

POST IDENTITY POLEMIC IN ANNA DEAVERE SMITH'S "PERFORMANCE PROJECT FIRES IN THE MIRROR: CROWN HEIGHT, BROOKLYN AND OTHER IDENTITIES"

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Abstract:

Smith embraced the documentary performance technique to explicate multiple dimensions of racial, ethnic, sexual, economic and religious intricacies within a community. Her performances are triggered by a radical instinct to perform the social. Smith's performance practice has become a critical and social tool when the communities are struggling to infiltrate a voice of themselves into the chaos of contemporary social interaction. While interviewing subjects and presenting them as characters on stage with subtle changes in costume and make up, she relies much up on manifesting various features of language to perform characters. This performance project is based on a real life incident of race riots in Crown Heights, Brooklyn in 1992 between Blacks and Jews.

Keywords: Performance of Race, Crown Heights Brooklyn 1992, Post Identity Performance, Documentary Theater.

Fires in the Mirror: Crown Heights Brooklyn and Other Identities is the first work Anna Deavere Smith performed outside the locale of her investigations. Being a smashing commercial success, the performance was premiered in the New York Public Theatre and was later shifted to a larger theatre named Anspacher. In 1993, a television version of the performance was broadcast by the PBS American Play House. These performances marked a radical departure from Smith's earlier works in the series.

In her interview with Kevin L. Fuller and Andrea Armstrong, Anna Deavere Smith emphasized the silence that prevails in the contemporary debates on race:

Andrea Armstrong: Where do you see silence in Theatre?

Anna Deavere Smith: I think the biggest silence is from

white people.

AA: About?

ADS: Race.

AA: What sort of silence is this – Is it about talking about
race completely?

ADS: Well there is that. I think that enough (white)people
have told me...that in their private lives they don't really
talk about race, whereas in the private lives of Black
people I know, that takes up eighty percentage of
everyday life. (Smith 1993, 1)

The debate on race is silenced deliberately so that the whites can transform the discourse on race to serve specific purposes. The appropriation of Black presence in culture according to white hegemonic norms is an instance of the phenomenon known as racial a literacy. People who are racially a literate refuse to specify their awareness of discrimination in interracial atmosphere. There is no total denial of the presence of other races, but their cultures and racial details are properly acknowledged and even celebrated. But it appears as an appropriation of other races to transmit and legitimize a white centred world view (Vaz 1992, 1-2). This hegemonic practice can be contested by challenging various forms of representation of racial identity. Deconstructing racial stereotypes with a sharp focus on the politics of their originary process is a practice in this direction. Anna Deavere Smith's prismatic performance collage *Fires in the Mirror: Crown Heights, Brooklyn and Other Identities* defines contemporary representation of cultural space and identities as essentially Black/White as a contested terrain.

Smith in *Fires in the Mirror* offers a number of real-world characters focusing on issues inherent in the race riots between Blacks and Jews in Crown Heights, Brooklyn, in 1991. Smith has scrupulously attended the people she wanted to recreate on the stage as they brood, reflect and weep on issues related to the riots. The re-presentation of the cadences of their speech, gestures and postures resulted in a complex, multi-layered communal dialogue on race, identity, politics, religion and thousands of other social forces that constitute the American experience.

Crown Heights in *Fires in the Mirror* is projected as an urban emblem of conflicts evolving in contemporary societies. This is a domain which holds many contradictory

views, interpretations and truths. Smith in Crown Heights appears both as a virtuoso actress and as an impartial chronicler of urban tensions. The 'circle of confusion,' as MIT physicist A.M. Bernstein (Smith 1993, 23) analogizes, is exposed through excerpts presented from interviews conducted among Crown Heights residents and others including Rebbes, activists, and intellectuals. The actual energy of the performance, exactly like Smith's earlier works in On the Road series, radiates from the fact that the words she is using are taken verbatim from what real people have said. Fires in the Mirror is a faithfully rendered experience, a work that honours the complexity of social conflict without trying to capitalise on them for the performer's own rhetorical ends.

Anna Deavere Smith's debut to the 'theater goes' was when Fires in the Mirror was commissioned by Joseph Papp New York Public Theater's New York Shakespeare festival in 1992. This performance piece was directed by Christopher Ashley for the New York Public Theater in the summer of 1992. Christopher Ashley's works have already appeared at Manhattan Punch Line, WPA and New York Theater Work Shop. Fires was produced for television by PBS's American Play House, with George C. Wolfe, the present day director of the Joseph Papp New York Public Theater as director, and broadcast in April 1993.

