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Disrupting Narratives and Narrators: A Case for Anna Deavere Smith's Work in the High School Classroom

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**DISRUPTING NARRATIVES AND NARRATORS:
A CASE FOR ANNA DEAVERE SMITH'S WORK IN THE HIGH SCHOOL
CLASSROOM.**

A culminating project submitted to the faculty of Dominican University in partial fulfillment for the Master of Arts in Humanities

By

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Abstract

Anna Deavere Smith, American actress, writer, and professor, explores racial conflicts and the nuances that contribute to dissonance and identity politics through her one-woman plays. Employing a journalistic dramatic format of her own, Smith interviews a panoply of people who play major and minor roles involving conflicts. She then brings these interviews to life on the stage. As a high English teacher, I incorporate Smith's plays *Fires in the Mirror* and *Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992* into my eleventh grade American literature class. In this paper, I explain why Smith's plays help facilitate and nurture important conversations about race for my high school students. This paper explores how Anna Deavere Smith disrupts narratives and dualistic stereotypes of racial conflicts by dramatizing salient lines from her interviews. I argue for the Smith's plays as powerful educational tools for reinforcing the relationship between knowledge and point of view and for promoting empathy.

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INTRODUCTION: Anna Deavere Smith's Art as a Tool for Change

In my high school, American literature classroom in Northern California, every unit of study I teach constellates around the idea that what we are learning is meaningful and worth knowing as conscientious human beings. Whether we are reading Ta-Nehisi Coates' *Between the World and Me*, writing about problems we see in the world that need to be changed or defining our environmental ethics, I try to impress upon my students the exigency of caring about people and the world in which we live. With the goal of broadening their perspectives, I want students to look at issues through lenses outside their comfort zones with the hope of challenging their assumptions and creating empathy. This task is challenging and has motivated me to experiment with texts and pedagogical approaches to teaching students how to see the complexity of issues and appreciate the relationship between knowledge and point of view.

I teach at a private independent school in Marin County, where the tuition is close to forty thousand dollars a year for day students and significantly more for the boarding students. While we do have a percentage of students on financial aid, most students come from upper middle class white and Chinese families. When planning my curriculum, I consider the demographics of my students. I'm always looking for texts and strategies to disrupt their narratives of the world, specifically their perceptions about racial inequality.

Over the last two years, I've started my eleventh grade English class with Chimamanda Ngozi Adiche's TED talk titled "The Danger of a Single Story." In this poignant talk, Adiche, a Nigeria born novelist who wrote *Americanah*, highlights the absolute necessity of providing young people with a range of stories to educate them

about the diverse cultures of people around the world. She speaks about the misconceptions that “Western literature” have created, but in a light-hearted tone that resonates with high school students. They appreciate her sense of humor and vulnerable stories about coming to America when she was nineteen, only to meet an American roommate who asked questions such as “where [she] learned to speak English so well” and “if she could listen to what she called [her] tribal music”? Adiche elucidates what many educators know about the formation of stereotypes and identities: students mostly know what they read and what they investigate about people outside our cultures. Their education is at the mercy of the curriculum and pop culture.

Adiche reinforces the need to educate students through many stories while empathizing with how stereotypes happen. Rather than creating distance with her audience, she explains her experiences with a clear attempt to create change. She admits:

If I had not grown up in Nigeria, and if all I knew about Africa was a place of beautiful landscapes, beautiful animals, and incomprehensible people, fighting senseless wars, dying of poverty and AIDS, unable to speak for themselves and waiting to be saved by a kind, white foreigner, I would see Africans in the same way.

(Burke 201)

Achiche connects with teenage audiences, and ever since I incorporated her TED talk into my curriculum, I’ve searched for similar authors, who create empathetic spaces for young thinkers to abandon their assumptions and examine how they frame the stories of others. Last spring I experimented with another text by Anna Deavere Smith’s called

Fires in the Mirror and noticed that the one-woman play was unusually effective in highlighting the complexity of identity and racial conflicts. The experience inspired my research of Smith's approach and why her art as a performance artist and journalist makes such a strong impact in the teenage classroom. In this paper, I examine Anna Deavere Smith's plays as pedagogical tools for exposing students to the constructions of race and identity, as well as the long-standing structural inequalities that shape our country's culture. Beginning with Cornel West's call to "understand out multilayered crisis" in *Race Matters*, and then incorporating Carlos Hoyt's research "The Pedagogy of the Meaning of Racism: Reconciling a Discordant Discourse," I make a case for Smith's performances as tools for inspiring courageous conversations about race and educating students about the nuances of privilege and personal location in the formation of identity. I will illuminate why high school students need many voices and perspectives such as the views Anna Deavere Smith provides when developing empathy for the points of view of others and navigating discussions about race and the emotionally charged questions that racial conversations precipitate.

Last year in the spring of 2017, I taught *Between the World and Me* by Ta-Nehisi Coates and *Fires in Mirror* by Anna Deavere Smith. At the end of our year, I was pleased with both texts for representing voices they had never heard and providing opportunities for discussions about institutional racism. However, with Anna Deavere Smith's play *Fires in the Mirror*, I noticed an unprecedented empathic energy in the classroom. Students took more interest in Smith's short monologues. They seemed intrigued by her journalism, not only her choice of characters but also the fact that her monologues were the *real* words of *real* people in *real* conflicts. Something about her honest portrayals and

the absence of a narrator empowered my students to think for themselves and question what they were reading, hearing and seeing. *Fires in the Mirror* worked alchemy in my classroom, and this experience has given me renewed hope for exposing students to worlds and voices outside their own.

Anna Deavere Smith's work is finding its way into the high school English canon. While many people are familiar with Smith as an American actress, they are new to her work as a writer and professor, who many credit with inventing a new form of socially conscious theater. From 1974, Anna Deavere Smith has preformed on stage in numerous plays, from Shakespeare to her own produced dramas, such as *Fires in the Mirror* (1992), *Twilight* (1993), *Let Me Down Easy* (2009) and *Notes from the Field* (2015). She is known in broader audiences for her significant television roles on popular shows *The West Wing* and *Nurse Jackie*. Even though Smith has made a name of herself as a talented actress, her work as producer of her own verbatim plays has contributed to her credibility as an agent for social change. With the goal to represent marginalized voices and the dynamics of racial conflicts, she has dramatized relevant, thought-provoking lines from her personal interviews with many people whose voices may not be heard or represented on stage. In a one-woman show format, Smith's approach is to "become" her interviewees. She writes in her introduction to *Fires in the Mirror*, "I wanted to develop an alternative to the self-based [acting] technique, a technique that would begin with the other and come to self...Learning about the other by being the other requires the use of all aspects of memory, the memory of body, mind and heart" (Talk to Me xxvi). Smith learned to listen to people's stories with the intention of bringing their views to life and therefore, humanizing their perspectives.

In *Fires in the Mirror: Crown Heights and Brooklyn and Other Identities*, she raises questions about racial conflicts, asking her audiences to consider why people hold onto fear - - why they irrationally judge or assume people from *others* are different. Smith's approach is not to be overtly didactic or to draw conclusions. Her approach is to present the voices of the issue from many angles, without adornment, without commentary. She juxtaposes voices from a wide range of people, employing a verisimilitude that gives her audiences space to reflect and perhaps *see* an interconnected humanity.

Smith's empathic approach is exactly what high school teachers need to create awareness about race and what it means to be disenfranchised because of race. Carlos Hoyt, Jr, in his scholarship "The Pedagogy of the Meaning of Racism: Reconciling a Discordant Discourse," asserts "the idea and action of racism are not easy to teach or learn in a simple and straightforward matter" (Hoyt 225). He analyzes how most educators approach the subject, giving priority to the terms educators must first introduce to frame their units. He concludes that teachers need to differentiate between the terms prejudice, racism, power, and oppression. Hoyt makes it clear that students are often confused and hostile as a result of anecdotal experiences or stereotypes they believe to be true. He maintains that most teenagers rarely have conversations about race in classrooms because teachers fear miscommunication or the accusation of insensitivity. Hoyt says it clearly when he writes, "Things tend to become challenging when the question of who can be racist (and the factor of power on which that question turns) is introduced into the conceptualization and definition of racism" (Hoyt 226). Hoyt's insight on the question of the "right to racism" is particularly relevant when navigating conversations with high

school students because they tend to oversimplify racism and interpret discussion on the subject as an argument. If a teacher has not established an environment where students feel safe to speak and work out questions, a conversation can become hostile and uncomfortable.

