

**“The True Words of Real People”:  
Documenting the Myth of the Real in Anna  
Deavere Smith’s *Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992***

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Do I contradict myself?  
Very well then, I contradict myself,  
(I am large, I contain multitudes.)  
(Walt Whitman “Song of Myself”)

“Have you met Anna?” ...  
“Oh, yeah, she’s the sister who wants to take my words.”  
(Sista Solja)<sup>1</sup>

I.

For almost anyone interested in issues of representation, agency, and voice, the solo work of American playwright and performer Anna Deavere Smith is likely to hold an irresistible if troublesome attraction. Using an uncanny ability to imitate others’ gestures and speech as her method and carefully selected verbatim accounts gathered in interviews as her scripts, in the 1980s and 90s Smith created one-woman shows in which she scrutinized American communities and historical events by enacting the experiences of the individuals who participated in them. Each of these solo performance pieces were a part of her larger ongoing investigation of the relationship between language and subjectivity entitled *On the Road: A Search for American Character*.<sup>2</sup>

The original impetus behind Smith’s distinctive acting technique stemmed from two main sources: the first was her growing interest in experimenting with the relationship between speech rhythms and the construction and representation of individual identity. The second was her dissatisfaction, both as a teacher and a performer, with methods of acting in which performers drew upon their own experiences as their

primary sources of dramatic characterization (“Introduction” *Fires* xxiii–vii). In the early stages of the research that would lead to *On the Road*, Smith and her drama students explored the relationship of voice and self by having the students restage celebrity interviews from talk shows and approach strangers on the street with an offer for them to see themselves “performed” by actors in exchange for their giving an interview (Richards 40). Smith created the exercises as a way to encourage students to “become the other” and move beyond the limits of their own frames of reference (xxix–xxx). Soon, however, Smith began to work out her theories by portraying interview subjects herself.

In these first interviews and performances, Sandra L. Richards explains, Smith attempted to draw out “those moments when language breaks down into vocal utterances, lapses in syntax, markedly altered rhythms, or repetitions that betray the individual’s great investment in what is being said” (40–41). As her interest shifted from portraying individuals to portraying groups of individuals who were members of the same community, Smith’s focus shifted to identifying and portraying those instances in the interviews when her subjects struggled to express their ideas clearly. Marking this transition Smith notes, “I knew that by portraying another person’s language, it was possible to portray what was invisible about that individual. It struck me that this could work on a social level as well as an individual level. Could language also be a photograph of what was unseen about society just as it reflects what is unseen about an individual?” (“Introduction” *Fires* xxxii–xxxiii).

From 1982 to 1992, Smith created sixteen one-woman shows in which she looked at “the unseen” in different academic and organizational communities by interviewing people suggested to her by community leaders and other interview subjects. She then edited, arranged, and performed excerpts of the interviews for the community’s members (Richards 36; Smith “Anna Deavere” 46–47). By juxtaposing a series of two- to three-minute excerpts, Smith created one-hour performance montages that mirrored to communities such as Princeton University, The Woman and Theater Program, and The Rockefeller Foundation their own opinions, strengths, and shortcomings using the words and gestures of their own members. A few of these pieces were

developed specifically for theater audiences but, more frequently, they were commissioned by groups interested in examining their own social dynamics and opinions (Richards 36–37).

The piece that brought Anna Deavere Smith to national attention, however, was *Fires in the Mirror: Crown Heights Brooklyn and Other Identities* (1992, 1993). *Fires* was Smith's exploration of a three-day race riot that took place between the Lubavitcher Jewish community (an Orthodox Jewish sect) and the largely Caribbean-immigrant Black community of Crown Heights, Brooklyn in August of 1991. The riot was sparked by the killing of Gavin Cato, a young black boy from Guyana, and the injuring of his cousin, Angela, by an automobile carrying the Lubavitcher community's spiritual leader and the subsequent retaliatory murder of Yankel Rosenbaum, a twenty-nine year-old Hasidic scholar visiting from Australia, by a group of young black men ("Introduction" *Fires* xliii).

For two weeks Smith interviewed members from both Crown Heights communities, as well as race critics and activists such as Nzotake Shange, the Reverend Al Sharpton, Angela Davis, and Letty Cottin Pogrebin. From these interviews Smith selected and performed twenty-nine excerpts that displayed both the deep-seated divisions and unexpected connections among the different accounts of the causes and events of the riot. Like her other *On the Road* pieces, *Fires* attempted to bring to the foreground both the ways social categories and discourses of difference structured individual perceptions and the intimate connections that exist between the spoken word, individual identity, and social power.<sup>3</sup>

Audience and critical responses to *Fires* were wildly enthusiastic. Smith was hailed as a theatrical tour-de-force who "turn[ed] headlines into pure drama" (*New York Daily News*), and as a virtuosic talent who was one of the few performers creating anything new in theater (Spaulding Gray).<sup>4</sup> *Fires* itself was deemed "the most significant artistic exploration of Black-Jewish relations in our time" (West xvii) and was awarded the Obie, Drama Desk, and Lucille Lortel awards, was short listed for the Pulitzer Prize, and was turned into a nationally broadcast production by PBS for *American Playhouse* (Smith, "Interview" 360; Smith, "A Fire" 35).