The very idea of Crown Heights emerged accidentally in Smith when George Wolfe asked her to participate in a festival of performance artists called 'New Voices of Color' in December 1991. Smith was already annoyed by the Crown Heights Riots which erupted on August 19 of the same year. (Martin 1996, 186) Crown Heights was burning and the waves of disturbances have shaken the whole New York City from August 19, 1991 onwards. What was personally compelling for Smith about Crown Heights was that it was a community with graphic differences. The Hasidim usually wore black and white so that their identity is declared visibly. "Every one wore their roots on their heads. The Hasidic men wore Yarmulkes and black hats, and women wore wigs. The African Americans and Caribbean Americans frequently had on hats with Afro-centric meaning, or dread locks with shells in their hair" (Smith 1993, xxxiii-xxxiv). Smith's exploration of people enmeshed in the Crown Heights incidents was fuelled by a desire to capture the personality of a place by attempting to embody its varied population and varied points of views in her own persona (1992, 18).

Smith's dramaturgical technique encompassed a variety of public discourses such as oral histories, documentary reportage, television talk shows, network news broadcasts and telephone interviews. Fires in the Mirror: Crown Heights Brooklyn and Other Identities basically was created from interviews with individuals involved directly or indirectly in the events in Crown Heights in 1991. The material collected from the interviews was rendered

verbatim by manifesting the words of the subjects as well as the essence of their physical beings in characterization.

Fires in the Mirror: Crown Heights Brooklyn and other Identities is the first work by Smith created not strictly for a specific community or group. Her previous works in the On the Road series aimed at particular objectives and communities. In such works, Smith's role as a co-ordinator of different views and an editor of words uttered by different individuals seems eclipsed in Fires in the Mirror in favour of performing characters in the conventional theatrical sense. The alienation effect on the stage in Smith's previous works paves the way for theatrical identification in Fires in the Mirror and other later works. Therefore, different sites of production, huge communities, large number of audience, theatre halls, and video projections in Fires in the Mirror: Crown Heights Brooklyn and Other Identities indicate Smith's development as a performer from communities to popular stage.

August 1991, Crown Heights

Racial violence exploded in Crown Heights in the wake of the death of Guynes-American boy Gavin Cato by one of the cars in the motorcade of the Lubavitcher Hasidic Grand Rebbe Menachem Schneerson. The car struck and killed Gavin Cato and injured his cousin Angela at 8.30 p.m. on August 19, 1991. Immediately after the tragedy, rumours spread that an ambulance service run by Hasidic Jews rescued the car driver and his passengers while the children lay bleeding on the road. The police escorted the cavalcade of the Grand Rabbe and the event took place at the intersection of Utica Avenue and President Street. The twenty-two-year-old driver of the car Yosef Lifsh allegedly escaped to Israel.

The insular community of Lubavitchers is an orthodox Jewish sect that survived Nazi genocide in Europe in Nineteen Forties and the Black community in Crown Heights consisted of Caribbean immigrants from Jamaica, Guyana, Trinidad and Haiti without U.S. citizenship. The Crown Heights incidents of 1991 caused the hidden tensions between Blacks and Lubavitchers to erupt. These sects have been experiencing long standing oppression, trauma and discrimination within their own communities.

The Black community in Crown Heights reacted violently to the Lubavitchers and to the cops. Three hours later in the same evening, twenty-nine year old Yankel Rosenbaum, a visiting Hasidic History Professor from Melbourne, Australia, was stabbed to death by a gang of Black young men. Riots broke out in many places in Crown Heights as Blacks and Lubavitchers set fires, unleashed terror and attacked police and government headquarters.

On August 21, 1991 morning Yankel Rosenbaum's funeral services were held at the Lubavitcher headquarters in Crown Heights and his body was sent back to Australia for burial. Reverend Al Sharpton, spiritual leader of the Black community in Brooklyn, held a

news conference and demanded the arrest of Yosef Lifsh. Later, on September 17, Al Sharpton flew to Israel to notify Yosef Lifsh of a civil suit brought against him by the Cato family.

Many people hinted at the controversial role of white racism in Crown Heights incidents. "Black leaders have charged that Lubavitchers have enjoyed 'preferential treatment' in the community from police and other city agencies, including permission to close off major city streets during Jewish holidays"(Smith 1993, xiv). The Jews in Crown Heights deplored Black anti-Semitism and pointed out the slogans 'Kill the Jews', 'Get the Jews out' and 'Hail Hitler'. The Black spokesman in Crown Heights described Jews as diamond merchants and devils evoking the age-old tales of sinister conspiracy by rich Jews controlling things in U.S.

On the very first day of the riots, police reported that sixteen men were arrested and that twenty policemen had sustained injuries. During the riots days, police beat up Black reporters and arrested between 150 and 300 young black men as a preventive measure and kept them in custody for days unofficially. On September 5, New York Grand Jury decided not to indict Yosef Lifsh for the death of Gavin Cato, while Lemerick Nelson Jr., a sixteen-year-old Trinidadian American, was charged with second degree murder of Yankel Rosenbaum. During the Crown Heights riots, the Lubavitchers felt victimised by the legal system.