This is why Anna Deavere Smith's plays make an impact. She provides diverse perspectives, which reflect the layers of issues in a nurturing, safe tone. Her approach to journalism is notably *different* and more effective in the classroom, where a teacher is trying to deconstruct perceived notions about race. In my case, when I discovered her first play *Fires in the Mirror*, I felt that I had stumbled upon pedagogical *gold*. My students started to understand the complexities of racial tensions in new ways. We were not reading one man's story or one woman's story. Instead, we were understanding an entire community of complicated stories that capture what Anna Deavere Smith calls "moving identities." For many students, they recognized that racial conflicts are not binary black and white issues, but deeper, more nuanced tapestries of power struggles among all human beings. Smith's characters shattered what my seventeen-year-olds thought they knew and understood about the heavily charged concept of racism. She recreates the reality of structural inequality in memorable ways. Her characters play themselves, and through a "show, not tell" style, elucidate what is so complicated for teachers to do with one person's story.

My experience teaching *Fires in the Mirror* has motivated me to look closely at Anna Deavere Smith's work with many lenses, asking every question from "Why this riot?" and "Why this character?" to "Why is it that Anna Deavere Smith can pull this off as an actress?" I also compare her art to the literature I've employed in the past to

understand what makes her art unique. To date, I've relied on many writers to expose my students to the concepts of racial conflict. Writers such as Richard Wright, James Baldwin, Maya Angelou, and currently Ta-Nehisi Coates have all featured prominently in my course outlines. While these writers are powerful and undoubtedly necessary, they do not inspire the same empathetic energy in the classroom that Anna Deavere Smith's work creates.

Smith alludes to the liminality of her work in the introduction to her second production *Twilight, Los Angeles 1992*, her play about the Rodney King riots. In her introduction, she highlights the words of an ex-gang member to provide a beautiful metaphor for her title and her collective body of work and life's objective. She quotes the young man, saying, "Twilight is that time between day and night, limbo, I call it limbo." This limbo Smith examines is that place between our *knowing* and *not knowing*. She points out that it's the limbo we need to have real conversations about racial conflicts and to acknowledge that it is perhaps more complicated than we realize. As Smith explains, "Our race dialogue desperately needs this more complex language" (*Twilight*, XXV). By acting out the language of her interviewees, Anna Deavere Smith is liberated to mirror the reality about what is going between people. She breaks down our western binary paradigms of what we think we know about what other people think and see. She humanizes everyone's story.

Through my close reading of Anna Deavere Smith's plays *Fires in the Mirror* and *Twilight, Los Angeles 1992*, my experimental teaching of the texts to high school students, I will reinforce the pragmatic place for Smith's work in the high school classroom by *dealchelmizing* the formal and creative nuances of her work that make it so

profound in promoting cognitive dissonance and growth. I will uncover how Smith's dramas employ colloquial language and unique points of views in ways that nurture empathy and disrupt long-held narratives and stereotypes. Lastly, I will explore Smith's precise character selection and juxtaposition that enable her audiences to create space for compassion and representation of the challenges of marginalized communities.

CHAPTER ONE: Why teachers need to talk about race.

“Education is the most powerful weapon we can use to change the world.”

– Nelson Mandela

One of Anna Deavere Smith’s characters Denise Dobson in her latest project *Notes from the Field*, admits, “I wasn’t given enough information to know that we all are connected somehow.” Dobson, an incarcerated African American woman of many years, employs the word “information,” a word we often associate with facts and data. However, in the context of her monologue, she refers to her education and exposure. Like many adults who reflect on their educations, Dobson regrets not “knowing” enough about the world and the priority of education. Hearing Dobson’s monologue provokes questions such as, “How could we be more effective as educators?” and “How can the system improve, so that students like Denise Dobson do not fall through the cracks?” As with any subject we teach in school, we must address the reality of inequity and institutional racism. We need to have courageous conversations about race, no matter how shameful and uncomfortable they can be. Derald Wing Sue, in his book *Race Talk and the Conspiracy of Silence*, reinforces this urgency by writing:

Silence and inaction only serve to perpetuate the status quo of race relations. Will we, as a nation, choose the path we have always traveled, a journey of silence that has benefited only a select group and oppressed others? Or will we choose the road less traveled, a journey of racial reality that may be full of discomfort pain, but offers benefits to all groups in our society? (Sue xvii)

As Sue highlights, there are many reasons why teaching students about racism are challenging, but one of the biggest hurdles is fear: the fear of misunderstandings and the fear of discomfort. As a result, some teachers avoid the subject or over simplify history and current examples of institutionalized racism, making the issues seem like events of our past or unusual occurrences. Glenn E. Singleton makes the case that “educators typically have not examined and discussed race in their schools, because they fear they don’t know how to go about the process correctly. Some justify inaction on racial achievement disparities by suggesting that no one knows how to impact them” (Singleton 31). Singleton then makes the case that no teacher has a formula or list of rules for broaching the difficult subject of race in our classrooms; however, it is still urgent that we address race and the power dynamics that plague our country.

For Humanities teachers, we have many texts to read that move students into discussions about race. However, not all texts are equal in facilitating the complexities of racial conflicts. For example, some teachers in California consider Harper Lee’s *To Kill a Mockingbird* to be a strong text for exposing the inequality for black Americans in the 1930’s. Many may not acknowledge that the author is a white woman and that all of her heroes are white men. Some teachers may not even ask the fair questions: Is this a fair representation? Does this text create cognitive dissonance or simply reinforce the western narrative that white men “save the day.” The need, therefore, is to create a curriculum that offers students a comprehensive study of institutional racism and the complexities of *permissible* identities as a result of race.

Cornel West, Professor of the Practice of Public Philosophy at Harvard University and political activist, writes in his book *Race Matters*, “we must look at new

frameworks and languages to understand our multilayered crisis and overcome our deep malaise” (West 11). In the introduction to his book he makes the claim that our progress depends on the admittance that our most valuable source is “our common history”, and this history must be explored in detail, even the shameful acts. Second, he calls for the focus “on the public square – the common good that undergirds our national and global destinies”(West 11). He explains that we need to “invigorate the common good with a mixture of government, business, and labor that does not follow any existing blueprint” (West 11). Because our current system is failing a large number of marginalized citizens, a new paradigm must be created by “new leadership,” that can see why our status quo institutional framework is broken.

We need leaders – neither saints or sparkling television personalities – who can situate themselves within a larger historical narrative of this country and our world, who can grasp the complex dynamics of our peoplehood and imagine a future grounded in the best of our past, yet who are attuned to the frightening obstacles that now perplex us. (West 13)

West’s vision relies on our understanding of the relationship between cultural and institutional discrimination. He asks us to rethink our values and how our collective values inform our decisions. West underscores that we cannot do this with grassroots leadership, “a visionary leadership that can motivate ‘the better angels of our nature’” (West 13). While he assumes that we have the capacity to change and “imagine a future grounded in the best of our past,” he also knows that we need visionaries to get us there. This is probably why he endorsed Anna Deavere Smith’s play *Fires in the Mirror*.

He sees the power of Smith's art as a visionary's tool for solidarity. In the Forward to her play, he writes:

In the midst of the heated moment of murder, mayhem, and madness of the Crown Heights crisis, she [Smith] gives us poignant portraits of everyday human faces that get up in the situation. Her sensitive renderings of the tragic and comic aspects of the reactions and responses of Blacks and Jews to the Crown Heights crisis give our universal moral principles a particular heartfelt empathy (Fires xvii).

West focuses on the two areas of Smith's work that make it powerful: the "everyday human faces that get up in the situation" and her "sensitive renderings." Similar to a portrait of a crowd of many people, Smith's characters represent the central and marginalized people in any community. Her aim is to tell the entire story of the conflict through the different lenses, and without her own direct narration. The thematic thread that holds the stories together is there but only for the audience to pull through the stories. Smith allows space for personal realization and empathy. This is one reason why her play belongs in American classrooms, where conversations about race need to occur.