The most consistent (and, in terms of this examination, the most interesting) thread that ran through audience and critical responses to *Fires* was the astonished and heartfelt conviction that Smith—a light-skinned, African American woman—had been able objectively and accurately to recreate the singular experiences and subjectivities of an entire spectrum of men, women, Jews, Blacks, rich, poor, young, old, scholars, housewives, and street rappers. Smith's interviewing methodology was believed by her audiences to set her work apart from that of other solo artists such as Spaulding Gray and Whoopie Goldberg whose shows also offered critiques of contemporary U.S. society. Unlike Gray, she did not recount and enact experiences from her own life, but from the lives of others (Smith "Brecht's 'Street Scene'" 52); unlike Goldberg, those others were not fictional characters, they were living individuals. In audience members' minds, this lent Smith's performance pieces a unique representational authority. *Fires* was alternately referred to as "enacted oral history," "performed interviews," "a linguist near-image," "postmodern theater for development," "hypernaturalistic mimesis," "Brechtian epic gestus," and "docudrama" (Richards 35; Smith, "Anna Deavere" 45, Reinelt 609). David Richards of *The New York Times* described Smith herself as "a documentary film maker who has simply decided to dispense with the camera,"<sup>5</sup> while Brechtian critic Carl Weber claimed Smith had made herself "the medium through which voices of her contemporaries appear before the audience" (Smith "Brecht's 'Street Scene'" 52).

Similar praise for Smith's ability to reproduce "the true words of real people"<sup>6</sup> followed the premiere of her next work, *Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992* (1993, 1994), a commissioned piece in which she examined the history, incidents, and controversies surrounding the four-day uprising that occurred in Los Angeles, California after the criminal acquittal of the four white police officers videotaped beating African-American motorist Rodney King. By now, Smith was being widely hailed as "a brilliant living documentary" (Rose D-1). In fact, her methodology and her work were seen as so objective and as so closely referencing "the Real," that the 1994 Pulitzer Prize nominating committee refused to consider *Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992* a work of dramatic fiction at all, and elimi-

nated Smith from their list of prize candidates. This dismissal did not stop the directors of the MacArthur Foundation from granting Smith a “genius” award in 1996, or from asserting that “[h]er work has advanced performance theory and introduced a new way for the theater to reflect, and reflect upon, society” (“Barbara Block” par. 4).

Such critical and audience responses to her work strongly echoed Smith’s personal performance goals. By portraying races and genders that her own status as an African American woman would preclude her from playing in realistic dramas, she sought to encourage her audiences to interrogate their own assumptions about the relations between external appearance and internal subjectivity (Smith “Brecht’s ‘Street Scene’” 56). By putting on stage “people who aren’t normally portrayed in the American theater or in the media,” she hoped to create a greater sense of dialogue and community, “to use the fact of physical presence to create a way that strangers can come close [to each other]” (56). What fascinated the audiences that praised Smith’s work as “enacted oral history” and “hypernaturalistic mimesis” was that Smith seemed to be capable of portraying those new characters and communities in and of her self.

Not everyone, however, had unqualified praise for Smith’s *Twilight*. Members of some of the ethnic groups portrayed in *Twilight* felt she was “harder” on them than on other groups, and some critics felt that she failed to adequately represent important populations such as actual looters (Suntree 114) and the Hispanic underclass (Villarreal 111). Other critics, such as Judith Hamera, were made uncomfortable by the fact that Smith did not overtly reveal her own opinions regarding the 1992 disturbance (116). What is interesting about such comments is that they were not so much criticizing Smith’s *methodology* as her results. In these critiques there is the underlying implication that, had Smith’s performance been more balanced and/or inclusive, it would have successfully represented “the Real.” Comments such as Sista Solja’s, which assert that Smith’s methodology represents an oppressive form of appropriation, were greatly in the minority. For the vast majority of Smith’s audience members and critics, Smith’s interviewing techniques represented her work’s greatest strength, rather than a potential weakness or act of appropriation.<sup>7</sup>

II.

What exactly did critics and audiences think they were seeing when they attended one of Smith's performances? What was the source of the performances' purported epistemic authority? Did Smith fulfill her goal of integrating oppressed peoples into drama or did her pieces appropriate the voices of those she interviewed, thus recreating the oppressive dynamics she claims she was attempting to interrogate? To answer these and related questions, in this examination I look at Smith's work and its reception as manifestations of the "trope of the informant/informee relationship," a paradigm of knowledge, identity, and difference that, I assert, dominates American conceptualizations and negotiations of diversity.

In contemporary American culture, the primary means by which individuals and groups gain and authenticate knowledge of those they consider "different" from themselves seems to be to seek out individuals and texts deemed representative of the difference under consideration: in essence, to seek an "informant." While the traditional anthropological understanding of an informant—a member of a culture under investigation who functions as an interpreter of the "native point of view" for interested outsiders—has been subjected to sustained and intense critique within the field of anthropology,<sup>8</sup> its legacy in U.S. society at large remains a powerful epistemic and cultural trope for evoking the interactions between different identity groups.

