

# PAL: Perspectives in American Literature - A Research and Reference Guide - An Ongoing Project

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## Chapter 8: Anna Deavere Smith (1950- )

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### Primary Works

*On the Road: A Search for American Character*, 1983; *Aye Aye Aye I'm Integrated*, 1984; *On Black Identity and Black Theatre*, 1990; *From the Inside Looking In*, 1990; *Hymn* (ballet), 1993; *Fires in the Mirror: Crown Heights, Brooklyn, and Other Identities*, 1993; *Twilight: Los Angeles, 1994*; *House Arrest*, 1997; *Piano*, 2000

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## A Student Project by Amanda Kirchner

As an actor, director, and critically acclaimed playwright, Anna Deavere Smith has not even begun to scratch the surface as to the width and depth of her multi-faceted talent. Her life long mission to discover the authentic voice in American culture has led her to create a series of productions known collectively as "on the road: A search for American Culture." Her style, a mix of journalism, realism, and production, cohesively ties together the every day memories and admissions of people across the country, knowing no racial boundary or prejudice. Her far-reaching goal as she describes it is to, "[S]earch for American character. My search was specifically to find America in its language. I interview people and communities about the events of our time, in the hope that I will be able to absorb America" (Smith 12).

Born September 18, 1950 in the highly segregated area of Baltimore, Maryland, Smith became fascinated with language and people's personal stories early on, often begging her neighbors, parents, and grandparents to tell well-worn stories over and over again. This thirst for knowledge carried her into her academic career where she earned a B.A from Beaver College in 1971. Setting out with \$80 and a suitcase, she headed for California and the American Conservatory Theatre where she earned her M.F.A. in 1976. At a party one night she struck up a conversation with a professional linguist named Julia and began to discuss her desire to change the 'how-to' method of acting so many people were proclaiming, and trying to get to the heart and soul of language and the people it represented. Her goal: to find the places in people's individual patterns of language where language fails them, and in owning those moments, actually being able to be that person. Julia gave her three questions that have since become the basis for the ever-reaching American character study Smith has embarked on. One: Have you ever come close to death? Two: Do you know the circumstances of your birth? Three: Have you ever been accused of something you did not do?

Beginning her research with these three questions, Anna Deavere Smith set out in 1979 to find America, and in 1983, she produced her first play based on her interviews and research, "On the Road: A Search for an American Character." Each play she has created, most one-woman shows, have fallen under this title and become part of an on-going series for her. Three more plays were to follow; "Aye, Aye, Aye, I'm Integrated" in 1984, along with "On Black Identity and Black Theatre" and "From the Inside Looking In," both produced in 1990. Her first critical success in the series came however in 1992 with "Fires in the Mirror: Crown Heights, Brooklyn, and Other Identities." Based on interviews she conducted after the race riots in Crown Heights following the death of a young black boy and the murder of a Hassidic student, the one-woman play garnered critical acclaim from the theatre community earning Smith a Drama Logue Award, a Drama Desk Award, and a Pulitzer Prize nomination. Her follow-up performance to such a successful piece was the even more highly praised "Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992" first produced in 1994. Following her traditional mixture of theatre and journalism, Smith based "Twilight" on interviews conducted after the Rodney King trial and beating of Reginald Denney. Within the play she takes on such diverse roles as a male Korean grocery owner, a black gang member, and white college student. Smith received two Tony nominations, an Obie, a Drama Desk, and two NAACP theatre awards for "Twilight." Most recently Smith produced "House Arrest" in 1997, performed by a multi-racial cast trained in her specific method of acting. In 2000 she produced her second multiple cast play, "Piano."

Smith's list of credits and acclaim are not solely limited to her playwrighting abilities. As an actress she has appeared in such films as Dave, The American President, and the Oscar nominated Philadelphia. She has also co-authored a ballet entitled Hymn with Judith Jamison. Currently she can be seen on the CBS medical drama Presidio Med as Dr. Letty Jordan, and NBC's The West Wing, as National Security Advisor Nancy McNally. Among Smith's many achievements she was named as the Ford Foundation's first Artist-In-Residence, and was given the 1996 "Genius" Award by the MacArthur Foundation.

Hailed as a possible savior for modern theatre (Lloyd) Anna Deavere Smith's distinctive style and mix between documentary and performance has swept through the theatre world like a fresh wind. The explanation, as Carol Lloyd notes, is relatively simple.

Not only did she make work that reflected the broad canvas of America, but also she did so without the use of massive casts, tendentious dialogue and high-art pretense. Not only was she an African-American woman, she was talking about racial issues freed from the blinders of identity politics. Not only was she a serious experimenter in the field of theater, but she was -- of all things -- entertaining [...] In portraying real people from divergent backgrounds, Smith depicts the hot pot of American culture that refuses to melt. Her technique is so seemingly simple that it is a wonder more actors-turned-solo-performers have not followed in her footsteps.

Though some of her fellow actors see her as a sell-out, exchanging real theatre for limousines and backstage chats with heads of state (including Presidents Carter and Clinton) Smith has above all things, kept true to her goal of discovering America in its language. Each of her plays and even her roles as an actress portray consistently deal with issues of race, gender, and language, commenting as Nancy McNally in an episode of the West Wing, "I'm the only woman on a conference call. Delaney can't tell when it's me talking. Do I have a bizarrely androgynous voice?" (Sorkin)

Smith, much like her theatrical productions, is a multi-faceted person. Private about the more personal aspects of her life, her most recent work is an autobiography of her time spent researching "House Arrest" in Washington D.C. Among her many credits as writer, director, producer, and actor, she is also a professor, teaching at such prestigious universities as Carnegie-Mellon, NYU, USC, Yale, and Stanford. She currently lives in San Francisco.

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