CHAPTER TWO: Who is Anna Deavere Smith?

When one seeks out biographical information on Anna Deavere Smith, it is likely to find commentary such as: “She creates a dialogue out of monologues among souls who, in real life, might never have occasion to speak to one another” (Brantley, “Review: Anna Deavere Smith's 'Notes From the Field'). Or more profound insight into the moving effects of her work: “She wants to leave us with a spark of hope...It seems to safe to say, though, that she also wants us to leave angry, and restless, and aware that the conversation being conducted isn't anywhere near completion” (Brantley, “Review: Anna Deavere Smith's 'Notes From the Field'). She is held in high regard in many communities, mostly for her ability to treat the most difficult subject in the world today with the most sensitive, empathetic approach. Her ability to transcend race and communicate with all people leads to more questions about her background that lead her to her unbelievable skill to connect with people.

Born in 1950, Anna Deavere Smith is the oldest of five children. She grew up in Baltimore, Maryland with mother Anna, a middle school teacher, and her father Deavere, a coffee businessman. Before she left home to attend Beaver College in Pennsylvania, Smith credits her family with inspiring her to explore her interest in the humanities, her gift for acting, and her passion for social justice. In her book *Talk to Me*, she writes, “My mother taught in Baltimore public schools. She only wanted to keep [her African American students] out of trouble, heartbreak, and illiteracy. As for me, she had spent many nights helping read and write, and I could tell she had faith in me” (4). Smith expresses in her prologue that she feels extremely fortunate to have come from an educated family, who supported her and encouraged her to follow her dreams. She notes, “My grandfather had managed to send all six of his kids to college, my mother and her

siblings, too, all went to college” (*Talk to me* 4). Having black parents who grew up during the depression, Smith acknowledges her fortunate, yet challenging beginnings. She admits, “It was a rocky road, and I as the first child, was to make the first solid step... I came out of college with debts, and, rather than a five-year plan, or even a foothold in the next generation of black success, I had fifty years worth of questions about the world I came from and the world I live in” (*Talk to Me*, 4). Smith’s parents provided her with a realistic look at the struggles of a black American, as they shared their stories and the historical oppression of black Americans. Echoing more about Smith’s life, Marcia Davis, for the *Washington Post Magazine* writes, “Her own youth in the ’50s was defined by legal and de facto segregation. And, yes, the city had poverty and crime. In her community, there was classism and color-struck politics. It was not perfect, but it sustained her and other children.” She survived Baltimore in the fifties, and more importantly, developed an *eye* for the issues and an *ear* for the people who suffered.

Vincent Cannato, in “The Many Faces of Anna Deavere Smith” synthesizes Smith’s life’s work, starting with the facts such as “In middle school, she discovered a gift for mimicry; in college, an interest in social justice” (Cannato, “The Many Faces of Anna Deavere Smith.”). Both Smith’s mimicry and subject matter distinguish her from other actresses. She goes beyond capturing human emotion by imitating actual people of all genders and races. Her ability to capture accents and mannerisms is extraordinary. Cannato writes, “Smith did not become a method actor, that is, an actor who uses their own personal experience and the context of the play to understand a character’s motivation. Instead, she came to view language itself as the great window onto the character.” Smith honed the art of listening and therefore, becoming; as opposed to

channeling by way of personal projection. Because some of her characters are famous people, such as Ann Richards and Eve Ensler, she took on the challenge of acting out characters with very distinctive mannerisms, unlike acting out her version of a literary character. She often tells reporters that her strongest skill is her ability to listen. In Cannato's article, Smith says, "If I were to go around and listen to Americans, would I end up with some kind of composite that would tell me more about America?" This question inspired her to become not only a powerful actress of her own show, but a profound researcher, journalist, and agent for change. Rather than reading these characters through her own experience, as would be in the case in method acting, she steps into the character as best she can. In this, she crosses a personal distance that most acting techniques do not. As a result, her work builds community and promotes solidarity by connecting to the lives of those who may never have the stage.

It's clear in her own book *Talk to Me* that Smith's family, notably her mother Anna, played a significant role in Smith's focus on the greater good. She highlights how her mother paved the path for finding the "truth" in the world. She writes, "Her life's work had been to educate me, my four siblings, and hundreds of others who had passed through her classroom all over Baltimore. Her goal had been to position us firmly in the black middle class" (*Talk to Me* 4). Having strong family support, Anna Deavere Smith was ready to leave Baltimore in 1971, for it failed to show her enough glimpses into the world's possibilities. She "wanted to see America and to make sense...of all of the breakage and promise that had been released through the antiwar movement, the assassinations of Martin Luther King and Bobby Kennedy, the beginning of the environmental movement man, and the bra-burning, brief as it was as the women's

movement” (*Talk to Me* 3). At age 22, Anna Deavere Smith’s exposure to struggle called her to learn more about the American culture and the nuances of race and class. The context of her childhood, from her immediate family’s experiences with racism to the milieu of Baltimore’s inequality, provided enough with many insights into realities of structural racism.

Similar to what became the subject of bestselling American author and *Black Lives Matter* leader Ta-Nehisi Coates’ writings, Smith’s Baltimore was and still is a highly segregated and racially hostile city. It was the place where The Federal Housing Administration “openly supported racist covenants that largely excluded African-Americans — even the middle class and well-to-do — from the homeownership boom that took place between the 1930s and the 1960s” (Editorial Board, “How Racism Doomed Baltimore”). Coates highlights these facts in the *Atlantic* by writing:

This policy meant that the federal government had endorsed a system of financial apartheid under which whites looking to achieve the American dream could rely on a legitimate credit system backed by the government. Blacks were herded into the sights of unscrupulous lenders who took them for money and for sport. (Editorial Board “How Racism Doomed Baltimore”)

Growing up in a city where inequality was blatantly clear, Anna Deavere Smith understands of how communities react and how racial resentments form. In many biographical sources, Smith writes about what led her to her personal journalism and the stage genre. On her first trip on the road in America, she developed an interest in the

diversity of American people. Driving a van from the east coast to California, she and her friends saw new pictures of the America they had only read about in books. This trip was seminal for Anna Deavere Smith, as it opened her eyes to diverse panoply of people and stories. Her trip foreshadowed the work she would someday do as a journalist and actress, as a new voice who would capture the voices of many Americans. It also gave her the opportunity to witness the successes and failures of her post-college friends. She remembers that her friends had to “return [home] with the questions unanswered,” but for her, the experience sparked a *project*, a project “that would give more voice to more people” by staging everyday folks - - the people who “lose” in life and never expect to be heard. It’s no coincidence that Smith discovered her material for the stage as her entire life’s events led her to the stories of real people living out their dreams and dreams deferred in America. Even today, Smith is interviewed and questioned about the problems and setbacks in the country; she “toggles between head-shaking despair and what she calls “hope-aholism” (Davis, Marcia, “Anna Deavere Smith Returns to Baltimore, with a Mission”).

CHAPTER THREE:
The “poignant portraits of everyday human faces” in *Fires in the Mirror*

Anna Deavere Smith’s one-woman play *Fires in the Mirror* centers on “The Crown Heights Conflict.” Based on the events in 1991, when a car carrying “the Lubavitcher Hasidic rebbe (spiritual leader) ran a red light, hit another car and swerved into the sidewalk” hitting and killing a young seven-year-old, black boy Gavin Cato from Guyana. (*Fires* xliii). His cousin Angela was also seriously injured. The incident sparked rumors immediately; one was that “a Hasidic-run ambulance service helped the driver and his passengers while the children lay bleeding” (*Fires* xliii). In retaliation to what was a perceived act of racism, a group of black men stabbed 29-year old Yankel Rosenbaum. The crime precipitated three days of mayhem, in which “black people fought police, attacked Lubavitcher headquarters, and torched businesses, while Hasidic patrols responded with their own violence” (*Fires* xliii).