Hit the Real Nerve : Performing Fires in the Mirror

In his Foreword to *Fires*, Cornel West has pointed out three basic shortcomings of Black –Jewish dialogue in present day U.S:

We often appeal to an abstract humanism and faceless universalism that refuse to confront the concrete conflicts that divide us. Second, we usually conduct the conversation as if the tension between black and Jewish men is, exactly, the same as those between Black and Jewish women. Third, we attempt to conduct the exchange in a public space equally to both blacks and Jews, yet fail to recognise that Jews seem to be much more eager to inhabit this public space than Blacks. (West, Cornel 1999, 485)

Fires in the Mirror in every sense are a triumphant effort to overcome these shortcomings by problematizing a concrete social conflict amidst the heated moments of murder, mayhem and madness of the Crown Heights crisis.

The reactions of Blacks and Jews were rendered by exploring both the tragic and comic aspects of human responses to examine critically the society's complicity in cultural stereotypes that restrict imagination. Cornel West describes Smith's theatrical ability in

portraying the real life characters of Crown Heights as something that takes the spectator beyond any self-righteous condensation toward parochial Hasidism and provincial Black urbanities.

The purpose of the interviews conducted for *Fires in the Mirror* was to investigate directly a community to render in theatrical and performative means. The interviews were conducted approximately eight days in the fall of 1991. The print version of *Fires in the Mirror* includes twenty-nine vignettes created from tapes of the interviews. Smith sought out and selected her subjects according to her performance purposes though she was a stranger in Crown Heights. (Martin 1996, 187)

Only one interview, the interview with Monique Big MO Matthews, rap artist and one of Smith's previous pupils, was taken from innumerable interviews Smith had conducted in the past for her early performance pieces in *On the Road...* series. This interview was originally conducted in 1989 Spring at the University of California, Los Angeles, while Smith was a Fellow in Residence at the Center for Afro-American Studies. Smith's intention in bringing Monique Big MO Matthews was to make the atmosphere more theatrical because Smith was very much interested in the performative behaviour of Monique and her ability to change the settings by her vigorous presence and energetic articulation. "I performed MO in many shows, and in the course of performing her, I changed the setting to a performance setting with a microphone. I was inspired by a performance that I saw of Queen Latifah in San Francisco, and by MO's behavior in my class, which was performance behavior, to change the setting to one that was more theatrical, since MO's everyday speech was as theatrical as Latifah's performance speech" (Smith 1997, 47). The interviews with Ntozake Shange, Angela Davis, Letty Cottin Pogrebin and the anonymous Lubavitcher woman were conducted over the telephone. All other interviews were conducted directly at the residence or office or at the airport.

Apart from her earlier works, Anna Deavere Smith made elaborate use of props, lighting, costume changes and sets to perform her interviews. Together with the minute details of dressing and appearance, the characters were represented as if they were in the original locations. In Smith's earlier community performance works, neither the costume nor the location was specifically imitated. But in the stage production of *Fires in the Mirror*, the locations in which she conducted interviews were perfectly simulated by using music, sound effects and other histrionic devices. Smith enacted 29 characters drawn from the interviews she had conducted in this production and realised the characters fully, not simply 'represented' them by means of their voices (Martin 1996, 86). She made use of simple things such as a golf cap raincoat, a sweater, an office chair, and an armchair to signify different characters. Smith used minimal clothing changes and some props such as a cap, a shawl, a tie, or a beaded sweater in performing different characters including Al Sharpton,

an orthodox house wife, Rose Malamud and a Black activist Sunny Carson. Especially in the New York performances, often the people on whom she had based her portrayals were sitting among the audience. The Director of *Fires in the Mirror: Crown Heights Brooklyn and Other Identities*, Christopher Ashley recalls an unexpected kind of criticism from a woman sitting in the audience, that she loved Smith's work but that she did not usually wear the sweater which Smith wore during the performance of her character. This moment can be seen as an evidence for Smith's successful representation of her subjects on the stage.

During her interview with Ntozake Shange, playwright, poet and novelist, Smith gathered all possible details of Ntozake Shange's appearance through the phone. The only clue Ntozake gave about her physical appearance was that she took one ear-ring off to talk to the phone (Smith 1997, 11). In the performance, Ntozake was placed at the centre of the upstage, smoking in an armchair. In the interview Ntozake associated the issue of identity with surroundings by contemplating the trauma of African –Americans.