This widespread practice in the United States of informees seeking "representative" individuals and/or texts as a means of gaining and authenticating knowledge of difference can be seen in everything from "rainbow" political cabinets and coalitions, the teaching of ethnic literatures as a means of understanding the specificities of ethnic cultures, and the public funding of "multicultural" art exhibits and performances, to the creation of "diversity" workshops on American university campuses and in American companies, the marketing and consumption of "authentic" cultural artifacts and goods, and shifts in representations of the U.S. cultural landscape from "the melting pot" to a "cultural mosaic." It is present in virtually every U. S. social arena where gaining knowledge

of different peoples is seen as a necessary component of promoting understanding and tolerance for all peoples.<sup>9</sup>

Within the context of the paradigm of the informant/informee relationship, Smith's goals, works, and reception become rich subjects of inquiry. Indeed, in her dual role as a gatherer of informant accounts and her subsequent re-presentation of those accounts to members of, and outsiders to, the identity groups under consideration, Smith can be seen as a type of "meta-informant." Certainly, her dramatic works were consumed as informant texts, believed to provide their audiences with objective knowledge about the essences and interactions of U.S. identity groups. Even more relevant to this examination than Smith's status as a meta-informant, however, are the ways in which Smith's methodology and reception bring to the foreground an unresolvable representational paradox that points directly to an aporia or point of impossibility in the informant/informee paradigm. That paradox can be summarized as follows: the more closely Smith is able to reproduce the idiosyncrasies of her subjects' actions, speech, and ideas—elements that she and her U.S. audiences believed embody the essence and uniqueness of individual subjectivity—the more those elements are revealed to be socially structured, to be separable from their origin of the individual, and to be reproducible,<sup>10</sup> *thus rendering the individual epistemologically unnecessary.*

The maintenance of this paradox, both within the reception of Smith's work and within U.S. culture as a whole depends upon a system of representation, association, and substitution that, I argue, is rhetorical in its logic. Using Smith's creation and audiences' consumption of *Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992* as a case study, I examine the logics of that system, illustrating both its efficacy and its instability as a means of negotiating the relations between representation and "the Real," and between individuals and collectivities. Ultimately, I contend, in Smith's work the informant/informee paradigm is decoupled from its premise of reference to "the Real," and is, *itself*, imbued with the authenticity and authority to which it supposedly grants access. This decoupling from referentiality and imbuing with authority represent the ultimate end-logic of the informant/informee paradigm, and reveal both its instrumentality and its

liabilities as the privileged mode of representing and negotiating difference in late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century U.S. culture.

### III.

The romanticized image that surrounds Anna Deavere Smith is that of the lone reporter/ethnographer who, armed only with a tape recorder, goes out amongst the people to make a record of their experiences as described in their own words. In truth, Smith's dramaturgic process, like the ethnographic interview paradigm with which it is often compared, is a good deal more complicated. This is especially true of the process in which Smith engaged in the creation of *Twilight*. In May of 1992, less than a month after the events that have subsequently been referred to as "the L.A. riots," the L.A. uprising," and the "L.A. civil disturbance," Smith was commissioned by Gordon Davidson, the artistic director/producer of the Los Angeles Mark Taper Forum, to create a one-woman work about those events ("Introduction" *Twilight* xvii). To aid Smith in her creative process, the Taper provided her with a car and driver, research assistants, translators, video technicians, theatrical, academic, and journalistic dramaturges, discussions with southern Californian ethnic minority focus groups, and access to the civil rights trial of the four, white police officers who were accused of beating Rodney King, and whose criminal acquittal sparked the civil disturbance (Smith "A Fire" 21–2). Given the number of people involved in and affected by the disturbance, and the "multiracial, multilingual and geographically dispersed" nature of Los Angeles's population, the task of documenting the events of that disturbance proved significantly more complex than that of documenting the events of the Crown Height riot (Wald par. 4). Over the next eight months Smith interviewed approximately two hundred people ranging from Angela King (Rodney King's aunt), author Mike Davis, and former police chief Daryl Gates, to Reginald Denny, gang members, Hollywood agents, and Korean American gunshot victims. From those two-hundred-some interviews she selected twenty-seven excerpts to portray in *Twilight's* two-hour stage production.<sup>11</sup>

At the start of the interviewing process for each of her performance pieces, Smith began with a list of names suggested to her by the pro-

ducer of the piece and/or culled from the local newspapers, and then moved on to people suggested by the interviewees themselves (Richards 36; Smith “Anna Deavere” 46).<sup>12</sup> Eventually, however, she claimed, “I [knew] very specifically what kind of person I want[ed] to meet so I [knew] what kind of person to try to find” (Smith “Anna Deavere” 46). During the course of what was usually a one-hour, audio-taped, face-to-face or telephone interview (on some occasions she also videotaped her subjects), Smith asked her interviewees to talk about their experiences of, and reactions to, the communities and events being investigated. Traces of these questions remain intelligible in the performed interviews when the subject’s response to a question is portrayed, but the questions themselves are never directly articulated. For instance, the interview excerpt of Jason Sanford, a white actor in his late twenties, begins, “Who’s they? / That’s interesting, / ’cause the they is / a combination of a lot of things” (“They” *Twilight* 21). As Janelle Reinelt points out, when Smith performed these excerpted responses, she often spoke directly to the audience, placing audience members in her position as the interviewer (613), thus encouraging them to identify with Smith and the interview process as well as with the interviewees.

