Fires in the Mirror Study Guide

Fires in the Mirror by Anna Deavere Smith

BOOKRAGS

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Introduction

In 1991, in the Crown Heights section of Brooklyn, New York, a member of the Lubavitch branch of Hasidic Judaism lost control of his car, jumped the curb, and killed a seven-year-old black child. This incident and the circumstances surrounding it led to a period of extremely high tension between the black community and the Jewish community in Crown Heights, including riots and the murder of the Lubavitcher Jew, Yankel Rosenbaum. As these events were unfolding, Anna Deavere Smith began a series of interviews with many of those involved in the conflict as well as those who were able to make key insights into its nature, its causes, and its results. In her play *Fires in the Mirror*, first produced in New York City in 1992, Smith distills these interviews into monologues by twenty-six different characters, each of whom provides an important and differing view on the situation in Crown Heights.

When Smith performs her play, she acts in the role of each interviewee, embodying his/her voice and movements, and expressing his/her message and personality. These perspectives combine to form a profound explanation of the conflicts between the different Crown Heights communities. Smith examines many of the historical causes of the situation, many of the racial theories that help to explain it, and a broad variety of opinions on the events and people involved, in order to come closer to the truth about what happened and why. Her play, which is the thirteenth part of her unique project *On the Road: A Search for the American Character* combines journalism and drama in order to examine not just the racial tension and violence in Crown Heights, but much broader themes, including racial, religious, gender, and class identity, and the historical conflict between these communities in the United States.

Author Biography

Smith was born September 18, 1950, in Baltimore, Maryland. The daughter of an elementary school principal and a coffee merchant, she was the oldest of five children. Smith attended Beaver College, outside of Philadelphia, from 1967 to 1971, and after graduating she became interested in the Black Power movement, moving to San Francisco in part to participate in social and political agitation. While living in San Francisco, she began to take classes at the American Conservatory Theatre, where she earned an MFA in 1976, and then she moved to New York City to work as an actor. Smith then began a professorial career teaching at universities, including Yale, New York University, and Carnegie Mellon. She also began a unique, long-term project called *On the Road: A Search for the American Character*, made up of a series of plays that combine journalism with dramatic performance.

Smith's first play/documentary for *On the Road* was produced in Berkeley, California, in 1983. She went on to write and perform two additional plays in the 1980s, but it was her play *Fires in the Mirror* (1992) that rocketed her into the spotlight. In 1993, *Fires in the Mirror* was published in book form, was a runner-up for a Pulitzer Prize, and was televised by PBS as part of the "American Playhouse" series. She has since written and performed four additional plays, including *Twilight: Los Angeles 1992* (1993), which won an Obie Award and was nominated for a Tony Award.

Smith has also acted in television shows, including *The West Wing*, and movies, including *The American President* (1995). She was awarded a prestigious "genius grant" from the MacArthur Foundation in 1996, and in 1998, in association with the Ford Foundation, she founded the Institute on the Arts and Civic Dialogue at Harvard (now at New York University) to address socially and politically conscious art. Smith continues to write, act, teach, and perform. She has taught at Stanford University, is a tenured professor at Tisch School of the Arts at New York University, and is an affiliated faculty member at New York University School of Law.

Plot Summary

Identity

The opening section of *Fires in the Mirror* is called "Identity." In its first scene "The Desert," Ntozake Shange discusses identity in terms of feeling a part of, yet separate from, one's surroundings. In the next scene, an anonymous Lubavitcher woman tells the story of a black child coming into her house on Shabbas, the Jewish holy day, to switch off their radio. "101 Dalmations" is George C. Wolfe's perspective on his racial identity, in which he argues that blackness exists independently of whiteness.

Mirrors, Hair, Race, and Rhythm

The second section, "Mirrors," contains only one scene, in which Aaron M. Bernstein discusses how mirrors are associated with distortion both in literature and in science. Physicists make telescopes with mirrors as large as possible in order to minimize the "circle of confusion."

The next section, "Hair," begins with a scene in which an anonymous black girl talks about how Hispanic and black teenagers in her Crown Heights junior high school think about race and act according to their racial identities. In "Me and James's Thing," the Reverend Al Sharpton explains that he straightens his hair (a practice that developed in the 1950s to simulate "white" hair) because he once promised the soul music star James Brown that he would always wear it this way. Next, Rivkah Siegal discusses the common Lubavitch practice of wearing a wig.

Angela Davis is the speaker in the only scene in the section "Race." She considers how the place of blacks and women in U.S. society has changed since the 1960s, and then goes on to discuss the concept of race more generally. In the "Rhythm" section, Monique "Big Mo" Matthews discusses rap, particularly the attitude toward women in hip-hop culture.

Seven Verses

The first speaker in "Seven Verses" is Professor Leonard Jeffries, who describes his involvement in *Roots*, the classic book and then television series about the slave trade. Letty Cottin Pogrebin argues in the next scene that blacks attack Jews because Jews are the only racial group that listens to them and views them as full human beings. Minister Conrad Mohammed then outlines his view of the terrible historical suffering by blacks at the hands of whites, stressing that blacks, and not Jews, are God's chosen people.