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 are still not the desert.
(Smith 1997, 11)

Angela Davis, a Professor in the History of Consciousness Department at the University of California, Santa Cruz and well-known scholar, activist and author was interviewed by Smith through telephone from an office room at the New York Public Theater. Angela Davis reflected on race, racism and race relations by pointing out the dynamism of communities to change:
What I am interested in is communities

That are not static.
That can change,
That can respond to
New historical needs.
(Smith 1997, 44)

In her interview with Letty Cottin Pogrebin, author of *Debra, Golda and Me, Being Female and Jewish in America* and one of the founding editors of *Ms Magazine*, Smith was specifically informed about the surroundings and clothing of the interviewee. Letty Cottin Pogrebin was interviewed while she was in her office at home on West Sixty Seventh Street and Central Park in Manhattan. Smith gives an account of Pogrebin's details in the print version of *Fires*: "Her office has an old-fashioned wooden roll top bookcase filled with

books. She says she was wearing leggings and a loose shirt” (Smith 1997, 69). Pogrebin reads the story of Isaac who survived the Holocaust from her book *Debra, Golda and Me, Being Female and Jewish in America*. The last of the interviews through telephone conducted by Smith for *Fires in the Mirror* was with a Lubavitcher woman who is referred to as an ‘Anonymous Lubavitcher woman’. Smith had already visited the home of this Lubavitcher woman three times. In the performance of *Fires*, the stage is set on the basis of these visits and on the basis of the information provided by the lady through the phone. In the interviews conducted through phone Smith takes enough freedom in setting the stage because all the details of the surroundings and the physical appearance of the interview are not properly communicated. Still Smith’s endeavour to recreate the original settings and atmosphere to heighten the theatrical effect is remarkable. George C. Wolfe, the director of Joseph Papp New York Public Theatre was interviewed for *Fires in the Mirror* in Los Angeles. The premiere of *Fires in the Mirror* was in the Shakespeare Festival of New York, directed by George C. Wolfe. During the interview, “George was wearing denim jeans, a light blue denim shirt and white leather tennis shoes. His hair was in ponytail. He wears tortoise /wire spectacles” (Smith 1997, 17). He speaks in short and broken sentences about blackness and about his feelings of extra-ordinariness in a context of social discrimination. My blackness doesn’t resis – ex – re --

Exist in relationship to your whiteness

.....

It does not exist in relationship to –

It exists

It exists

I come from –

It’s very complex,

It’s confused neurotic

At times destructive

Reality, (1997, 18).

Minister Reverend Al Sharpton had granted Smith an interview for fifteen minutes during a meeting, which was in progress in his office on Fifty Seventh Street West and Seventh Avenue in New York. He is a very impressive and charismatic person with straightened hair and wearing a suit, colourful tie and a gold medallion that was given to him by Martin Luther King Jr. Smith observed that Reverend Sharpton’s face was much younger and more innocent than it appeared to be in the media and his humour was in his face (Smith 1997, 29). His presence is inevitable in an issue concerning Black people in New York because he argued vigorously for the rights of the Blacks. Al Sharpton does not hint at the Crown Heights crisis in the first part given to him, but his very presence reminds the spectator of the battle the Blacks have fought in the United States so far.

Sharpton speaks about his patron James Brown in an unassumingly theatrical manner. The presentation of Sharpton is a lucid instance of Smith's ability to find out the theatricality of speech patterns and gestures in real life people and to transform them into people with performative significance. The microcosmic attentiveness in minute details in recreating people on the stage elucidates Smith's stark capabilities of observation and listening. Going through the full range of motions and absorbing each and every emotional vibrancy of the individual she performs and Smith's performance is almost an aerobic activity which mediates the essence of a character.

Rivkah Siegal, a Lubavitcher woman, was interviewed in the kitchen of an apartment in Crown Heights in a spring afternoon. She was wearing a wig and a knit sweater. Rivkah spoke near the round wooden table with a coffee mug and another Lubavitcher woman with light blond hair and without a wig observed the interview. She spoke of wigs, "that I'm kind of fooling the world --- people and I would wear a different wig, and they'd say I like your new hair cut and I would say it's not mine" (Smith 1993, 34). Leonard Jeffries, a professor of African American Studies at the City University of New York, was interviewed on Wednesday, November 20, 1991 in a conference room in the African American Studies Department at CUNY. A big African American bodyguard of Prof. Jeffries was present during the interview. Jeffries was wearing a multi-coloured African top and an African hat. "Sometimes he scratches his head with great ease and authority" (1993, 53). This piece was a part of the original performance of *Fires in the Mirror: Crown Heights Brooklyn and Other Identities* and was excluded from the PBS television production of *Fires*. Prof. Jeffries's controversial theories of African American history and his black activism have irritated Jews all over United States. Arthur Schlesinger wrote a book titled *The Disuniting of America* which portrays Jeffries as a person working against America. All Foundations and Multinationals ceased to fund Jeffries's projects and there were threats to his life.