During the course of an interview, Smith asserts, people will say a few “essential things,” “[i]n other words: repeatable things, things which are quite distinct, nobody could have said it like they said it” (Smith “Brecht’s ‘Street Scene’” 61). Those few instances where people “leave the cloak of language and come to the real expression” in their struggles to clearly articulate their ideas were what Smith was seeking during the entire hour:

... it is that real or essential expression I’m trying for, cutting away the rest of the scraps in there to get that. Even though somebody may have said something which is a much more eloquent narrative and would help me tell my story more quickly, it won’t be of use. What’s of more use are the bits and pieces of disconnected language with a peculiar syntax which seems to have nothing to do with the rest of the interview. (61–62)

In the performed versions of the interviews, these syntactic “ums” and pauses were readily apparent, contributing as much to the rhythm of Smith’s performance as did the words themselves. They also are visible in the way in which Smith records the interviews in the published texts of her work. In the printed version of a *Twilight* segment entitled “I Was Scared,” an anonymous young woman from the University of Southern California describes being on Greek row during the beginning of the disturbances:

I was scared to death.  
I’ve never felt as scared, as frightened, in my life.  
Um,  
and it was a different fear than I’ve ever felt.  
I mean, I was really afraid.  
At a certain point  
it dawned on us that they might try to attack the row,  
the sororities and fraternities.  
Because they did do that during the Watts riots.  
And, um, they ...  
they went  
into the house,  
where they smashed the windows.  
I don’t know how we got this information but somebody  
knew that,  
so that  
spread in the house real fast,  
and once we realized that,  
we started packing. (ellipses included “I Was Scared” 156)

Alice Rayner suggests that the form of the interviews in the text coincides “with conversational form at the level of rhythm, in what Roland Barthes might call ‘the effect of the real’ ... [t]hey do produce the effects of ‘speaking subjects’ in the intonations, efforts, rhythms, hesitations, and uncertainties of people in crisis and conversation” (5). Smith was interested in the moments where people stutter and pause, where they *fail* to say something, because she believed that, “character really exists in

the struggle to say something ... it usually ends up being a moment or a time, once I try and re-enact it, that brings me closer to what I would think of as the feeling of that person. Then I really begin to feel that it's not me, that there's somebody else in there" (Smith "A Fire" 73).

Smith's emphasis on the moment of re-enactment underscores what, in actuality, was the highly-constructed, almost tautological nature of her selection/interview process. From a myriad of potential interview subjects, Smith looked for the individuals she felt best represented the event she hoped to portray. She then selected and edited those interviews with an ear towards their ultimate performance in front of an audience. What most influenced her decisions about what/whom to include in a performance was not a commitment to demographic or historical accuracy, but "how an interview text works as a *physical, audible, performable* vehicle. Words are not an end in themselves. They are a means to evoking the character of the person who spoke them" (emphasis in original "Introduction" *Twilight* xxii–iv).

In *Twilight* this selection and editing process was even more mediated than usual because of the presence of four dramaturges—Dorinne Kondo, "a Japanese American anthropologist and feminist scholar"; Hector Tobar, "a Guatemalan-American reporter from the *Los Angeles Times* who had covered the riots"; Elizabeth Alexander, "the African American poet and University of Chicago professor"; and Oskar Eustis, "a resident director at the Taper" (xxiii)—whom Smith invited to work with her as she developed the piece. Smith asked these people to join in her creative process out of a concern that her own perspective as an African American woman would lead her to narrow the racial complexity of Los Angeles and the events of 1992 to a black-and-white struggle. In many of her interviews about *Twilight*, Smith spoke of the "battles" that occurred over the kinds of the individuals Smith chose to include in the play, and the manner in which she portrayed them. Dorinne Kondo and Hector Tobar, especially, held Smith to the fire, constantly insisting that she increase the number and the complexity of her portrayals of Asian Americans and Hispanics.

In her transition from the selecting and editing process to the performances themselves, Smith listened to the interview tapes over and

over, then practiced re-iterating (Smith's preferred term) the voice patterns, intonations, and bodily mannerisms of her subjects until she had integrated their voices and gestures "well enough to 'wear' the characters' words" (Wald par. 5). Gayle Wald maintains that Smith's approach

lends itself particularly well to highly charged media spectacles such as the Crown Heights conflict and the L.A. uprisings, precisely because these are wars of image *and* voice. A crucial part of the public spectacle that was 'L.A.' entailed the struggle of voices speaking on behalf of besieged communities to broadcast their beliefs over the steady din of talking heads reporting official estimates of property damage. (Emphasis in original par. 5)<sup>13</sup>

During staging of *Twilight*, Smith performed her interview subjects in two- to eight-minute segments. She marked transitions between characters with brief blackouts during which she added a prop or changed a costume piece such as a hat or a sweater. Transitions also were marked by short intervals of music and the projection of the interviewee's name and, sometimes, a personal description, on a screen above or off to the side of the stage: e.g., "Angela King, Rodney King's Aunt" (Rose D-1). At no time did Smith try physically to alter her identity as an African American woman; her own physical presence was readily visible. The transformations took place at the level of speech and gesture.

Regardless of one's opinion of Smith's methodology or intentions, there is no denying that her ability to create the illusion of "reiterating" another person is extraordinary.<sup>14</sup> In her earlier works, where many of the interviewees were known by audience members and in the audience themselves, spectators frequently burst out in exclamations of surprised pleasure or shocked hurt at the accuracy of Smith's portrayals (Richards 37). In larger productions such as *Fires* and *Twilight*, most of the audience members were unfamiliar with the majority of the individuals she portrayed. Sometimes, despite the projected names and descriptions, even the race and/or gender of individual interviewees was not readily apparent. However, because Smith also "became" figures in the public media such as Cornel West, Reginald Denny, Maxine Waters, and Gil

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Garcetti, figures with whom *Twilight* audiences were familiar from television and radio, they still experienced “shocks” of recognition, often with humorous results. The effect of these moments of public recognition was to encourage audience members to grant Smith’s portrayals of unknown individuals a similar authority.