This event triggered the dormant hostilities and deep resentments on both sides for members of the Jewish and Black communities. Smith says it cogently in the background information to her play: “The conflict reflected long-standing tensions within the Crown Heights... as well as the pain, oppression, and discrimination these groups have historically experienced outside their own communities” (*Fires* xliii). It is also important to note that the Black community in Crown Heights included many immigrants from “Jamaica, Guyana, Trinidad and Tobago, and Haiti” (*Fires* xiv). As one can imagine, the diverse black community felt ongoing discrimination for two reasons - skin color and national origin. On the other side of the conflict, the Lubavitchers dealt with their historical wounds of Nazi Germany, ongoing anti-Jewish stereotyping, and the

demands of adhering to a strict religious community. This combination of “otherness,” fueled by pain, defensiveness, and the pure need to survive, exploded in 1991. It is this racial combustion that set the stage for Anna Deavere Smith.

When Smith learned about the conflict in Crown Heights, she had already been at work with her series called *On the Road: A Search for American Character*. Therefore, she simply chose to explore the conflict in the same manner in which she approaches all her work: an interview to stage technique. She interviews her characters, by asking questions that get them to open up about their feelings about identity and race. She then splices their words, creating the script for her monologue. In her introduction to *Fires in the Mirror*, she details her creative, journalistic process:

Fires in the Mirror is a part of a series of theater (or performance) pieces called *On the Road: A Search for American Character*, which I create by interviewing people and later performing them using their own words. My goal has been to find American Character in the ways that people speak. When I started this project, in the early 1980’s, my simple introduction to anyone I interviewed was, “If you give me an hour of your time, I’ll invite you to see yourself performed.” (*Fires* xliii)

Smith’s art is not simply the mimicry of her characters, but her character selection and their placement in the play. Because she highlights the actual words of her interviewees, the characters reflect their own tensions and ironies. Smith brings these people to life on stage with the “word-by-word” lines of their “one-hour” interviews. Many of these monologues offer testimonies of marginalized people who need

representation and humanize the views of the other. The contrasts in these monologues and the different points of view juxtaposed in Smith's work are a means to humanize speakers with different points of view.

With *Fires in the Mirror*, she organizes her play in seven chapters: Identity, Mirrors, Hair, Race, Rhythm, Seven Verses, and then Crown Heights, Brooklyn, August 1991. She builds trust with her audience by starting with everyday people, expressing their thoughts on every subject from identity and racial conflicts to why they style their hair the way they do. It takes a few characters to recognize what Smith is doing, for she slowly draws her audience into her stories, allowing viewers the time and space to hear the words and formulate opinions about the characters.

Most of her work happens before the curtain rises because she writes her own scripts. It is her thorough research about the conflict and the various people who play major and minor roles that makes her work so rich and profound. Gregory Jay in "Other People's Holocausts: Trauma, Empathy and Justice in Anna Deavere Smith *Fires in the Mirror*," begins his critique of the play by writing, "As their speeches [in *Fires*] incite our empathy, however, they also create competing and contradictory narratives that make it difficult for the audience to take sides or to form a united community sure of where justice lies" (Jay 120). As Jay notes, her narratives do achieve what seems to be Smith's objective, which is to make it very difficult for viewers to take a side. As a result, she reinforces the significant, more nuanced questions: When it comes to racial conflicts and deep-rooted divisions, maybe no one race is to blame? Could it be that many people have reasons to feel disenfranchised and misunderstood by others? Is oppression a result of hatred or fear? How does power play into conflicts?

Smith begins the first themed act of *Fires in the Mirror* titled *Identity* with the playwright Ntozake Shange, calling the monologue “The Desert.” This is a very deliberate choice by Smith because it establishes some of the central concerns and concepts of the production. Ntozake is an abstract thinker, who contemplates identity and race from a black feminist perspective. As a playwright herself, she’s most known for her play titled “for colored girls who have considered suicide/when rainbow is enuf.” In a “similar but different” form, Shange’s play consists of twenty poems by unnamed black women who recite and dance to their words in emotional, postmodern form. Undoubtedly, Smith knew when she made the call to ask Shange for the interview, that she was going to get thoughtful, academic responses from a woman who spends her life writing and contemplating the plight of the black woman. It is her voice that sets the tone and many ways the theme of identity for the entire play.

Shange’s first words after the curtain rises are “Hmmm... Identity.” She then continues to think aloud in her first response: “Identity - it, is, uh.. In a way it’s, um.. it’s sort of, it’s uh...it’s a way of knowing I’m not a rock or that tree. And it’s a way of knowing that no matter where I put myself that I am not necessarily what’s around me...I am part of my surroundings” (*Fires* 4) Shange’s stream of consciousness response, while fragmented and imperfect, mirrors how most people think when asked to speak candidly on a complex question. Even as a scholar on the subject, Shange hesitates for a few lines to grapple with the elusive subject of identity. Her thought process contributes to the beauty and authenticity of her words, as she attempts to make her ideas clear for Smith in the interview. In Smith’s Shange monologue, it is clear that Smith has asked her to define

the process of discovering how people arrive at knowing who they are and how they belong. Shange says,

Everything that's ever happened to us as well as our responses to it' cause we might be alone in a trance state, someplace like the desert and we begin to feel as though we are part of the desert, which we are right at that minute. But we are not the desert. Uh...we are part of the desert, and when we go home we take with us that part of the desert that the desert gave us, but we're still not the desert. It's important differentiation to make because you don't know what you're giving if you don't know what you have and you don't know what you're taking if you don't know what yours And what's somebody else's. (*Fires* 4)

With this particular monologue, Smith asks her audience to consider the relationship between identity and place. The notion that a person can be “a part” of a place, like Shange’s desert, but not necessarily be that place provides an important essential question about how people differentiate themselves with their environments. Examining Shange’s words closely, she reflects how individuals develop a sense of self and a sense of where they belong, especially as they may border many places, many groups. Smith calls into question the idea of identity locations and permitted identity. Through Shange, Smith acknowledges that all people have personal identities; however, who a person is permitted to be in the world is often dictated by gender, race, and class. Through monologues like Shange’s, Smith starts the conversation about representation and

identity. Her personal narratives provoke necessary contemplation. They work a subtle alchemy by exposing who people are on the inside, through their vulnerable and honest testimonies.

Ntozake Shange's monologue is equal parts beautiful, thought provoking, and ambiguous. The ambiguity is often the byproduct of the interview format. As Smith explained in her San Francisco talk "Insurgent Voices: Striving to End Racism in America," "I like the broken sentences. They're messy and confusing." We see this messiness with Shange's lines about identity. Shange, in trying to answer the question, reveals her personal understanding of how she arrives at her own identity and asks a question about how *place* influences our concept of self. She asserts that identity is "a way of knowing that no matter where I put myself...I am not necessarily what's around me." Shange clarifies how place affects most people by using the metaphor of a desert. She says, "we are part of the desert [and]... we take with that part of the desert that the desert gave us." She articulates the question: "To what degree am I a part of my environment?" This question is one of the many questions Smith asks her audience to consider. When the goal is to understand the causes of racial prejudice, we need to understand how we derive our own understanding of "who we are." Smith subtly asks us to evaluate how we identify, and therefore perhaps judge others.

Following Ntozake Shange's monologue, in the same theme of identity, is Aron M. Bernstein, an MIT physicist. His monologue is number four in the grouping which Smith titles "Mirrors and Distortions." Even before Dr. Bernstein speaks, we know he is speaking from a place of scientific research, especially if one reads the play along with watching it. His ethos is clear and his facts, respectable. On the topic of mirrors, he says,

“You know you have a pretty young woman and she looks in a mirror and she’s a witch. (He laughs) because she’s evil on the inside. That’s not a real mirror, as everyone knows” (*Fires* 13). He then qualifies the notion of real mirroring and distortion from a physicist’s view: “But physicists do talk about distortion... if there are errors in the construction which you can see, it’s easy, if it’s huge, then you’re gonna have a circle of confusion” (*Fires* 14). Bernstein, while speaking about physics, reinforces what Anna Deavere Smith wants him to clarify: What we see is not always what is true. She brilliantly juxtaposes Aron Bernstein’s insight to Ntozake Shange’s monologue about knowing who we are and realizing that we are not every part of our surroundings. Just when the audience has absorbed Shange’s concept, Smith introduces Bernstein to suggest that we are also often wrong about what we think we know about what we see. He makes his point from a different angle and subject, however, his message about perception and reality reinforces Smith’s larger message, which is that our perceptions about reality can be misleading.