In the scene "Isaac," Letty Cottin Pogrebin reads a story about her mother's cousin, who participated in Nazi gassing in order to survive the Holocaust. Robert Sherman then

contends that the English language is insufficient for describing and understanding race relations.

Crown Heights, Brooklyn, August 1991

The final section of the play begins with Rabbi Joseph Spielman, who gives his versions of the accident that killed Gavin Cato and of the stabbing of Yankel Rosenbaum, stressing that the black community lied about the events in order to start anti-Semitic riots. Reverend Canon Doctor Heron Sam then describes his opposing view of the two events, full of resentment that the Lubavitcher Grand Rebbe's entourage was reckless and unconcerned about having killed Gavin Cato. In "Wa Wa Wa," an anonymous young man from Crown Heights describes what he saw of the accident, maintaining that the police never arrest Jews or give blacks justice. Michael S. Miller then argues that the black community in Crown Heights is extremely anti-Semitic.

In "Knew How to Use Certain Words," Henry Rice explains his role in the events. While he was trying to stop blacks from instigating violence, he was hit and handcuffed by the police and, after he was released, threatened by a young black man. Norman Rosenbaum gives a speech about the injustice of his brother's stabbing. In the next scene, "16 Hours Difference," Rosenbaum describes his reaction at the time he heard about his brother's murder.

In "Bad Boy," an anonymous young man contends that the sixteen-year-old blamed for Yankel Rosenbaum's murder is an athlete and therefore would not have killed anyone. Sonny Carson then describes his connection with the black youth community and his motivation for leading them in activism against the white power structure.

Rabbi Shea Hecht argues that integration is not the solution to race relations, and he interprets the Lubavitcher Grand Rebbe's comment that all are one people. In "Rain," Reverend Al Sharpton discusses why he went to Israel to pursue legal action against the driver who killed Gavin Cato. Richard Green then speaks of the rage of black youths in Crown Heights and the lack of role models for black youths.

In "The Coup," Roslyn Malamud contends that the blacks involved in the rioting were not her neighbors, and she blames the police department and the leaders of the black community for letting things get out of control. Reuven Ostrov describes how Jews get scared because there are Jew haters everywhere. Finally, Carmel Cato describes his trauma at seeing his son die and expresses his resentment of powerful Jews.

Characters

Anonymous Girl

The anonymous girl of "Look in the Mirror" is a "Junior high school black girl of Haitian descent" who lives near Crown Heights. She discusses who follows and copies whom in junior high school, giving insights about the racial attitudes that develop during adolescence.

Anonymous Lubavitcher Woman

The anonymous Lubavitcher woman in the second scene of the play is a mother and preschool teacher in her mid-thirties. She appears slightly flustered by the religious restrictions that dictate what Hasidic Jews can and cannot do on Shabbas, but she laughs about the situation in which a black boy turns off their radio for them.

Anonymous Young Man #1

"A very handsome Carribbean American man with dreadlocks," the anonymous young man of the scene "Wa Wa Wa" insists that the police unjustly favor Jews over blacks. He was on the street when Yosef Lifsh's car ran over Gavin Cato, and he believes that Lifsh was drunk. When no one wants to do anything to stop Lifsh from getting away, the young man starts to cry. He believes that there will never be any justice because the words of black people "don't have no meanin'" in Crown Heights.

Anonymous Young Man #2

An African American man in his late teens or early twenties, the anonymous young man from the scene "Bad Boy" insists that young black men are either athletes, rappers, or robbers and killers, but not more than one of these things. For this reason, he argues, the sixteen-year-old athlete accused of killing Yankel Rosenbaum is innocent.

Aaron M. Bernstein

A physicist at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Aaron Bernstein is a man in his fifties who wears a shirt with a pen guard. He describes how physicists create telescopes in order to minimize the "circle of confusion" caused by mirrors that are not "perfectly spherical or perfectly / parabolic."

Sonny Carson

An activist and agitator, Sonny Carson is involved in the Crown Heights riots. He does not "advocate any coming together and healing of / America," but wants to make up for past injustices by protesting, and instigating violence. Commenting that "Jews come second to the police / when it comes to feelings of dislike among Black folks," he cites his close connection to the youth of Crown Heights and his ability to mobilize them into activism that will last all summer.

Carmel Cato

Gavin Cato's father, Mr. Cato is a deeply traumatized man with a "pronounced West Indian accent." Originally from Guyana, Mr. Cato describes his son's death and his own reaction afterward in the final scene of the play. He explains that what is "devastating" him is that there is no justice because Jews are "runnin' the whole show." He then claims, however, that there is no way the Jews can "overpower" him since he is "special," having been a breech birth (born feet first).