In both the performed and published versions of her work, Smith’s selection and arrangement of excerpts creates the effect of intertextual moments where, on the level of content and/or delivery, the experiences and opinions of the interviewees seem to “respond” to one another. In an example of this phenomenon from *Twilight*, the rhetoric of race scholar Cornel West explains the cultural logics and costs of racial machismo:

you *tough*  
like a soldier,  
you like a, uh, military mayan,  
you, you can best,  
you’re better *thayan*, uh, these other  
military men that you’re fightin’ against,  
you can outpolice the police,  
you can outbrutalize the police brutality,  
the police who are being brutal and so forth  
and so on.  
So you’re playing exactly the same game, as it were,  
and racial *reasoning*, I think, oftentimes has been construed  
as an  
attempt of black people  
all coming together  
in order to  
both protect  
each other  
but usually the men  
who will serve as the policing agents,  
therefore the interests of black *women*  
are subordinated

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and the black men  
become the  
machismo heroes  
(emphasis in original "A Bloodstained Banner" *Twilight* 43–44)

West's view is both underscored and subverted by Sergeant Charles Duke's (LAPD's use-of-force expert for the defense witness, Simi Valley and Federal trials) description of the inadequacies of Laurence Powell, of one of the policemen charged with beating Rodney King:

So one of the things  
they keep talking about  
why did it take fifty-six baton blows.  
Powell has no strength and no power  
In his baton strikes  
The whole thing boils down to ...  
Powell was ineffective with the baton.  
You're aware  
that that night  
he went to baton training  
and the sergeant held him afterward  
because he was weak and inefficient with the baton  
training.  
That night. That night.  
He should have been taken out of the field.  
(ellipses in original "Where the Water Is" 61)

And Duke's explanation is, itself, recast by the comments of Josie Morales, an eye-witness to the beating:

I remember  
that they just not only hit him with sticks,  
they also kick him,  
and one guy,  
one police officer, even pummeled his fist  
into his face,  
and they were kicking him.

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And then we were like “O, my goodness,”  
and I was just watching.  
I felt like “Oh, my goodness”  
'cause it was really like  
he was in danger there,  
it was such  
an oppressive atmosphere.  
I knew it was wrong—  
whatever he did—  
I knew it was wrong.  
I just knew in my heart  
this is wrong—  
you know they can't do that.  
And even my husband was petrified.  
My husband said, “Let's go inside.”  
He was trying to get me to come inside  
and away from the scene,  
but I said, “No.”  
I said, “We have to stay here  
and watch  
because this is wrong.”  
And he was just petrified—  
he grew up in another country where this is prevalent,  
police abuse is prevalent in Mexico—  
so we stayed and we watched the whole thing  
 (“Indelible Substances” 66–67)<sup>15</sup>

Although gathered independently by Smith, the three interview excerpts send ironic, sometimes painful, reverberations through one another. West's discussion of the race-reasoning behind Anglo and African American brutalities—brutalities, we see by Duke's comments, that stem as much from impotence as they do from a struggle for power—suggest that Morales's husband's terror may be a more appropriate response to the scene of King's beating than is Josie's heartfelt conviction that “they can't do that.”<sup>16</sup>

As discussed earlier, the effect of Smith's wide-ranging, highly-edited portrayals was to produce, in the majority of her spectators, the conviction that she had objectively, accurately, and fully represented the people—and, hence, the event—in question. Smith, of course, did not *become* the individuals she portrayed. However, there was a strong tendency among reviewers of her work to describe Smith as if she were a transparent medium through which the unmediated voices of her interviewees can be heard. The words “medium” and “channeler” were frequently used in evaluations of her work.<sup>17</sup> Performance Studies professor Richard Schechner contended that Smith did not “act” the people on stage, she “incorporate[d]” them, she was “possessed by” them, opening herself up thoroughly and deeply to another being (63). Feminist and drama scholar Carol Martin describes Smith as “the person through whom so many voices travel,” and who gives her interviewees and her audiences “the chance to speak as if to each other—in much the same way a ‘spirit doctor’ brings ancestors or other spirits in contact with the living—in the presence of the community of the audience” (45). Similarly, reviewer Gayle Wald described Smith's performances as “magically transporting” people from south central Los Angeles and Koreatown to a theatrical stage where, “through ‘real’ physical proximity and presence,” they constructed “an imaginary—and highly intimate—conversation among ... people who will *never* share the same room together” (emphasis in original par. 10). In all of these comments there is an underlying suggestion that Smith is able to speak for, and as, the individuals she interviews. As Janelle Reinelt points out, in such responses her work is seen moving towards “an always elusive horizon of ‘Truth’” while she, herself, is constructed as “a bearer of truth, accuracy and validity” and “a privileged voice who may speak for others across race, class, and gender boundaries” (609, 611).