Jacqueline O’Connor writes about the significance of Anna Deavere Smith’s creation of “a new language” in her paper “A One-Woman Riot: Brooklyn 1991 & Los Angeles 1992.” She notes, “[Smith] uses the facts and records and anecdotes that in their overlapping truths and contradictions tell some part of the complex story of race in American, but she tells stories in a way that transforms selected pieces of the discussion” (O’Connor, 156). We see O’Connor’s observations resonate in Smith’s Bernstein-Shange juxtaposition - - as two scholars, albeit experts in different fields illuminate the profound idea that our knowledge is limited. Whether this knowledge is about the relationship of identity to place or the scientific relationship between seeing and knowing, viewers or readers of the play have the opportunities to question their prior knowledge. Both

conclusions and claims in the respective monologues speak to what O'Connor calls "the complex story of race" in that they allow us to question our assumptions about knowing who we are and knowing who others are. This dissonance is exactly what Smith wants to create. She wants us to ask: if our inherent conclusions about identity are wrong, then maybe it is time to rethink how we see people we have labeled as *other*.

All of Smith's characters invite her audience to reflect on racial identity, but none more so than Angela Davis. Her monologue, titled 'Rope,' adds layers of questions to the broader discussion of the relationship between personal identity and racial representation. An effective teacher, Davis provides examples to explain her point about the "old way" of "constructing community" and how this relates to "immutable biological facts." Her metaphor about needing a "rope" that allows people to move between communities captures the Smith's overarching theme that we all need more flexibility to move past our permitted identities and racial and gender stereotypes. Davis addresses this need through her honest reflection on the Thomas Clarence- Anita Hill conflict.

I was saying to my students just the other day

That if in 1970,

When I was

In jail,

Someone had told me

That in 1991

A Black man - a Black man

Who said that

(Increased voice, speed, and energy)

One of his heroes
Was Malcolm X -
Would be nominated to the Supreme Court.
I would have celebrated.
I don't think it could have been possible at that time
to convince me
that I would
Be absolutely opposed
To a Black candidate
(a new attack, more energy)
And if someone had told me that
A woman would
Finally be elected to the Supreme Court,
It would have been very difficult -
As critical as I am with respect to feminism -
To imagine opposing her.
...
Actually, we
in our various oppressed and
marginalized communities,
have been able to turn
terrible acts of racism directed against us
into victories

And I think

Anita Hill achieved a victory by showing the courage

to expose the sexual harassment issue on the national level

This is a very complicated situation

But I have no problem aligning myself politically

Against Clarence Thomas. I am very passionate about

That

But at the same time, we have to think about the racism

that made

the Thomas-Hill hearings possible .

So I think we need to develop

New ways of looking at community.

Race in the old sense has become

An increasingly obsolete way

Of constructing community

because it is based on

immutable biological

Facts...

Through the words of Angela Davis, Smith asks her audience to consider how loyalty and new kind of community that transcend the “immutable biological facts” of race. Davis employs the case of Anita Hill and Clarence to highlight how her own experiences with “opposing” a “black candidate” may have surprised her “1971” younger self. She argues, through this case, that racial loyalties are not as simplistic and static, that

race is not an immediate bond between people. Some could argue that this is not a profound point to make. However, for high school students, it is. They need testimonies like Angela Davis' to discuss the necessary "rope" for "new ways of looking at community" and how to mend the shameful reality of institutionalized racism.

Angela Davis delves into the complexity of race and community in her interview helping Smith highlight the nuances of racial loyalty - and more importantly, the fact that our comprehension of these matters is broken. Davis illuminates that our collective binary mindset about race is flawed. She makes it clear that people are inherently torn by racial loyalties. In her closing to her "Rope" monologue, she calls for change by saying, "we need to find ways of working with and understanding the vastness of our many cultural heritage... What I'm interested in are communities that are not static, that can change, that can respond to new historical needs" (Fires 32). Her closing lines inspire hope and provide crucial essential questions for all audiences, but especially high school students who tend to think in dualistic terms.

In other thematic scenes, Smith continues to ask her audience tough questions about identity and politics. She creates themes and sub-themes, all the while whispering the question in her audience's' ears: "What *if*.. what you think is true, is not true?" To reinforce the idea that truth depends on point of view, she juxtaposes two moving characters in her scene or chapter titled "Seven Verses." Both characters highlight the suffering of both black Americans and Jewish Americans. To start, Smith plays Minister Conrad Mohammed, a Muslim leader who she describes as "impeccably dressed in a suit of elegant fabric" (Fires, 52). Mohammed starts his monologue, with a cup of coffee in his hand. He asserts emotionally:

The fact that our – our Black parents were actually taken as cattle and as, as animals and parked into slave ships like sardines amid feces and urine – and the suffering of our people for months in the middle of a passage. Our women, raped before our very eyes, so that today, some look like you, some look like me, some like brother (*indicating his companion*). (Fires 54)

Mohammed’s insight educates the audience but also serves to shock and to call attention to the severity of a history many people do not like to hear. His tone shifts to a passionate orator when he emphasizes, “These are the crimes of slavery that no one wants to talk about - But the most significant crime...[is] the fact that they cut off all knowledge from us” (Fires, 57). His focus on the loss of identity and lost of heritage reverberates back to Smith’s prior questions about knowing one’s self in relationship to one’s community. Smith’s thematic connection reflects her hours of critical thinking that she needed to curate her character positioning and passage selection in the play. In this process, one aspect of her art is her extensive research in finding the right people, asking these people strong questions, and finally placing their words in an order for dramatic effect and eventually - - social change.

In “Seven Verses,” Mohammed not only enumerates the painful details of black history and oppression but also makes a claim that the black people are the “chosen of God.” Addressing the Jewish community directly, he boldly states that the Jewish community takes “seven verses” in Deuteronomy that [they] base their chosen people, *uh, uh*, claim the theology, the whole theological exegesis with respect to being chosen is

based upon seven verses in the Scripture that talk about the covenant with Abraham” (Fires, 58). He then bolsters his argument by saying, “The Honorable Louis Farrakhan teaches us that we are the chosen of God. We are those almighty God Allah has selected for his chosen” (Fires, 58). His logic and sense of knowing help the audience realize that our sense of *knowing* is also imparted to us through our cultural exposure and the inheritance of “information.” His confidence is not unique to him, but rather common of the confidence we all have in our communities and “chosen” statuses. As readers of the text, we can never know exactly what Anna Deavere Smith was thinking with her thematic placement of Mohammed’s monologue, but one could argue that she wanted to expose mentalities and mindsets of racial groups, and how these groups tend to adopt a “us” and “them” duality. This is another example of the kind of questions Smith’s monologue inspires in the classroom. By closing reading the text and watching the dramas, students have the opportunities to examine Mohammed’s worldview.

One portion of Mohammed’s monologue that sparks rich analysis is when he acknowledges the “horrible crime,” but struggles with the scale of the loss over the fact that during slavery, “we lost over a hundred, and some say two hundred and fifty million in the passage coming from Africa to America” (Fires 54). He then becomes a bit competitive and emotional saying, “We didn’t just lose six million. We didn’t just endure this for, for five or six years... We endured this for over three hundred years” (Fires 55). His resentment is not lost on the audience. His monologue creates a palpable tension between characters, something that had to be one of Smith’s main objectives with the play. These character tensions give classroom teachers a canvas to examine the important of understanding why a person would feel or see the world in a certain way. When the

goal is to teach students the value of point of view and the subjectivity of *knowing*, Anna Deavere Smith curates an ideal collection of views.

Gregory Jay spends a good portion of his analysis on the tension Smith creates between characters in his paper “Other People’s Holocausts: Trauma, Empathy, and Justice in Anna Deavere Smith’s *Fires in the Mirror*. He starts by posing the question, “if we perceive the chasm between ethnic-racial groups as unbridgeable, or if we assert the impossibility of empathizing across such divides, how can we do justice to one another?” (Jay 123). He puts words to the exigency of Smith’s work, as she attempts to bridge the “unbridgeable.” We see this effort in every monologue, but the tension builds to crescendo in her “Seven Verses” scene. Jay analyzes the stark contrast between Smith’s characters by comparing her possible humanist intentions with the rigidity of the postmodernist. He writes, “Much of the tension in Smith’s work comes from dramatizing this contradiction between a humanist vision of commonality and a postmodernist commitment to an identity politics that rejects identification with or by ‘others’ (Jay, 124). Jay’s insight resonates when teaching Smith because students ask the questions: Are we capable of empathy? Do we compete over suffering?