Angela Davis

Davis is the activist and intellectual whose scene "Rope" discusses the need for a new way of viewing race relations. She became involved in philosophy and activism while studying in the United States and Europe during the 1960s. In 1970, she was placed on the FBI Most Wanted List and was imprisoned on homicide and kidnapping charges, of which she was acquitted in 1972. Since then, she has had a successful and prominent career as a scholar and activist, writing about issues such as race theory, and working to achieve prison reform, racial equality, and women's rights. As her scene in *Fires in the Mirror* reveals, Davis is a sophisticated historian and philosopher as well as a practical thinker about community and community relations. At the time of her scene in the play, she is a professor in the History of Consciousness Department at the University of California, Santa Cruz.

Richard Green

Green is a community activist who speaks about the rage that young blacks feel and about their lack of role models and guidance. He stresses that leaders of the black community, such as Al Sharpton, do not control the youths actually carrying out the riots, and that the youths' rage builds up and cannot be contained. Implicitly defending the young black people who used phrases like "Heil Hitler" in the riots, he argues that they do not even know who Hitler was, and that the only black leader they know is Malcolm X. Green is the director of the Crown Heights Youth Collective and the co-director of a black-Hasidic basketball team that developed after the riots. His main role during the period of racial tension was to attempt to end the violence.

Rabbi Shea Hecht

A Lubavitcher rabbi and spokesperson, Rabbi Hecht talks about community relations in his scene "Ovens." Dismissing the idea that religious groups should try to understand each other, he says they need only to have mutual respect based on their unique needs. He does not acknowledge that it is difficult for a community of people to have respect for another community's unique needs unless they understand what these needs are.

Leonard Jeffries

Jeffries is a controversial intellectual figure who speaks in the play about his work with Alex Haley on the famous book and television series *Roots*. After enjoying marked success in his private education, Jeffries worked and studied in Europe and Africa and then took a position as professor of African American studies at the City University of New York. By this time, he had developed a profound interest in working as an advocate for black social advancement, and he had begun to espouse some of his key theories about race and race relations. He began to come under criticism for his views that there are biological and psychological differences between blacks and whites, and that wealthy European Jews played an important role in running the slave trade. A *New York Times* editorial in 1990 denounced Jeffries as an incompetent educator and a conspiratorial theorist, and between 1992 and 1994 Jeffries fought a legal battle with the City University of New York over his chairmanship of the African American Studies Department. His scene in Smith's play questions whether he is an anti-Semite; explores his personal history and his view of himself; and plays with the notion of losing and discovering African roots.

Roslyn Malamud

A Lubavitcher resident of Crown Heights, Ms. Malamud blames black community leaders for instigating the riots and blames the police for letting them get out of control. She is shocked and horrified by the riots, and seeks to blame the series of events on individuals and policies rather than community groups or any kind of entrenched racial tension. She claims that her black neighbors want exactly what she wants out of life, although she admits that she does not know them.

Monique "Big Mo" Matthews

A rapper from Los Angeles, Mo is a skilled poet and a socially conscious political thinker. In the preface to Mo's scene, Smith writes, "Mo's everyday speech was as theatrical as Latifah's performance speech," referring to the famous rap artist and actor Queen Latifah. Mo feels a great deal of anger at black male rappers who demean women and who have a double standard about promiscuity, and she expresses these sentiments in her music and in conversation. Mo has ties to feminism because of what

she calls her "female assertin,'" and she believes that rap music is a powerful tool of expression that is essentially rhythm and poetry.

Michael S. Miller

Executive director at the Jewish Community Relations Council, Mr. Miller points out that "words of comfort / were offered to the family of Gavin Cato" from Lubavitcher Jews, yet no one from the black community offered condolences to the family of Yankel Rosenbaum. He argues that "There is no boundary / to anti-Judaism" among blacks.

Letty Cottin Pogrebin

Well known Jewish American writer and founding editor of *Ms*. magazine, Letty Cottin Pogrebin appears in two scenes. Smith describes her as "Direct, passionate, confident, lots of volume," and it is also apparent from Pogrebin's lines that she is self-confident and eloquent. In "Near Enough to Reach," Pogrebin speculates that the tension and violence between blacks and Jews is due to the fact that Jews are close to blacks and take them seriously enough to address them in their rage. In "Isaac," she is reluctant at first to share a Holocaust story because she worries that they are becoming dulled through overuse, but she goes on to read about the horrific experience of her mother's cousin.

Henry Rice

A resident of Crown Heights, Mr. Rice was involved in the riots, first as a skeptic of those preaching peace, and then as a preacher of peace. He was hit by the police and handcuffed, then threatened by a young black man with a handgun. "Good-natured, handsome, healthy," he describes the anger between police and blacks, and the violence on both sides.

Norman Rosenbaum

Yankel Rosenbaum's brother, Norman Rosenbaum is a barrister from Australia who is angry and upset about his brother's death. He speaks out passionately in his first scene that there should be justice for his brother's murderers, and in his second scene, he describes his reaction to the news that Yankel had been killed.