"Our black parents were actually taken as cattle and as, as animals and placed into slave ships like sardines amid feces and urine ... Our women raped before our own eyes ... this is a crime of tremendous proportions," (Smith 1997, 63-64) says Minister Conrad Mohammed, New York minister for the Honourable Loise Farrakhan in his interview with Anna Deavere Smith. During the interview in a Café in Roosevelt Island in NY, his companion, another Muslim, whom he was travelling with, was watching the interview and the Minister was drinking black coffee with a packet of sugar. His tapping of the sugar packet on the edge of the table is worth noting during the performance. He compared the dignity of the blacks in U.S. with that of the poor people in India, Bangladesh or Nigeria and pointed out that "they are in better condition than the Black men and woman today, right now even at Harvard. They have a contextual understanding of what identity is" (1997, 65). Jeffries and Mohammed put in their views regarding the race relations in harsh terms to

signify the role of the white hegemony in the terror unleashed against Blacks in Crown Heights.

The last part of *Fires in the Mirror* consists of people who are directly involved in the Crown Heights incidents 1991 as victims, sufferers or as people who bore witness to scenes of terror during the riots or activists who worked for healing the wounds. This section of the performance included Carmel Cato, Gavin Cato's father, Norman Rosenbaum, brother of Yankel Rosenbaum, Rabbi Joseph Speilman, spokesman of the Lubavitcher community and many others.

The spokesman of the Lubavitcher community in Crown Heights, Rabbi Joseph Speilman appeared for the interview in black fedora, black jacket and reading glasses. There was a tape recorder in front of the Rabbi at the table and as he talked he slightly slid around it (Smith 1997, 79). The Rabbi was very near to the location of the accidental death of Gavin Cato at the time of the accident. He gives a graphic description of the events on August 19, 1991. According to the Rabbi, the driver, Yosef Lifsh "on seeing himself in such position that he felt he was going definitely hit some one, ... he steered at the building, so as to get out of the way of the people. ... Regrettably one child was killed and another child was wounded ... he jumped out of the car realising there may be a child under the car, he tried to physically lift the car ... as he was doing this the Afro Americans were beating him already. He was beaten so much he needed stitches on the scalp and the face, fifteen or sixteen stitches. The EMS (ambulance) responded with three ambulances ... when the Jewish ambulance [one of the Jewish community ambulance core] came ... the EMS asked ... for certain pieces of equipment that they were out of" (1997, 81). As the Hasidic ambulance left, leaving one of the passengers of the carcade of the Grand Rabbi, he talked to the Rabbi through cell phone to rescue him. The Rabbi found a deliberate attempts to evoke riots. At The same time he asserts Yankel Rosenbaum died due to the carelessness of the doctors.

Reverend Canon Doctor Heron Sam was interviewed in the rectory office at St.Marks Church in Crown Heights with clocks ticking and church bells ringing in the background. In the performance of *Fires in the Mirror* the character of Rabbi Joseph Speilman is followed by Doctor Heron Sam who reacts to all claims of innocence by the Lubavitcher. The Grand Rebbe had a threat to his life from the Satmars, enemies of the Lubavitchers and his motorcade was always in a hurry.

Every week the Grand Rabbi visited his dead wife and father-in-law in the cemetery with high escort and band. He travelled at seventy miles per hour in a big city like Brooklyn. When the accident took place, "the Jewish ambulance was concerned about the van while some boy lay dead. The people showed their anger, [increase volume] they burned ... upturned police cars... I think in retaliation, murdered one of the Hasidic. But that was

just the match that lit the powder keg. Its gonna happen again and again” (1997, 86-88). The black fury is manifested in a similar manner at various quarters of the play.

Michael S. Miller, the executive director of the Jewish Community Relations Council signals at the intensity of the hatred and divide between Jews and Blacks in Crown Heights and justifies the Lubavitchers. The funeral of Gavin Cato was turned into a political rally to express the Black's hatred to the Jews. Miller emphasises the slogans such as 'Kill the Jew' and 'Hail Hitler' during the funeral procession. "I am not going to participate in verbal acrimony, not only were there cries of 'Kill the Jew'... there were cries of 'Hail Hitler'. There were cries of 'Hitler didn't finish the job'. There were cries of 'Throw them back into the ovens again'" (1997, 97-98). This interview was conducted at 9.30 am. on Tuesday November 12, 1991 in his office in the president Street, Crown Heights.