Beyond Smith's remarkable ability to imitate others' speech rhythms and gestures, what lends her performances their representational authority? Does that authority, as Tania Modleski asks in “Doing Justice to the Subjects: Mimetic Art in a Multicultural Society: The Work of Anna Deavere Smith,” suggest that audiences and critics are testifying “to a naive belief in the myth of presence, or to the belief in language's

function to mime or mirror a ‘pre-given reality’” (58)? Or are other assumptions and logics behind in her elevation to the status of Über-informant? Certainly, there is no doubt that Smith’s status as an African American woman contributes to that elevation. As Reinelt further observes, Smith’s racial heritage legitimizes her role as “an insider-among-the-outsiders,” while, at the same time, her light complexion makes her “specularly mobile” (614). Indeed, in an interview with Richard Stayton, Smith was asked if she thought a white male *could* perform *Fires in the Mirror* or *Twilight*, to which she replied:

That’s a fabulous question! I think that is The Question. I would like to see somebody do my show from a different race, maybe a Jewish woman or Jewish man. Which one of us could get away with more? Is there in fact a kind of license that I have, a kind of permission, because I’m black, to do Jewish people? That a Jewish woman wouldn’t have when doing a black man or a black woman? Would it be considered a stereotype? A caricature? There are certainly people who feel that what I do is caricature. And others who will say, ‘Oh, no it’s not.’ Still, nobody would get upset about it the way someone would get upset by blackface, for example. The question about who can say what, who can enact which culture, is The Question. (75)

Smith’s identification of “Who can say what?” or “Who can enact which culture?” as “The Question” surrounding her work seems accurate, but not only for reasons involving Smith’s own race and gender. Although critics and audiences liked to think of Smith as having introduced “a new way for the theater to reflect, and reflect upon, society,” in fact, her methodology and works are firmly embedded within the figural logics of the informant/informee paradigm that dominates U.S. beliefs about, and struggles regarding, “Who can say what?” and “Who can enact which culture?” It is to these logics—or, rather, illogics—that I now would like to turn. For, I contend, in Smith’s work, as in the informant/informee paradigm itself, the underlying structure of authority depends upon a series of metaphoric substitutions that are mistakenly interpreted as metonymic chains of association. By analyzing Smith’s

work and its reception as a condensed example of this mistaken rhetorical logic it becomes possible to reveal, more generally, the troubling dynamics of the informant/informee paradigm of which it is a part.

#### IV.

In Smith's work the perceived "truth" of her portrayals of communities and events stemmed from a belief that her methodology worked by means of metonymic associations; more specifically, that it worked by means of a series of synecdochal associations—metonymic relations in which a part stands in for a whole, or a whole for a part: e.g., "mouths to feed" for one's dependents; or "America" for all American citizens. However, as Hayden White explains, a synecdoche is also a discursive strategy "by which contiguous entities can be *reduced* to the status of functions of one another" (emphasis in original 253), and in which parts and wholes are viewed as elements of a totality that share the same essential natures. In synecdochal functions, the relation presumed to exist among parts and wholes, Hayden points out, is the same as that put forth "by those philosophers who speak about microcosm-macrocosm relationships" (254).

In Smith's work the multiple stages of her creative process were read as a sequence in which representative parts were used to stand in for a series of social wholes with which they were contiguous in time and space. From the macrocosm of a community or historical event, Smith selected a range of individuals whose combined subjectivities and experiences she felt represented a microcosm, or synecdoche, of the larger community or event. The whole of those individuals' subjectivities and experiences were thought to be reducible to their personal speech and bodily mannerisms, which were viewed as the synecdochal essence of their subjectivities. In turn, Smith's excerpting of those particular moments in their speech/gestures when her interviewees struggled to express themselves clearly was seen as capturing the unique essence of their speech and gestures. At each stage, a whole was simultaneously represented and reduced to a part believed to embody its essential nature: event to people, people to subjectivity and experience, subjectivity and experience to speech and gesture, speech and gesture to a moment of

individual expressive struggle. This presumably unbroken chain of contextual associations is what, in many audiences members' minds, linked Smith's performance to the referent of "the Real," and why, to borrow James Hannaham's colorful summation, Smith was celebrated as "the MacArthur genius who channeled a whole goddamn riot" (48).

The exact same rhetorical dynamics and representational paradoxes are at the heart of the informant/informee paradigm: an informant is viewed as a synecdochal microcosm of the macrocosm of his or her identity group, because he or she is believed to be contiguous with that identity group in space and time. However, this view of the relationship between individuals and collectivities is based on a number of unsustainable assumptions: first, identity groups, rather than referring to pre-existing differences, are, themselves, conceptual practices of categorization that *produce* the differences to which they supposedly *refer*. Similarly, the range of relationships individuals have to the identity groups with which they are associated, and the larger economic, political, and social structures and discourses that influence those relationships clearly illustrate that "apart from the mere possession of the identifying properties that permit assignment to the group in first place, *nothing follows about an individual from any fact, actual or alleged, about a group of which that individual is a member*" (emphasis in original Caws 377). The assumption that individuals in similar demographic positions (e.g., race, gender, class, nation) necessarily have similar experiences of those positions ignores the ways in which subjective experiences are socially constructed.

Rather than serving as synecdochal microcosms of identity groups then, within the informant/informee paradigm informants function as metaphoric substitutions for those groups—a function which is possible because, by definition, the informants belong to the same conceptual categories—"race," "ethnicity," "gender," "sexuality"—as do the groups of which they are presumably members. It is these pre-existing conceptual categories and social discourses, not material contexts and contiguities that are why individuals and identity groups appear to be synecdochally related. Despite multicultural wishes to the contrary, the metaphoric process of substitution, not the metonymic process of con-

textual association is what drives the dominant U.S. culture's use of informants to stand in for collectivities.