Reverend Canon Doctor Heron Sam

The pastor of St. Mark's Church in Crown Heights, Reverend Sam gives his version of the events in Crown Heights. Finding fault with a number of the Lubavitcher Grand Rebbe's habits and activities, he claims that Yosef Lifsh ran the red light and that the Jews did not care about the fatally injured Gavin Cato. He says, "These Lubavitcher

people / are really very, / uh, enigmatic people. / They move so easily between / simplicity and sophistication," a comment that gets to the root of his feelings toward Lubavitchers as a group.

Ntozake Shange

A "playwright, poet, novelist," Ntozake Shange is a profound abstract thinker. In the opening scene of the play, she considers what "identity" is and how people are different from their surroundings.

Reverend Al Sharpton

A politician, minister, and activist famous for his advocacy of black civil rights, Sharpton is one of the key black community leaders involved in the Crown Heights events. Sharpton grew up in Brooklyn and was ordained as a Pentecostal minister in 1963. In addition to working as a manager in the music industry with singers including James Brown, Sharpton began a career in community activism. He rose to a prominent role in the black community in 1986, after he organized protests in Howard Beach, where a black man had been chased into the street by a white mob and then killed by a car. A year later, Sharpton became closely involved with the case of Tawana Bradley, a fifteen-year-old black girl who claimed she had been raped by five or six white men, one of whom had a police badge. Inquiries later suggested that Bradley had been lying, but this did not seriously damage Sharpton's career as an activist.

At Gavin Cato's funeral in 1991, Sharpton spoke out against racism by Hasidic Jews and helped to mobilize large protests in Crown Heights. He then flew to Israel personally to serve legal papers to Yosef Lifsh, the bodyguard who ran over Gavin Cato. In the play, Sharpton speaks in two scenes. In the first scene, he discusses why he wears his hair straight, in a style associated with whites, explaining that it is because of a promise he made to James Brown and that it is not a "reaction to Whites," although it is not entirely clear that this is true. In his other scene, "Rain," he describes and defends his role in the events following Gavin Cato's death, which he calls a "*complete* outrage."

Robert Sherman

Sherman is the director of the mayor of New York's "Increase the Peace Corps," a youth organization promoting nonviolence. He "smiles frequently," and he is "upbeat, impassioned . . . Full. Lots of volume, clear enunciation, teeth, and tongue very involved in his speech." While trying to define and explain the racial situation in Crown Heights, he becomes frustrated with the English-language vocabulary about race and he stresses that the language's inadequacy in expressing ideas about race "is a reflection / of our unwillingness / to deal with it honestly."

Rivkah Siegal

"A very pretty Lubavitcher woman, with clear eyes and a direct gaze," Rivkah Siegal is a graphic designer. Wigs have long been a "big issue" for her, in part because she feels like they are "fake" and she is "kind of fooling the world" when she wears one.

Rabbi Joseph Spielman

A Lubavitcher rabbi and a spokesperson in the Lubavitch community, Rabbi Spielman maintains that Jews share no blame whatsoever in the Crown Heights racial riots. Wearing a black fedora, black jacket, and reading glasses, he is interviewed in his home. Rabbi Spielman's one-sided explanation of the accident and the events that followed reveal that he is unable or unwilling to view the situation from the perspective of members of the black community. He also engages in racial stereotypes of blacks, commenting that they were drinking beer on the sidewalks and that a black person stole a Lubavitcher Jew's cellular phone.

George C. Wolfe

George Wolfe is the producing director of the New York Shakespeare Festival, for which *Fires in the Mirror* was written. After constantly being treated as a "special special creature" in his private black grade school, he remembers being treated as though he were insignificant when he ventured outside of the black community. His words become slightly muddled when he attempts to explain how his blackness is unique and independent of whiteness.

Themes

Racially Motivated Anger and Violence

The central theme of *Fires in the Mirror* is the racially motivated anger and violence in Crown Heights, Brooklyn, in the early 1990s. From the many perspectives in Smith's play, the reader is able to piece together a representative variety of emotions that blacks and Lubavitcher Jews felt toward each other. The play also provides many contradictory descriptions of the violence that resulted from these emotions, which helps flesh out the truth of the historical events.

Smith explores the historical background behind what happened in Crown Heights by highlighting possible explanations and theories behind the relations between blacks and Hasidic Jews in Brooklyn. She includes perspectives on black history and Jewish history, particularly slavery and the Holocaust, and she explores different perceptions of black and Jewish relations with the police, the government, and the white majority in the United States. Acknowledging the diverse and multifarious causes behind the anger and violence in Crown Heights, Smith highlights the views of black and Lubavitcher leaders and spokespeople as well as anonymous members of each group. Her play seeks an explanation of the conflict but does not necessarily imply that any one viewpoint about it is completely accurate.

Inter-Community Relations

Fires in the Mirror is thematically ambitious in the sense that it does not confine itself to Brooklyn but uses the situation in Crown Heights to provide more general insights about race relations. The characters consistently provide their perspectives on whether racial harmony is possible in the United States, and many discuss how to go about achieving this goal. Not all characters desire peace, however; some continue to seek retribution for past and current crimes. Sonny Carson, for example, looks to redress racial injustice by working as an agitator. In expressing views about race in the United States and abroad, Smith draws from many key philosophies about race relations and refers to important figures in the history of race relations, including Malcolm X, Alex Haley, and Adolph Hitler.