The 'Anonymous Young Man #1' episode is most symptomatic of Smith's obsession with people whose speeches are rhythmic and appearance theatrical. The interview conducted by Smith in the recreation room of the Ebbets Field apartment was originally scheduled for a woman called Kim. The Anonymous Young Man #1 and anonymous young man #2 "started watching the interview from the side of the room but soon approached me and began to join in. The Anonymous Young Man #2 was most vocal" (Smith 1997, 89). He was a witness to the scene of Gavin Cato's death. He bore witness to the scene of the Jewish ambulance taking the driver away from the spot of the accident. Anonymous Young Man #2 was wearing a black jacket and a very odd-shaped multicoloured hat. He argues that the young blackbody arrested for the murder of Yankee Rosenbaum is innocent.

Crown Heights resident Henry Rice was interviewed on Thursday November 21, 1991 at the Jackson Hole restaurant on Lexington Avenue in Manhattan. During the interview Mr. Rice was eating a large messy hamburger and horizontally chopped pickles with a Millerlite bear. At certain points of the interview, he sat up with his right hand on his hip in an authoritative posture. Smith explains his pose as very unaffected but truly authoritative. During the interview, there was loud music in the background. During the riots Mr. Rice worked with a black community activist called Mr. Richard Green.

The Next two episodes in *Fires in the Mirror* are by Norman Rosenbaum, Yankel's brother. The first piece titled "My Brother's Blood"; is a speech delivered at a rally organised by Lubavitcher women across City Hall in NYC. Mr. Rosenbaum had a beard, and wearing hat and a pinstriped suit spoke loudly and passionately over the microphone on the stage, holding his hat to keep it on his head because the day was so windy. The second piece of Norman Rosenbaum titled "16 Hours Difference" was an interview at the Newark airport departure gate of Continental Airlines at 7 A.M. He was moments before his flight to Los Angeles and then back to Australia. Norman explains how he got the shocking news of his brother's death. Smith met Sunny Carson, a youth activist, in the next

spring in a restaurant in Brooklyn where the judges come for lunch. Sunny was dressed in a black turtleneck and a grey jacket with a mud cloth hat. He has as bodyguard in black leather jacket; he came in the middle of the interview. Sunny blames the mass media which portrayed him as a villain during the Crown Heights events. This is mainly due to this close interaction with young black boys: "I speak their language. They don't engage in long dialogue/ anymore/ Just short. Word" (Smith 1997, 112). According to Sunny Carson, the crisis evolved because the leaders of the nation have become unable to comprehend what young people speak.

It always amazes me
 How the city fathers,
 the power brokers ,
 Just continue to deny whats happening.
 And it is just getting intolerable for me to continue
 To watch this small arrogant group of people continue
 To get this kind of preferential treatment.
 (Smith 1997,112)

Richard Green, an activist and Director of Crown Heights Youth Collective was interviewed in a van. He was also the co-ordinator of the Black Jewish Basketball team constituted after the riots and named project CURE. Green turns sideways to speak to Smith who is sitting in the back. He speaks about the limitless rage which evolved during the Crown Heights event among Black Youths. "Seven—and eight-and nine and ten year old boys were running at those cops with nothing, just running at them. That's rage." During his interview, he attended a call .The interview session ends up with a very significant statement about Malcolm X: "They know Malcolm --- because the system has given 'm Malcolm..." (Smith 1997, 124-125). . To signify his role in the project CURE : a Black–Hasidic basket ball team that developed after the riots and co-ordinated by Richard Green, Smith wore a basket ball jacket with the project CURE's insignia during the performance of Green. Because of the Los Angeles riots in the wake of the Rodent King beating incident, the Fires in the Mirror show was cancelled and Smith went to a demonstration at Time Square: "Richard Green was walking around with a megaphone, the way you and I carry a purse, or the way somebody else would carry a gun. And I said, 'What are you doing with this megaphone? Are you going to make a speech?' He said, 'Oh no, I always carry it in the street because a lot of times you see the trouble, and a lot of times you just talk to them they'll calm down'"(357). Rabbi Sheer Hecht, Reuvan Ostrov, a member of the Project CURE and assistant chaplain at Kings County Hospital, Roslyn Malamud, a Lubavitcher resident in Crown Heights are among the other characters in the last part of Fire in the Mirror.

Reverend Al Sharpton appears again in the last part explaining his effort to bring the driver Yosef Lifsh who has already fled to Israel to escape the court. Sharpton with Alton Maddox went to Israel to notify Yosef about the case. The whole episode convinced him that: “Blacks do not have equal protection under the law.” Rose Malamud, the Lubavitcher housewife, blamed Reverend Al Sharpton for bringing outrageous young black people to Crown Heights to light up riots. But Sharpton points out the inhuman attitude of the grand rabbi, and the Lubavitchers in general, after the death of Gavin Cato are responsible for what has happened. To the white community in U.S., Sharpton was an exponent of reckless racial politics and violence, especially during the Crown Heights events. When Sharpton appeared in his first episode in *Fires in the Mirror*, Smith attempted to present him in an entirely different dimension by de-contextualizing him from his familiar image among the public, mainly constructed by the white media. The relationship between Sharpton and Singer James Brown was brought to the focus: “James Brown raised me.... James Brown took me to the beauty parlor one day and made my hair like this” (Smith 1997, 29). Smith described that Reverend Al Sharpton was “an example of a person who is an expert at this kind of performance.” Smith says in her introduction to *Fires in the Mirror*: “They have a greater gift than actors for making what they have said before seem as though they are saying it for the first time.” .