Because Smith's methodology appears to fit so precisely into the illogic of the informant/informee model of cultural interaction, her work was, and continues to be seen by her audiences as referencing "the Real." In fact, in Smith one finds the ultimate fantasy of the informant/informee interaction: Taken to its logical extreme, the informant/informee paradigm implies that if an individual informee were able to practice its methods of gaining knowledge of difference correctly (a knowledge defined as the correct internal representations of an external, material real), he or she would be able to understand and to reproduce those differences him or her self. Thus, after the original contact, the informant would be rendered epistemologically unnecessary. Obviously, an epistemic dynamic that masters difference by eliminating the need for those who are constructed as different is alarming, to say the least. The greatest issue at stake in Smith's work is not that she misrepresented "the Real," but that the majority of her audiences believed she provided them access to it, and to the lives of the people she seemed to represent.

Ironically, in Smith's performances, the same phenomenon that seemed to lend Smith her representational authority—her apparent ability to speak "as others"—is ultimately the very thing that undermines the informant/informee assumptions upon which it is based. The more closely Smith was able to approximate the idiosyncrasies of her subjects' actions, speech, and ideas—that is, to reproduce the apparent "essence" of those individuals—the more those essences were revealed to be socially-constructed and separable from their origin of the individual. Smith's ability to "reproduce" her interview subjects by means of reiterating their speech and gestures reveals the ways in which "discourse is not tied to an originating speaker/writer," but creates social positions "that may be inhabited by a plurality of speakers" (Lyons and Lyons 48) underscoring the instability of the visible and discursive markers U.S. society uses to assign race, gender, and class identities.

What Smith's performances and the informant/informee paradigm produce are not microcosms of "the Real," but *collections* of representations that reveal more about the power dynamic and principles of organ-

ization that generate their construction than about the material realities to which they ostensibly refer (Stewart 154). The function of a collection, Susan Stewart maintains,

is not the restoration of context of origin but rather the creation of a new context, a context standing in a metaphorical rather than a contiguous relation to the world of everyday life ... the collection is not representational. The collection presents a hermetic world: to have a representative collection is to have both the minimum and the complete number of elements necessary for an autonomous world—a world which is both full and singular, which has banished repetition and achieved authority. (152)

Smith's work, like the informant/informee paradigm, depends upon the belief that, in the "displacement of fragment for totality," one can "produce a representation which is somehow adequate to a nonlinguistic universe" (Donato 223). Those critics and audiences that praised *Fires* and *Twilight* for their depictions of historical events like the Crown Heights and Los Angeles race riots did so out of a conviction that Smith had succeeded in producing a complete and representative collection. Even those critics who condemned her work usually did so only out of a belief that her collection had left out an important identity group; they rarely condemned her "collection methods." Yet, rather than being fragments of "the Real," Smith's and other informant accounts are generated out of pre-existing principles of classification and conceptual categories of difference for which, tautologically, they are used as evidence. Ultimately, it is the informant/informee paradigm and methodologies *themselves* that are imbued with the authenticity and authority to which they supposedly grant access.

## V.

The tensions that drive and destabilize the informant/informee paradigm have to do with questions regarding the ownership and the appropriation of cultural identities; with competing agendas regarding the production and circulation of information about difference; with disa-

reements over the qualities and characteristics that should be used to determine the boundaries of different identity groups; with arguments over the ethical and material ramifications of those boundary-making processes; and with the dilemmas and the possibilities that arise when current models of identity, difference, and community are revealed to be social fictions. When Anna Deavere Smith identifies “Who can say what?” or “Who can enact which culture?” as “The Question,” she underscores the omnipresence of these tensions in contemporary multicultural societies.

It is my contention that these tensions cannot be clearly examined much less resolved using current informant/informee practices, *regardless of whether the practices stem from liberatory or repressive intentions*. The paradigm itself is flawed. For those who seek to generate, uncover, and/or teach truthful, ethical, and effective representations,<sup>18</sup> this assertion can be dismaying. It also naturally raises the question: what alternate ways of negotiating social constructions of difference can be employed?

If we are to try to move beyond the limitations of the informant/informee paradigm, the first step required is that we give up hope: hope that we will find the “real thing”; hope that, with extensive research, we will be able to select truly representative figures or texts; hope that, with the proper humility, we can avoid making overgeneralizations about the individual, text, or identity group in which we are interested; hope that the representations we generate will grant others access to our Real. We must surrender hope, essentially, that somehow we can reveal a useful stable truth that exists independently of the structures of knowledge and difference that enable us to have such hopes in the first place.

We also will need to develop a new vocabulary that will allow us to look at the interaction of individuals and collectivities in ways that cannot be reduced to or conflated with the relations of parts and wholes and that does not assume that language can “mime or mirror a ‘pre-given reality’” (Modleski 58). This new vocabulary also will require a shift of emphasis away from issues of truth (What is the nature of the Real? How do we gain access to it?) to issues of consequence (How do our practices and representations of difference harm or aid their subjects?). Such emphases fly in the face of current convictions that knowledge of otherness is

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what leads to the “tolerance” of differences, and that tolerance leads to a mutual respect which enables diverse cultures to coexist in harmonious, unified wholes (San Juan, Jr. 72). A shift away from knowledge and truth necessarily will eliminate our epistemic authority. Indeed, without pre-established practices for negotiating the relations between individuals and their identity groups, or the relations between such groups, we will find ourselves at what Smith calls “crossroads of ambiguity.” At these crossroads we are forced to do without the security of our familiar identities and authorities (*Talk to Me* 23–24). As Smith allows, these are uncomfortable places, but it is at such crossroads that we are most likely to move beyond the myth of the Real.