Smith broadens her focus further by including commentary on gender and class relations, such as Monique "Big Mo" Matthews's scene about sexism in the hip-hop community, and in the variety of scenes that make reference to the economic disparities between the Lubavitch and black communities. Angela Davis, like Robert Sherman and other characters, encourages the reader to think outside the traditional understanding of race, which she describes as obsolete and inadequate for understanding how communities of people interact. Theories such as these are tested in real contexts, particularly during the final section, in which characters forcefully articulate their

understandings of community and community relations because emotions are running so high.

Identity

Throughout *Fires in the Mirror*, Smith considers how people construct their notions of selfhood, particularly how they see themselves in relation to their community and race. From anonymous young men and women, to well-known leaders like Al Sharpton, to middle-aged Lubavitcher housewives, characters reveal a struggle to establish their personal identities and to negotiate how they fit into their religious and racial communities. In George C. Wolfe's scene, for example, in which Mr. Wolfe becomes somewhat muddled, insisting that his blackness is independent from another person's whiteness, Smith suggests that a person's racial identity may depend on his/her relationship with other races as well as with the way that they view their own race. Mr. Wolfe argues that his racial identity exists independently of other racial identities, but Smith implies that it may in fact be more complex than this.

History

Smith is a historian, in the sense that her goal is to gather a multiplicity of perspectives in order to focus on the truth of the past. By displaying the many sides of the issue, she delves into the root causes of the situation in Crown Heights and she attempts to communicate what really occurred. At the same time, however, Smith is also interested in theories of historical understanding. Her play acknowledges the complexity of the situation and the difficulty of ever ascertaining exactly what is at the root of it all, implying that history is not objective, but that all people, including historians, form their understandings of past events based on their racial attitudes, emotions, and attachments. Smith may even be suggesting that there is something deeply unknowable about history, which is why she refuses to take any objective stance on the situation in Crown Heights.

Style

Journalistic Drama

Smith's unique style of drama combines theatre with journalism in order to bring to life and examine real social and political events. Each scene is drawn verbatim from an interview that Smith has held with the character, although Smith has arranged the subject's words according to her authorial purposes. She captures the essence of the characters she interviews, distilling their thoughts into a brief scene that provides a separate and coherent perspective on a particular situation or idea.

Poetic Verse

One of the key tools in Smith's artistic process is to render the words in poetic verse; this allows her to arrange each character's words in an aesthetically beautiful form, and to emphasize certain words and phrases that she finds important and that express the rhythm of the interviewee's speech. Smith also includes pauses, breaks indicated by dashes, and nonsensical noises like "um" to capture a sense of character and real speech. Then, in a one-woman show, Smith actually embodies the people she has interviewed: dressing like them, using their words, and moving using their gestures. This creative form of journalistic drama, which Smith developed herself, allows her as writer and actor to vividly express the people involved in the themes and events of her subject. It gives her a great deal of authority over the subject matter, and draws the audience into a variety of real perspectives on a real-life situation.

Diverse Perspectives

Fires in the Mirror contains twenty-nine different scenes, involving twenty-six different characters. The characters in these scenes vary widely in their opinions about the themes of the play, based on their backgrounds, personalities, politics, and ties to the situation. Smith uses so many opposing voices because, when taken as a whole, they create a profounder impression of what really happened in Crown Heights than a single perspective would, even if this single perspective were supposedly unbiased.

Historical Context

Crown Heights is a neighborhood in Brooklyn, New York, with a black majority, largely from the West Indies, and a Hasidic Jewish minority, making up about 10 percent of the population. The neighborhood includes a large number of undocumented black immigrants, and it is the worldwide capital of the Chabad-Lubavitch branch of Hasidic Judaism. Also known simply as Lubavitch, which means "city of brotherly love" in Russian, this sect is composed of adherents to the strict teachings and customs of Orthodox Judaism. At the time of the riots, the Lubavitcher Grand Rebbe, or spiritual leader, was Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson, who many Lubavitcher Jews considered to be the Jewish Messiah. Tensions between Jews and blacks in the Crown Heights neighborhood had been running high because of the perception among Lubavitchers that there was a great deal of black anti-Semitism, and because of the perception among blacks that there was a great deal of white racism and that Lubavitchers enjoyed preferential treatment from the police.

On August 19, 1991, a car driven by Grand Rebbe Schneerson's bodyguard, Yosef Lifsh, ran a red light, was hit by another car, and jumped a curb onto the sidewalk where Lifsh ran over a seven-year-old black child named Gavin Cato. A private Hasidic-run ambulance appeared on the scene to evacuate the driver, possibly on orders from a police officer, but left Gavin Cato to wait for the New York City ambulance. Cato died a few hours later, and members of the black community began to react with violence against Lubavitcher Jews and the police. That evening, a group of young black men stabbed and killed a Hasidic scholar from Australia named Yankel Rosenbaum. Sixteen-year-old Lemrick Nelson Jr. was arrested in connection with the murder.