Smith's interrogation into the very process of interviewing people to perform them on the stage elucidates the complex nature of presenting selves in everyday life.

My interview with the Reverend Sharpton lasted little more than Fifteen minutes but his gifts of communication are also great that the material was as rich as material that I have gotten from people who I spoke with much longer. In other words, regardless of the Reverend Sheraton's sound-bite speech, he is completely present in the speech. That kind of presence is a gift (Smith, 1992, xxxi).

Smith described him as a ‘thirty second sound bite king’.

The last piece in *Fires* is Carmel Cato, Gavin Cato's Father. He was interviewed at the corner of Crown Heights, where the accident occurred. Near the wall where the car crashed killing Gavin Cato, an altar was erected for him. Carmel Cato was wearing a trench coat and there is “Darkness and Reggae music in the background” (Smith 1994, 136). There is heavy traffic and there is a crowd on the street. Cato speaks in a West Indian accent. In this most emotionally charged piece in the *Fires in the Mirror*, Carmel Cato told Smith: “The whole week that Gavin died my body was changing, I was having different feelings, I stop eating, I didn't eat nothing, only drink water, ...for two weeks --- I was lingering, lingering, lingering, lingering all the time.” At the same time he recognises harsh moments of injustice done by Jewish people towards Blacks: “The Jewish people, they are very high up, it's very big thing, they runnin' the whole show from the judge right down” (1997, 136).

The image of the father weeping in the darkness as a concluding piece seems to affect the equilibrium throughout the performance.

Performing the Dialogic of Race

Dramatisation of the actual event is not the prime objective of Smith. The situations that provoked the Crown Heights riots 1991, the death of Guinean American Gavin Cato, and the retaliatory killing of the Hasidic Australian scholar Yankel Rosenbaum are not at all dramatised in *Fires in the Mirror*. The actual moments of crisis are drawn back to the background to regulate a multiplicity of debates and interpretations. This performance strategy encompasses a variety of techniques in treating history so that we can call it "enacted oral history" (Richards, S. L. 1993, 35). At the same time the "kind of history performed doesn't enclose events within a linear narrative based upon interpretations of cause and effect" (Lyons, 1994, 44). Fragments, quotations, broken pieces of speeches, partial poems, stories, readings and slogans are gathered together to constitute representative moments in theatre without defining a well-structured linear progressive narrative. What Smith creates is an open-ended, flexible and dynamic narrative which rejects a unified, coherent system of interpretations which mass media are most likely to produce. *Fires* fundamentally is an effort to perform representative moments in history denying all possibilities of fixities and certainties regarding history and identity. "The history enacted here [in *Fires*] is a history of the play of discursive practices in which the event and their reverberations are subjected to diverse configurations and reconfigurations in the immediate past of a critical event" (Lyons 1994, 44). The actual event is not at all re-enacted theatrically, but the process of re-enactment takes place in another time and space presenting multiple responses, views and interpretations sequentially by imitating actual people.

Richard Schechner, while defining the pattern of performance, described a 'hot center' of events. Each event is reproduced theatrically at the same time and space or at a different time and space evoking a discourse:

An accident happens, or is caused to happen (as in Guerrilla theatre); a crowd gathers to see what is going on. The crowd makes a circle around the event or, as in the case of accidents, around the aftermath of the event. Talk in the crowd about what happened, to whom, why; this talk is largely interrogative: like dramas and courtroom trials, which are formal versions of street accidents, the event itself is absorbed in to the action of reconstructing what took place. In trials this is done verbally, in theatre analogically: by doing again what happened actually, fictionally, mythically, religiously. The questions asked in the crowd are those which Brecht wanted theatre audiences to ask of theatre. (Schechner, R 1977, 159)