We see equitable character representation in *Fires in the Mirror* as Smith tries to tell multiple sides of the story. While each person contributes to the voices of the riot, the audience might be asking, “Whose side am I on?” or “Who has a stronger case?” After Minster Conrad Mohammed’s monologue, when the audience is feeling the shame of slavery, Smith strategically places her monologue titled “Isaac” by Letty Cottin Pogrebin. Letty Pogrebin is a Jewish woman, who speaks to Anna Deavere Smith on the phone

from her apartment in Central Park West in New York City. She responds to Smith's question about the Holocaust by saying:

This story about my uncle Isaac - makes me cry - and it's going to make your audience cry... They put him on a transport train with the Jews of his town and then gave him the task of herding into the gas chambers everyone in his trainload. (Fires 62)

Pogrebin tells the emotional story of her uncle, and her details reinforce Anna Deavere Smith's point that Jewish Americans have equally suffered. Even as they riot with black Americans, they, too, have a shared history of oppression and pain. This shared but different oppression creates complexity for a study on racial conflicts. Gregory Jay comments on the two group's respective traumas and how they affect generation after generation:

Slavery and the Holocaust thus may be seen as two historical traumas of personal as well as group cultural identity, horrors that simultaneously undermine efforts at group identity and function as "founding traumas" for a collective history. Moreover, the larger sociocultural failure to work through these traumas leaves many with the feeling that their injustice has yet to be addressed. (Jay 122)

This failure to reconcile is exactly what surfaces in *Fires in the Mirror*. Audiences can see the pain on both sides, and how wronged they both feel. Pogrebin creates cognitive dissonance, resulting in what Smith hopes to achieve: empathy. In developing

his point about social justice in the play, Gregory Jay cites Martha Nussbaum's work in his paper. He builds on her claims about how literary experiences promote empathy and justice. He extends her ideas by writing "Empathy entails identification with the feelings of the character (rage, love, hunger, jealousy) and so involves us in their values and beliefs since these determine what they perceive. Thus empathy has an essential cognitive dimension, capable of teaching us what the other knows, believes, and feels" (Jay 123). While Nussbaum's scholarship makes sense when discussing Anna Deavere Smith's work, one aspect that Gregory Jay also explores, and rightly so, is the fact that her work is not *fiction*. She is not making these characters up or adding to their words. Smith's interviews reflect the true stories of real people, exposing their own personal versions of the knowledge. As Jay explains, "Smith's *Fires in the Mirror* belongs to this genre of testimonial... Truth remains on trial even after the official judgment is in, so we continue to return to the witness for reenactments of their tales" (Jay 124). Because these testimonies are seemingly honest and often vulnerable, Smith creates space for her viewers to consider the point of views of people they may never otherwise read or hear. Curated with purpose, Smith contributes to the cognitive dissonance of audiences, especially young audiences, which is exactly what high school teachers are trying to promote.

CHAPTER FOUR:
Thinking about our Thinking: What happens when students challenge their assumptions.

Writing on cognitive dissonance, James E. Zull offers educational methods to nurture the process. In “The Art of Changing the Brain,” he outlines the theory about what happens to the brain when learning new ideas like the audience gleans in *Fires in the Mirror*. He supports a common educational theory that teachers need to build on a student’s “schema” or past knowledge in order to teach new concepts. Zull defines effective teaching as an “art” that requires a deliberate focus on “emotion” and subjects that interest young people. He calls teachers to “ find ways that the learning itself is intrinsically rewarding. That seems to mean two things: first, the learning itself must evoke emotion, and second, it must be about things which naturally engage the learner” (“New Horizons for Learning”). Zull goes further to explain what exactly happens when students engage in new ideas and how people always tap into prior knowledge. He explains:

We learn by attaching the new to the old. This modifies the old, sometimes beyond recognition, but we are always building on what has gone before. Sometimes these old networks are so powerful that they become a barrier to new knowledge. Thus, we often carry childhood beliefs with us for a lifetime, even when we know that they are technically incorrect. (Zull “The Art of Changing the Brain”)

These old networks might include dualistic patterns that tie back to western, enlightenment master narratives that go back to the teaching of Plato and Aristotle. We

tend to hold the philosophers of the past in high esteem for their contemplation of the world and for their ideas about values. However, they left our current culture with dualisms, such as “master/slave”, “self/other”, and “mind/body” (Plumwood 43). Val Plumwood, in her book *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*, maintains, “many elements of Platonic reason/nature dualism remain unresolved in modern approaches to reason, human identity, and death” (Plumwood 5). A case could be made that dualistic Platonic vestiges of thought still pervade modern thought patterns, especially in relation to the collective proclivity to stereotype and categorize people based on race.

Even though the cognitive research on the subject of learning is still a fairly new field, educators are beginning to analyze what is actually happening when people read ideas that conflict with their original assumptions. With knowledge about what is taking place inside our brains when we engage in new knowledge, teachers might be more inclined to choose new texts and stronger methods. This process has actually already begun. In 1957, Leon Festinger “proposed cognitive dissonance theory which refers to a situation involving conflicting attitudes, beliefs or behaviors. This friction produces a feeling of discomfort leading to an alteration in one of the attitudes, beliefs or behaviors to reduce the discomfort and restore balance” (McLeod). He tried to make sense of how we cope when faced with “shift” our thinking.

Teachers interested in broadening the thinking of their students will find *Fires in the Mirror* an efficient text that resonates with teenagers. Her play provides enough content for weeks of discussion about identity and tolerance. She dissects the complexities of what teenagers like to define simplistically as racism. One of her key monologues about terminology is by the songwriter Robert Sherman, titled “Lousy

Language.” In this interview, he discusses the language we have to express the shades of racism:

There is a sort of soup
of bias -
prejudice, racism, and discrimination.

I think bias really does relate to
feelings with a valence,
feelings with a, umm

(Breathing in)

feelings that can go in a direction positive or negative,
although we usually use bias to mean a negative.

What it means usually is negative attitudes
that can lead to negative behaviors:

biased
acts, biased incidents,
or biased crimes.

Racism is hatred based on race.

Discrimination refers to
acts against somebody...

so the words

Actually tangle up.

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 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. (Fires 65)

The Sherman monologue provides English teachers with a framework for discussion about our limitations with language. A teacher could use this monologue to start the conversation about what students know and think they know about the fine distinctions between terms. Sherman's monologue also provokes the questions: are all people are capable of bias and abuse of power? Could we be using the term *racism* loosely and incorrectly? These questions reverberate with Carlos Hoyt's scholarship and insight about the meaning of racism and its complexity: "To be guilty of racism, however, to be racist, say the revisionist proponents, one must have *power*, and power of

a special sort. For the revisionists, racism is prejudice plus power leveraged at an institutional level to maintain the privileges of the dominant social group” (Hoyt 226). In words high school students understand: racism is more than bias or an acknowledgment that people are different. Racism is as Smith’s character Sherman explains, “ is hatred based on race. Discrimination refers to acts against somebody...” (Fires, 65).

These are the discussions and lessons students need to have in order to distinguish between stereotyping, holding a bias, and acting upon racist beliefs. Because students tend to have myopic assumptions about terms based on the conflicts they see in their own immediate worlds, they often misconstrue arguments for acts of racism. I’ve noticed that my students use the word loosely and frequently. If they were exposed to more direct teaching of the terms and had more “courageous conversations” about race and its relationship to power and discrimination, they might understand structural racism over optical racism.