Rioting by both black and Lubavitcher groups continued throughout the next day, and Yosef Lifsh departed from the United States for Israel. Although twenty police officers were injured, the police were somewhat restrained in their response, partly because of sensitivity at the time due to the recent brutal beating of Rodney King by police officers in Los Angeles, which was caught on videotape and broadcast throughout the nation. The Reverend Al Sharpton demanded Yosef Lifsh's arrest and he led protests through Crown Heights. New York City mayor David Dinkins visited Crown Heights to urge peace but was silenced by insults and by objects thrown at him. The rioting died down by August 23, but tensions between blacks and Lubavitchers remained high.

On September 17, the day of the Jewish holiday Yom Kippur, after a Brooklyn grand jury refused to indict Yosef Lifsh, Al Sharpton flew to Israel to notify Lifsh of a civil suit against him. Proceedings against Lemrick Nelson Jr., accused of killing Yankel Rosenbaum, continued throughout the year and into the next fall, when he was acquitted of all charges. Hasidic Jews rallied outside Lubavitch headquarters that evening, October 29, 1992. The next day New York governor Mario Cuomo ordered a state review of the case. The Lubavitcher community filed a lawsuit against Dinkins and his administration, criticizing their mishandling of the riots, and Dinkins's unpopularity among Jews was a major factor in his loss to Rudolph Giuliani in the 1993 mayoral elections.

Critical Overview

Fires in the Mirror was Smith's major breakthrough. The play was a runner-up for the Pulitzer Prize, and the critical reaction to it was overwhelmingly positive. Robert Brustein, for example, writes in his *New Republic* article "Awards vs. Achievements" that Smith's play is one of "the most interesting works being produced in New York." Brustein describes the play's commentary about race and stresses that it vividly expresses emotions such as grief and rage "with an eloquent, dispassionate voice."

Reviews of the play tend to focus on the accuracy and efficacy of its political commentary, and it has become known as a superb historical document about race relations in the United States. Richard Schechner, however, was among those who discussed Smith's stylistic prowess as a writer and performer. In an article in *TDR: The Drama Review*, Schechner praises Smith's acting skills, writing that "Smith composed *Fires in the Mirror* as a ritual shaman might investigate and heal a diseased or possessed patient," in order to absorb her characters and portray them skillfully.

After PBS produced an adapted version of the play for television in 1993, broadening the influence of the work, positive reviews began to appear in periodicals with wide circulations. A *Time* critic, for example, calls the television production of the play "riveting." Exposure such as this, as well as the success of her play *Twilight: Los Angeles 1992* helped launch Smith's acting career in television and film.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1

Critical Essay #1

Trudell is an independent scholar with a bachelor's degree in English literature. In the following essay, Trudell examines the theme of identity in Fires in the Mirror *and how it relates to the racially motivated violence in Crown Heights.*

The main subject of Smith's commentary in *Fires in the Mirror* is the specific historical event of the 1991 racial tension and violence in Crown Heights, Brooklyn. Each character provides a unique perspective about how feelings such as rage, hatred, misunderstanding, and resentment were formed in individuals, and how they eventually manifested themselves in a massive community conflict. Smith is able to penetrate the nature and meaning of this conflict so provocatively, however, only by exploring the key broader issues at its roots, particularly how people develop and understand their religious, ethnic, cultural, sexual, and class identities.

Identity is a definitive issue in *Fires in the Mirror*; it preoccupies characters, including the Reverend Al Sharpton, "Big Mo" Matthews, Rivkah Siegal, and several of the anonymous black and Lubavitcher men and women. It is the subject of the first section, it is important to the extended title of the play (*Fires in the Mirror: Crown Heights, Brooklyn and Other Identities*), and it is vital to Smith's subtle authorial commentary on race relations. An examination, therefore, of how Smith treats the concept of identity and how the characters understand their identities in relation to their own and other communities will reveal what lessons can be learned, in Smith's opinion, from the situation in Crown Heights.

"Identity" is the first word in the play, after Ntozake Shange's introductory "Hummmm." Shange sees identity as an interplay between being a "part of [one's] surroundings" and "becom[ing] separate from them." As an example, she describes how a person who has been in the desert incorporates the desert into his/her identity but is still "not the desert." This notion of identity seems to pose more questions than it actually answers, but it is important because it begins to acknowledge the complexities inherent in forming a distinct racial identity.

George C. Wolfe's description of his "blackness" is similarly unclear. He breaks off, pauses, and becomes muddled when he tries to state that he is "not□going□to place myself / (*Pause*.) / in relationship to your whiteness," and when he attempts to establish the self-sufficiency of his blackness: "My blackness does not resis□ex□re□/ *exist* in relationship to your whiteness. . . . it does not exist in relationship to□/ it *exists* / it exists." His hesitancy and the sense that he is trying to convince himself of the truth of what he is saying throws doubt over the independence of his black identity. On the contrary, his scene seems to imply that racial identity is locked into a sense of self that is very much dependent on what self is not, or on what self perceives as the other or opposite of oneself.