In *Fires in the Mirror*, the Crown Heights incident 1991 functions only as a 'hot centre' which is retold and re-enacted to provoke infinite questions from the audience. In Crown Heights; Brooklyn we have a hot centre with the involvement of the spectators fading into the rim. Schechner calls such an event 'eruptions'. In an eruption, it is not the accident gunfire or falling wall or whatever that attracts the spectators around the hot centre. The spectators are kept in the location by reconstruction or re-enactment of the event in the form of storytelling, argument, debates and even re-presentations. The reconstruction can happen in a different time and different space other than the location of the eruption. Crown Heights crisis of 1991 is theatricalized in different times and spaces as re-enactments from the voices, gestures, movement's emotions and words from people who were involved at the hot centre physically or otherwise. The technique of building a performance text for Smith is to reconstruct responses of actual subjects from the hot centre conducting interviews and re-enact them at different times and spaces. The narrative structure through which the reconstruction takes place is emphatically unconventional and innovative in *Fires in the Mirror*. Charles R. Lyons illustrates the reconstruction narrative in Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* which "reconstructs a past through segments of dialogue that reveals its characters processing their vision and revision of prior events. The difference rests in the fact that the dramatic past of these performances is both immediate and historical and the language of the individual narratives constitutes the performance as a whole"(1994, 44). The narratives of the past bring in the motives for Oedipus's self blinding. But in *Fires in the Mirror* the narratives themselves provide the action. The narrative reconstruction of Crown Heights incidents in *Fires* breaks through the theatrical conventions of Western theatre.

Similarly the presence of an authorial text that frames the various segments and episodes into a unified dramatic structure is totally alien to Smith's performance of *Fires in the Mirror*. Hence the performance is unobtrusively polyphonic to the extent that it represents multiple voices and refuses to bridge any difference by asserting an authorial presence or intervention. Various segments remain incoherent and episodic without a definite frame of theatrical action and narrative. The beginning and end of each episode are accomplished by invoking the audience through a minor change of costume, simple change of furniture or a change in the projected title.

The performer presents her fully immersed in the hot centre of events devoting her body to the characters reproducing statements originally articulated by the subjects there. Being both the interviewer of the subjects involved in the actual incident and the interviewed for the spectators, Smith performs her words gathered as an interviewer to the spectator with well imagined amplification and editing. "The absence of an authorial voice puts the emphasis upon the polyphonic display of voices and, as well, upon the presence of Anna Deavere Smith as both the original audience for the speaker and the physical instrument through whom these statements are represented to the audience"(Lyons, 45).

In her early attempts in community theatres, Smith's authorial presence on the stage received responses from her subject sources to present them to the audience. Since the sources are familiar to the audience (many of them were personally present among the audience, during such performances), the presentation of what she had received from the other end (by personal interview or telephone call or television appearance) has a greater impact among the audience. When Smith decided to discuss issues of national or international import such as race, gender, power and sexuality, her presence as a non-interrupting, invulnerable coordinator of different views has become insignificant. "Smith, who fascinated us by not quite transforming into the persons whose voice and gestures she represented, was now more an actress capable of playing many roles sequentially. What jumped to the foreground were the events and people of Crown Heights" (Martin 1996, 82). The process of identification increases consistently as the spectator community becomes larger and larger. In Smith's performance voyage from community based performances to theatre to video production, an immediate recognition is absolutely apparent. As Carol Martin has observed, in the early works, Smith's 'voice' was heard along with all other voices she simulated. In her later works Smith's personal voice receded (1996, 82). Smith's presence as an authorial voice that defines and determines the debate in theatre recedes as the subjects interviewed by Smith reigns over her persona as an interviewer, author and performer.

Contours of Post identity Representations

Smith's engagement with racial conflict in *Fires in the Mirror* simultaneously reveals the problematic of representing racial identities. Performing identities in a 'postidentity' era (Guiner, L 2002: 35) ostensibly points to the processes of destabilising categories of identity. In her interview with Smith, Lani Guiner defined the present moment as 'postidentity moment' since "it is after identity movements"(35). At this historical moment, the notion of identity is no more defined as a closure and the locus of 'identity' is not so easily definable. Smith believes that the *On the Road* project took shape during a time "that many institutions were going through identity shifts with regard to gender and ethnicity"(1993, xxxiii).

This complex state of affairs is further detailed with reference to her experience in Crown Heights where she witnessed the most graphic display of negotiation of identity(1993, xxxiii). According to Smith, there is a battle between the perception of a place and the moment to moment identity of a place. This battle in present day America, ultimately results in consistent negotiation of identity.

This does not imply that their identities are not susceptible to negotiations of identity, a major strategy of individuals and communities to survive when identity based politics and social movements cease to be effective. Smith's primary task as a performer in

Crown Heights is to destabilize these essential identities represented as Blacks and Whites. Smith's performance project *Fires in the Mirror* basically is a revolt against cultural stereotyping of racial identities, a process which forbids reflection and self examination. The Black/White bipolar nature of the Crown Heights riots of 1991 is deliberately ignored in an effort to organise a dialogue between various fragments of the community thereby unmaking the roles assigned to these fragments in representation. Smith embarks on re-mapping the community-scape of Crown Heights by contesting the condensation of a complex social conflict into an essentially Black/White crisis.

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