This is another subject that Carlos Hoyt incorporates in his paper. He employs the research and testimony of B.D Tatum in her book *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria? And Other Conversations about Race*. He quotes her extensively on the topic of how racism is influenced by power:

When I am asked, “Can people of color be racist? I reply, “The answer depends on your definition of racism.” If one defines the racism as racial prejudice, the answer is yes. People of color can do have racial prejudices. However, if one defines racism a system of advantage based on race, the answer is no. People of color are not racist because they

do not systematically benefit from racism. And equally important, there is no systematic cultural and institutional support or sanction for the racial bigotry of people of color. In my view, reserving the term racist for only the behaviors committed by Whites in the context of a White dominated society is a way of acknowledging the ever-present power differential afforded Whites by the culture and institutions that make up the system of advantage. (Hoyt 23)

Hoyt's commentary mirrors what is lacking in most discussions in high school classrooms. Even when students learn about American history, textbooks have been written in a way that clouds shameful facts about abuse of power. In many ways, racism has become a topic relegated for novels such as Richard Wright's *Black Boy* or Elie Wiesel's *Night*. Depending on classroom and the teacher, often the subject of racism blends into bias, leaving out the necessary relationship of racism to power.

Therefore, teachers must differentiate between the terms *bias* and *racism*, and this is what Anna Deavere Smith helps educators achieve. Her plays help students see how the abuse of power gives people the opportunities to act on racist beliefs. She helps students imagine a community of voices that contribute to conflicts. Agreeing with her talent and her powerful art, Cornel West endorses the effectiveness of her work in the *Forward to Fires in the Mirror*:

Her ability to move our passions, not only takes us beyond any self-righteous condescension toward parochial Hasidism and provincial Black urbanites, but also forces us

to examine critically our own complexity in cultural stereotypes that imprison our imaginations. (Fires xvii)

West's observation that Smith "forces her audience" to look at the details of our culture is not only accurate, but reassuring coming from a man who has spent his life fighting for the examination of racial equality. He is the man who once said, "Empathy is not simply a matter of trying to imagine what others are going through, but having the will to muster enough courage to do something about it." His conclusion about empathy could be applied to Smith's courage to act out her characters, no matter how shocking or upsetting her characters' words are. She takes risks in all of her plays, but the risk is especially notable when the topic is race. Cornel West says it clearly when he says:

As a citizen, Smith knows that there can be no grappling with Black anti-Semitism and Jewish anti-Black racism without a vital public sphere and there can be no vital public sphere without genuine bonds of trust. As an artist, she knows that public performance has a unique capacity to bring us together - to take us out of tribal mentalities - for self-critical examination and artistic pleasure. (Fires, xxii)

West's insight that Anna Deavere Smith creates trust on stage is critical in understanding why she engages us in a way that a novel cannot achieve. In a way, she reassures her audiences that what she is doing is *fair* to everyone. She tells the stories but creates a space that eliminates direct shaming and hostility. Another quality that makes her plays work their magic is the fact that she is in a position to tell these stories. Keeping in mind B.D. Tatum's argument that racism is interconnected with power, Smith as an

African American woman and highly skilled actor has the agency to perform characters through her own body on stage. She performs white men, black men, Jewish men, black women, white women, old women, young women, young kids, and anyone she would like to impersonate. Aware of her positionality, she uses it to her advantage and creates an opportunity to be an agent of change.

Cornel West also acknowledges how Smith's work helps "deepen the dialogue," when he writes, "the gendered character of the Black-Jewish dialogue often produces obstacles that compound the problems and render us more paralyzed. Smith's deepening of this dialogue by *de-patriarchalizing* our conversation is a major contribution in this regard" (Fires, xix). As West highlights, Smith, through her interviews and dramas, transcends the problems that other authors have had in our past. Instead of focusing on the ways that *we* differ, Smith reveals the humanity in people. She exposes suffering, even as it differs from one person to the next. It is this interconnecting that works alchemy in the classroom. As Smith says herself in *Talk to Me*, "I borrow people for a moment to understand something about them, and to understand something about us. By "us," I mean humans" (*Talk to Me* 294).

Anna Deavere Smith is answering a call to service. She promotes solidarity through education. In a recent San Francisco interview, she commented, "I only talk to people who have lost something. It is their losses that give their stories power." This is true. She contributes to the American canon with each play because they are engaging, rich with cultural reference, and most importantly, promote empathy. Anna Deavere Smith's work aims to expose reality, but through the lives and voices of the people who may never be heard - - and certainly not in relationship to each other. This unique

panoply of perspectives nurtures the fledgling empathies of young people who might eventually do something about the inequalities and injustices of American culture. For this reason, we must read her work. We owe it to the next generation of thinkers and leaders, and writers, including Ta-Nehisi Coates, whose work seeks to reveal the complexities of inequality, bringing together lived experience with moments of the actualization that call them to work for change. As teachers, we seek to create these moments in the classroom, through critical evaluations of our own lived experience. When he comes to formal education, we have these moments through exposure to multiple viewpoints and critical evaluations of our own lived experience. In an interview with Krista Tippett, Coates explains his education: “I think I was looking for enlightenment from my teachers. I think I was looking for exposure. I think I wanted to see other things about the world. I think I wanted to be exposed to different worldviews.”

- Ta-Nehisi Coates

CONCLUSION: Why Anna Deavere Smith's plays work with teenagers.

“I do not see how we will ever solve the turbulent problem of race confronting our nation until there is an honest confrontation with it and a willing search for the truth and the willingness to admit the truth when we discover it.” - Martin Luther King, Jr.

Many teachers of high school English might admit that behind every lesson and book is Martin Luther King's ideal to “admit the truth when we discover it.” As a group of people, we aspire to promote social change. Most of us know Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* and F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* by heart. We've also taught Richard Wright's *Black Boy*, Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Are God*, Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun*, and lately Ta-Nehisi Coates' *Between the World and Me*. These texts are extremely powerful and important in starting conversations about race and racial inequality. Their narrators tell necessary stories of the oppressed, who suffer and fight their ways through the obstacles that structural racism creates. However, they do not have the *same* critical “teach ability” and texture that Anna Deavere Smith's texts have in her plays. Excluding Ta-Nehisi Coates' story, they all include fictional accounts of people imagined by the authors. Their characters speak to their experiences and injustices, but the texts, as a whole, are fictional. They present narratives, where the main character makes sense of his or her life and guides the readers to an understanding or truth about the stories. Reading these stories, students experience how these “imagined” characters feel, and in the classroom, these texts provide springboards into many important discussions about equality and structural racism. However, they do not get as many “real” people onto the stage to tell authentic stories about life as Anna Deavere Smith does in *Fires in the Mirror* and *Twilight: Los Angeles*,

1992. Her plays do not feature one narrator who “makes sense” of the realities. The narrator, therefore, is metaphorical, living in the minds and hearts of the people who cognitively wrestle with what they see on the stage. This significant quality makes Anna Deavere Smith’s exceptional and uniquely impactful when exposing high school students to the diversity and the power of perspective when it comes to racial hostility.

In her introduction to *Twilight: Los Angeles 1992*, Anna Deavere Smith explains why avoiding insularity is vital when trying to create change. She writes, “My predominant concern about the creation of *Twilight* was that my own history, which is a history of race as a black and white struggle, would make the work narrower than it should be. For this reason, I sought dramaturges who had very developed careers and identities, outside the theater profession” (*Twilight* xxi). She explains how she surrounds herself with people who have different perspectives to offer on her subjects. For Smith, the diversity in voices helps give her work layers of meaning. She illuminates these intricacies about the Brooklyn riots in the introduction:

One the surface this picture was Black and White. When one looks more closely, one sees something much more interesting than the stark lines of Black and White. One sees motion, and one hears multiple symphonies. The Black people didn’t all come from one place, and neither do the Hasidim. One looks closely and one sees that not every hat is the same kind of hat and not every yarmulke is the same kind of yarmulke. (*Fires* xxxvi)

As Smith explains, racial conflict is complicated and “interesting”, far from dualistic and “black and white.” Our objective as teachers then is to shift thinking and

dispel stereotypes. The aim is to create student awareness that most problems are complex and worth examination. In her introduction to *Twilight*, Anna Deavere Smith elaborates on the nuances of the King riot, calling them “shades of loss.”