Early on in the play, therefore, Smith throws into doubt the idea that identity is a unique series of individual traits that do not change based on one's surroundings or

relationships to other people. Instead, identity can be formed and altered by a neighborhood such as Crown Heights; this is why the subtitle of Smith's play, "Crown Heights, Brooklyn and Other Identities," suggests that Crown Heights is an identity in itself and that a resident of the neighborhood incorporates their geographical area into their sense of self. Add to this the idea that characters understand their race only in relation to other races and the result is a notion of identity that is very much dependent on how one views one's surroundings and one's neighbors as well as oneself.

The ensuing scenes continue to provide insights into what identity actually is and how people develop a racial self-consciousness. Angela Davis, for example, stresses that race is a flexible and even arbitrary construction in her scene "Rope." Arguing that the traditional concept of race is an outmoded notion constructed by European colonists attempting to conquer and colonize the world, she stresses that Europeans divided the populations of the earth into "firm biological, uh, / communities" in order to divide and dominate others. This European concept of racial identity is meaningful only through a differentiation from other races. Davis argues that it is vital to move beyond a historical notion of race in order not to be "caught up in this cycle / of genocidal / violence," and that it is important to make connections and associations with other communities.

Most of the characters in Smith's play, however, understand race as a firm biological category in which a person's identity is determined by his or her relationship to other racial groups. Community leaders such as Rabbi Shea Hecht insist that there should be no attempt for black and Jewish groups to understand each other, while Minister Conrad Mohammed argues that the Jews have stolen the identity of blacks and are "masquerading in our garment" by pretending to be God's chosen people. These are extreme views, but normal citizens□such as the anonymous teenage girl in "Look in the Mirror" who sees her class as strictly divided into black, Hispanic, and white groups, or the anonymous young man in the scene "Wa Wa Wa," who groups Lubavitcher Jews with the police□seem to acknowledge no common cultural or geographical identity between races. Even Roslyn Malamud, who argues that blacks want "exactly / what I want out of life," says that she does not know any blacks and is unable to mix with them socially because of their differences.

This firm and separate understanding of racial identity leads, as Davis says, to "genocidal / violence" because people who subscribe to it thrust everything that is negative and different from them onto another racial group. The "rage" that Richard Green describes, and which Davis would suggest comes from centuries of racial oppression, "has to be vented" somehow, and since blacks see their identity as completely separate from the Lubavitcher identity, they are able to direct all of their anger at Lubavitcher Jews. Green states that young black agitators are "not angry at the Lubavitcher community," but their rage takes this form anyway, despite the fact that Lubavitcher Jews are also a minority group who encounter discrimination and disdain in the United States.

Letty Cottin Pogrebin offers an explanation of this confusing set of circumstances in her scene "Near Enough to Reach." Discussing how Jews came to be scapegoats for the discrimination and oppression directed against blacks, Pogrebin points out that "Only

Jews listen, / only *Jews* take Blacks seriously, / only *Jews* view Blacks as full human beings that you / should *address* / in their rage." Her comments emphasize that blacks and Jews share a certain affinity because of the historic discrimination against their races by non-Jewish whites.

Most characters however, Jewish and black, do not feel any kind of Crown Heights solidarity, and see themselves as entirely separate racial groups according to the traditional European concept. Jewish characters such as Rabbi Joseph Spielman, Michael Miller, and Reuven Ostrov do not acknowledge any community ties with blacks and identify black anti-Semitism with historic anti-Jewish massacres in Germany and Russia. Meanwhile, black characters, including Leonard Jeffries, Sonny Carson, Minister Conrad Mohammed, the anonymous young man from "Wa Wa Wa," and the Reverend Al Sharpton, tend either to group Jews together with dominant non-Jewish white culture or to blame Jews specifically for the oppression of blacks.

A close reading of the section "Mirrors" and the implication of the title *Fires in the Mirror* helps to reveal Smith's commentary on how black and Jewish perceptions of their own identities make it possible for them to blame each other for the historic oppression of their racial groups and to direct all of their contempt and rage about racial injustice at each other. On the surface, the kinds of mirrors to which the section "Mirrors" and the play's title refer are telescope mirrors, which provide an amplified view of an external object. If this were the case, the title *Fires in the Mirror* would refer to an image of the riots from the perspective of an outside observer, as though each character was a mirror within the telescope and the play itself was the telescope. The many diverse perspectives are attempts to reduce, in Professor Aaron M. Bernstein's words, the "circle of confusion" at the center of the racial tension.

The more common meaning of a mirror, however, is also crucial to Smith's subtext about identity and self-reflection. As Professor Bernstein stresses, a "simple mirror is just a flat / reflecting / substance," although "the notion of distortion also goes back into literature." Therefore, in addition to referring to a tool like a telescope that allows outside observers to view the racial violence of 1991, the title *Fires in the Mirror* suggests that the characters of the play, and possibly the audience as well, view themselves and their identities as a fire that is reflected, and possibly distorted, in a mirror.