### Notes

1 Interview.

2 Most recently, as part of her *On the Road* series Smith has performed and published the text of *House Arrest: A Search for American Character in and Around the White House, Past and Present* (1997, 1998, 2000; Anchor Books, 2004 [along with the text of *Piano*]) and performed *Let Me Down Easy*, a play about the human body and global health care (“Anna Deavere Smith: “Let Me Down Easy”).

3 For an extended discussion of the ways in which *Fires in the Mirror* represented the relation between individuals’ subject positions and their interpretation of the events of the riot see Gregory Jay.

4 These comments are quoted on the inside cover of the published text of *Fires*.

5 Ibid.

6 “In the true words of real people” (58) is Tania Modleski’s summary of mainstream critics’ evaluation of Smith’s work.

7 There have been other types of critiques of Smith and her work. When the Taper invited Smith to come and produce a piece on the 1992 disturbance, a group of Los Angeles artists of color complained that they were in a better position “to create art about the violence that had occurred in their own communities” than was non-Los Angeles resident, Smith (Modleski 69). Drama critic Edit Villarreal, while arguing that Smith had not given the Latino underclass the voice they deserved, also asserted that, because many of Smith’s monologues in *Twilight* are of people remembering and commenting upon the events of 1992 and are in the past tense, they represent a passive and “unpolemical” picture of those events (111). In my research, I have run across far more critiques of Smith’s results than of her methods, however.

- 8 See, for example, *Anthropology and the Colonial Encounter*, Talah Asad, George E. Marcus and Dick Cushman, George E. Marcus and Michael M. J. Fischer, Steven Webster, James Clifford and George E. Marcus.
- 9 For more on ways the trope of the informant/informee relations functions in several of these arenas see Weatherston.
- 10 There are a number critics who analyze the deconstructive aspects of Smith's representations, including Attilio Favorini, Gregory Jay, Dorrine Kondo, Charles R, and James C. Lyons, Carol Martin, Tania Modleski, Martha Pacelli, Janelle Reinelt, Sandra L. Richards, Sandra Kumamoto Stanley, and Debby Thompson. What I am particularly interested in, however, are the ways in which Smith's methodology, which is firmly embedded in the informant/informee paradigm, is implicated by this paradox, and what that paradox reveals about the informant/informee paradigm more generally.
- 11 The text version of *Twilight* includes excerpts from fifty interviews (from a total of forty-seven people). In the introduction to the text version Smith writes that she hopes the additional interviews "will enrich the reader's understanding of the conflicts that erupted on April 29, 1992. For those who both see the play and read the book, I hope the book can serve as a companion to the theater experience" (xvii).
- 12 Some members of what Smith considered to be the core or grass roots community of L.A. refused to see her out of a concern about being misrepresented. A few of those same individuals later contacted Smith wanting tickets to the show and accusing her of not representing them well. Smith responded "Well, you haven't been represented because we couldn't get an interview. Why didn't you talk to us? You wouldn't talk to us.' ... I was very glad, because suddenly this thing, this play which is on the periphery of their experience, becomes important. And I think it's rare that institutional theaters are important to people at the grass roots—rare, rare, rare." (Smith "Media Killers" 108).
- 13 The media was such a significant part of the L.A. disturbances that, for the first time in her *On the Road* series, Smith included video imagery (of Rodney King's beating and of the looting and fires) in her performance. "[The] media was almost like a character during the riots," she asserts, "people relied on the media for information. Those who couldn't get any other help used the media as a vehicle for communication" (Smith "A Fire" 72).
- 14 Smith's artistic talent actually became another reason the Pulitzer Prize nominating committee decided not to consider *Twilight* for best play. In their opinion, the success of *Twilight* depended on Smith's unique acting talents, therefore could not be performed by other actors (Rayner 3). Contrary to their opinion, there have been several productions of *Fires* and *Twilight* with multi-person casts. In one such production, black actress Chrystal Bates and white actress Jennifer Mendenhall performed *Fires* as a duo, frequently playing against their

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own races. For more on this particular production see Attilio Favorini's performance review.

- 15 Because Smith continuously revises both the order and the content of her performance pieces (interviewing new people, making adaptations to fit different venues and different time constraints), it is difficult to definitively identify the list of characters and the order of their appearance for any one work. In this analysis the information regarding *Twilight* is primarily drawn from its premiere production in 1993 at the Mark Taper Forum in Los Angeles under the direction of Emily Mann, and from the text version of *Twilight* published by Anchor Books in 1994.
- 16 For further discussion of Smith's creation of intertextual resonances, see William H. Sun and Faye C. and Martha Pacelli's "Resistant Histories: Contemporary American Documentary Theatre and the Politics of Representation."
- 17 For additional examples and a more extended discussion of this tendency, see Modleski, 60–63.
- 18 This three-part breakdown of the different components and issues of representation is discussed by W.J.T. Mitchell in the introduction to his book, *Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation*. See esp. page 6.

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