel
Helen Thomas
Rusty Thomas
Dan Tripp
Walter Trohan
Richard Tromka
Teodora Trujillo
Tom Turnipseed
Owen Ullman
Mihai Ursachi
Nestor Valencia
David Valladolid
Dalissa Vargas
Ann Vassaly
Maria Verel
Jorge F. Villa
Chris Vlasto
Diana Walker
Mike Wallace
Pastor Maxwell Washington
Omar Wasow
Alice Waters
Maxine Waters
Rev. Elijah C. Weaver
Hayden White
Kevin White
Robert White
Christine Todd Whitman
Maggie Williams
Patricia Williams
Rev. Cecil Williams
Gracie Wilson
Eddie Wong
Judy Woodruff
Bob Woodward
Frank Wu
Bobby Zarem
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REVIEWS OF FIRES IN THE MIRROR: CROWN HEIGHTS, BROOKLYN AND OTHER IDENTITIES


**REVIEWS OF *TWILIGHT: LOS ANGELES, 1992***


REVIEWS OF *HOUSE ARREST*


WORKS BY ANNA DEAVERE SMITH