The enflamed, raging identity that blacks and Jews from Crown Heights see when they look in the mirror is Smith's most important metaphor for the identity crisis at the root of the violence in the neighborhood. Smith implies that a central motif of the play, searching for an image of an individual's identity, is comparable to seeing in a mirror a burning flame that consumes any notion of the complex, interrelated, historically aware conception of what identity really is. Without an understanding of the complex interrelations of their identities and their common bonds, racial groups in close proximity, such as the blacks and Jews in Crown Heights, are able to focus all of their rage and anger on each other, and violence inevitably follows.

Source: Scott Trudell, Critical Essay on *Fires in the Mirror*, in *Drama for Students*, Thomson Gale, 2006.

Adaptations

Fires in the Mirror was adapted and filmed for television in 1993, as part of the "American Playhouse Series" on PBS. It starred Smith, was directed by George C. Wolfe, and was produced by Cherie Fortis.

Topics for Further Study

Research Gavin Cato's death and the events that followed, as they were related in the press. Examine newspaper stories in the *New York Times* and the *Wall Street Journal* as well as accounts of the situation in magazines and in newspapers such as the *New York Post*. How would you describe the general perspective of each publication that you view? How does it compare it to the perspectives of some of the characters in Smith's play? How do you think your view of the events would be different if you had not seen Smith's play but had only encountered the situation in the media?

Consider the stylistic elements of Smith's unique form of drama, and research the larger scope of *On the Road: A Search for American Character*, her project that combines journalism and theatre. Discuss why you think Smith has chosen to use words verbatim from her interviews, why she uses so many short scenes, why she has chosen to act as each of the characters herself, and why she places the monologues into poetic verse. Describe Smith's place in the journalistic community and in the contemporary dramatic scene.

Choose a well-known figure, such as Angela Davis, the Reverend Al Sharpton, or Letty Cottin Pogrebin, and research that person's real life and career. What is your subject's place in twentieth-century race relations? How and why was s/he a key figure in the Crown Heights events? How does his/her public perception compare to his/her portrayal in Smith's play?

Smith is a versatile journalist, playwright, and performer who is able to excel at all three roles and gain a close connection to her material. Follow her documentary-play process by interviewing three or four people on a topic of your choice, transforming these interviews into brief theatrical scenes, and performing your scenes for an audience. Then evaluate your work. How was this format helpful for exploring your issue? How was it difficult or unhelpful? Describe what you learned about your topic and how this method helped you do so.

What Do I Read Next?

Alex Haley's famous novel *Roots* (1976), which was adapted into a popular television series by ABC in 1977, dramatizes the life of Kunta Kinte, a black slave kidnapped and taken on the brutal passage from Africa to the United States. The book emphasizes that Kunta never lost his pride and connection to his African heritage.

Angela Davis: An Autobiography (1974) is Davis's compelling account of her early career as an activist, including her imprisonment between 1970 and 1972.

Twilight: Los Angeles 1992 (1993), Smith's next play in her journalistic drama project, focuses on the 1992 civil unrest in Los Angeles following the acquittal of the four police officers who were caught on videotape beating Rodney King. It uses the same format as *Fires in the Mirror* and has received wide critical acclaim, including an Obie Award.

Race Matters (1993), cultural theorist Cornel West's best-known work, provides eight essays that assign equal blame to blacks, whites, liberals, and conservatives for their roles in the poor state of race relations in the United States.

Further Study

"Brooklyn Highs," in *Entertainment Weekly*, No. 168, April 30, 1993, p. 44.

The anonymous critic in this short review discusses the PBS television production of *Fires in the Mirror*.

Rayner, Richard, "Word of Mouth," in *Harper's Bazaar*, Vol. 126, No. 3376, April 1993, pp. 248—49.

Rayner focuses on Smith's methodology in *Fires in the Mirror* and includes a profile of the artist.

Reinelt, Janelle, "Performing Race: Anna Deavere Smith's *Fires in the Mirror*," in *Modern Drama*, Vol. 39, No. 4, Winter 1996, pp. 609—17.

Providing an analysis of the television production of Smith's play, Reinelt discusses Smith's performance and dramaturgical technique as well as the play's commentary on race relations.

Rich, F., "Diversities of America in One-Person Shows," in *New York Times*, Vol. 141, No. 48967, May 15, 1992, p. C1.

Rich reviews *Fires in the Mirror* and Ron Vawter's *Roy Cohn/Jack Smith*, arguing that both shows are adept at revealing the racial tensions in the United States in the early 1990s.

Rugoff, Ralph, "One-Woman Chorus," in *Vogue*, Vol. 183, No. 4, April 1993, pp. 224—26.

A profile of Smith that includes her thoughts about *Fires in the Mirror*, Rugoff's article praises the play and Smith's performance in it.

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Schechner, Richard, "Anna Deavere Smith: Acting as Incorporation," in *TDR: The Drama Review*, Vol. 37, No. 4, Winter 1993, pp. 63—64.

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"When Art Meets Journalism," in *Time*, Vol. 141, No. 18, May 3, 1993, p. 81.