Twilight “is an attempt to explore the shades of that loss [The Rodney King beating]. It is not really an attempt to find causes or to show where the responsibility was lacking... I have been particularly interested in the opportunities the events in Los Angeles give us to take stock of how the race canvas in America has changed since the Watts riots. Los Angeles shows us that the story of race in America is much larger and more complex than a story of black and white. There are new players in the race drama. Whereas Jewish merchants were hit during the Watts riots, Korean merchants were hit this time. Although the media tended to focus on blacks in South-Central, the Latino population was equally involved. We tend to think of race as us and them - us or them being black or white depending on one’s color. The relationships among peoples of color and within racial groups are getting more and more complicated. (Twilight xxi)

Smith captures this very idea of *us* and *them* in her monologue about Jason Sanford, “a handsome white man,” who she tells us in the preface notes is “an actor.” She titles the monologue “They,” which reflects the racial pronouns that “we” like to use

when describing others. What makes Jason's analysis of the word "they" so insightful, is the fact that he speaks to the fluid application of the term. "They" could be any number of people in a margin or in a racial group other than one's own. Smith includes Jason's monologue in her scene titled "The Territory." These titles "They" and "Territory" represent language that people employ when differentiating between their own identities and their own territories. The questions of "Who am I?" and "Where do I belong?" reverberate from Smith's *Fires in the Mirror*. It would be a nice pedagogical choice to start with *Fires in the Mirror*, then move to *Twilight*. Smith includes more white voices, who, like Jason Sanford, surprise audiences with their perspectives.

Who's they?

That's interesting

'Cause the they is

A combination of a lot of things.

Being brought up in Santa Barbara,

It's a little bit different saying "they" than being brought up

in

Um,

LA.

I think,

'Cause

Being brought up in Santa Barbara

You don't see a lot of blacks.

You see Mexicans,

You see some Chinese,
But you don't see blacks.
...
Even the times that I have been arrested
They always make comments
About God, you look like Mr.,
Uh,
all-American white boy...
You look responsible.

Sanford's monologue about stereotyping and skin color resonates in my classroom for many reasons. It has the four qualities that make most material "work" with teenagers: engaging, open-ended, creative, and relevant. To start, high school students respond to "real talk." This means they like vulnerable accounts of someone telling the truth, even if that means admitting to being "arrested." The fact that Jason is a white kid, who retells how his appearance confused his community, is part of this appeal, particularly because the majority of my students are privileged white students. As he says, he looks like "all American white boy." Most high school students resent stereotypes and generalizations based on appearance. They relate to the frustration of Sanford, therefore reading his monologue in class provides an opportunity for students to discuss discrimination and inappropriate profiling.

In addition to an open-ended text, the last two elements of a strong, "teachable" text are its creativity and relevancy. With Anna Deavere Smith, students pick up on her profound research and creative alignment of character witnesses. They often respect her

effort in traveling all over the country to listen to everyday people. In this way, she is not only creative but “down to earth.” While, the frequently taught texts named above, do provide wonderful opportunities for growth, they do not always encourage and inspire students to participate in shared experiences. With Anna Deavere Smith’s plays, she diversifies her monologues with colloquial street talk and more sophisticated monologues. This variation keeps students engaged and intrigued. Anna Deavere Smith’s plays are clearly relevant, and this fact keeps my students invested in the material. As stated earlier, Smith’s journalism and verisimilitude highlight the relevance and meaningful purposefulness of our study. In teaching her work, I have had positive feedback from the students. In fact, most of the students reflected that *Fires in the Mirror* was their favorite unit. With this in mind, my plan is to explore Smith’s current project, *Notes from the Field*, which has the potential to be especially engaging and effective in the classroom. This project, unlike her last two plays, tackles a bigger structural issue: the school to prison pipeline. Rather than interview many people involved directly and indirectly in a riot, Smith addresses another political and necessary structural racist condition: our broken education system and how it has failed students of color. Anna Deavere Smith’s website describes the production:

Smith fearlessly brings to life the stories of 18 real-life people in the one-woman show, among them current and former inmates, protesters, educators, and politicians. Shining a light on a lost generation of American youth, *Notes From the Field* is an expression of community, positivity and, ultimately, hope by inspiring awareness and change. Enlightening and empathetic, the film tackles questions of race and class through

compelling first-person stories, drawing on the accounts of well-known figures like Rep. John Lewis, NAACP Legal Defense Fund president Sherrilyn Ifill, and activist Bree Newsome, as well as everyday people struggling in a broken system” (*Notes from the Field*).

This new project reflects Smith’s years of research and theater experience. While currently airing on HBO, if published, the scripts could be studied as written texts like her previous work. For the work to be effective for teens, the teacher should require reading, watching, rereading, and discussing. Students also need context for every character. A unit on Smith requires scaffolding to insure that students can make sense of the details.

Teachers are always looking for material like Anna Deavere Smith’s work to facilitate what Derald Wing Sue calls “Race Talk.” In his book titled *Race Talk and the Conspiracy of Silence*, he explains the psychology behind why race talk is so difficult even in academic settings. In the preface, he writes:

The attitudes, beliefs, and fears inherent in race talk symbolize our society’s resistance to unmasking the embedded inequities and basic unfairness imposed on citizens of color. We avoid honest racial dialogues because innocence and naiveté could no longer serve as excuses for inaction. Race Talk potentially makes the “invisible” visible and opens gateways to view the world of oppression through realistic eyes. (Sue, xii)

One notable observation that Sue makes in his research is how defensiveness surfaces immediately in a multicultural environment. This is especially true when leading

discussions with adolescents who need more guidance addressing sensitive subjects. Over the years, I have noticed how quick students are to suggest the racism of others and equally, how defensive students become during these discussions. Most often students simply stop talking. Sue acknowledges this exact classroom experience when he writes,

When people of color talk racism, Whites seem to interpret statements as a personal accusation, and rather than reach out to understand the content, respond in a defensive and protective posture... Their defense response to a racial dialogue is seen as protection against (a) criticism (“You just don’t get it!), (b) revealing personal shortcomings (“You’re a racist!”), or (c) perceived threat to their self-image and egos (“I’m not a racist - I’m a good person.”) Because of this stance, Whites who feel attacked may engage in behaviors or argumentative ploys that present denials and counterpoints because they view the racial dialogue as a win-lose proposition. (Sue 140)

Derald Sue uncovers many realities that I have encountered teaching in public schools in California. He understands that teachers need more specific training guiding these students on these topics and creating curriculum that nourishes the right issues and provokes the questions that need to be addressed. Another writer, Glenn E. Singleton addresses our collective need for professional development in his book *Courageous Conversations about Race*. In this book, he offers many suggestions and lessons to get students talking. He calls teachers to honor what he calls the “Four Agreements of

Courageous Conversation: “Stay Engaged, experience discomfort, speak your truth, and expect and accept non-closure” (Singleton 70). All of these tenets help keep students focused and safe, but his acknowledgment that “non-closure” might not occur is extremely helpful when many students expect closure. We are a culture that embraces hope and happy endings, which makes “race talk” difficult. Students want solutions or promises that our American culture will “fix” our broken system. However, it is the understanding that we have work to do that makes a difference with young people. They need to know the realities of the world they live in, and Anna Deavere Smith provides honest pictures.

Sandra Kumamoto Stanley agrees that Smith’s plays “allow[s] students to engage immediately in a number of questions concerning the politics of identity” (Stanley 194). She teaches *Twilight* in her college classes and notes that, “Smith raises crucial questions of representation that we need to confront as both readers and teachers. Smith’s work questions the myth that we are living in a “color blind” society in a post-identity age” (Stanley 195). Similar to many conclusions about the power of Smith’s “amalgamation of the forms of social documentary,” Stanley narrows Smith’s *alchemy* to her ability “to disrupt the underlying ideological assumptions embedded in the theater of the media. She, however, is not interested in inverting binary oppositions and thus privileging, in this case, King over the police officers; rather, Smith is interested in creating a third, hybrid space depicting character as plural and multiple, as an ever emerging identity” (Stanley 198). It is the third hybrid space that we need to create change, and we achieve this space by listening to every story - - as Anna Deavere Smith listens. While she

started this work as an actor, she's becoming best known as someone who listened to American stories and helped her audiences *listen* as well. At sixty-seven years old, Smith will not be doing this forever, but she tells us that "the listening part of it, I can do for as long as I have ears, because I think it's very beautiful. It's my purpose for being, really and it's usually beautiful."

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