There's a lot of work to do to turn this thing around

An Interview with Anna Deavere Smith

Richard Schechner



Figure 1. Anna Deavere Smith interviews Yoruk fisherman Taos Proctor on the Klamath River in Northern California. August 2015. (Photo by Daniel Rattner)

On 8 January 2017 Anna Deavere Smith and I met in a New York City coffeehouse for our interview. Because Smith's website is so full of information, I wanted to concentrate on what people might not find there. We focused on Smith's latest endeavor, *The Pipeline Project*. The *Project*'s centerpiece, *Notes From the Field*, explores how persons living in poverty—especially young African American men—are in a pipeline pouring them from their communities into jails. By means of panels and discussions, as well as Smith's performances, *The Pipeline Project* focuses on this cruel and unjust system. I also wanted to follow up on a short piece I published in *TDR* many years ago about Smith's way of working, how she literally "incorporates" her subjects, both people and materials (1993:63–64).

At NYU, Smith is University Professor and the founding director of the Institute on the Arts and Civic Dialogue. Among her many honors are the National Humanities Medal, a MacArthur Fellowship, The Dorothy and Lillian Gish Prize, two Obies, and honorary degrees from Yale, Juilliard, Barnard, the University of Pennsylvania, Radcliffe, Wesleyan, Williams College, Spelman College, and Northwestern, among many others.

TDR: The Drama Review 62:3 (T239) Fall 2018. ©2018 New York University and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology

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Figure 2. Anna Deavere Smith portrays parent Leticia De Santiago (Stockton, CA), with composer Marcus Shelby on bass, in Notes From the Field. *Second Stage Theater, New York, NY, 2016. (Photo by Joan Marcus)*

RICHARD SCHECHNER: Could you give me a sense of the shape of *The Pipeline Project*? How long will the project last, what's its place in your work?

ANNA DEAVERE SMITH: I don't know how long it's gonna last, that's number one. In terms of the shape, it wasn't designed for me to do my typical one-person show. This project was something I did because I was invited by a group of social justice funders, not arts funders, and it was important to let them know that just because I would research and write a play, there's no insurance that that play would be produced. So what I did was create a project without having to depend on agents, regional theatres, and New York. The project was a promise, a scheme, whatever, that I would go to three geographic areas, interview people, and then stage readings with the idea of having town hall discussions.

The first presentation in Berkeley[1] — the first research was in Stockton, Northern California, and then on an Indian reservation[2] — was no problem. I worked before in Berkeley. I said, "You don't have to spend any money. Give me a room and I'll do the staged reading and I'll invite people." But the "town hall" was so horrible that I felt I had to rethink the project. It's not like what you were able to do in the '60s, that hotbed of activity when theatre could really create community. Or the **Free Southern Theater**. But that's really where I was coming from: "Wow, if it could be a little bit like the Free Southern Theater, let's forget about these institutions." But the conversation after the performance was full of clichés. That really bothered me. So I went back to the **Berkeley Rep** to rethink it all.

1. The first presentation took place in Berkeley, California, on 12 and 13 July 2014.

2. The performance was held on 22 August 2015 for the Yurok Tribe in their territory in northwestern California along the Klamath River. The Yurok Tribe is California's largest with about 6,000 individuals.

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In the summer of 2015 I tried to engage the audience, to ask them to be more than passive spectators. I hired somebody in January to work on that part of the play—I didn't even have a director yet. What I'd presented that previous summer was just a staged reading, which I did with two local jazz musicians. Then in the summer of 2015 I did a show with a director. I performed a first act. I stopped the show after the first act and said, "This isn't a show. This is about a real problem. I want you to go off into groups and talk about what you're gonna do." We had 20 facilitators (that's what we called them). We divided a sold-out run of audiences of 500 each night into groups of 20. We asked people to talk about the problem and then to make commitments about what they were going to do.



Figure 3. Audience members convene in the bar area of Berkeley Repertory Theatre for a facilitated dialogue as part of Notes From the Field. *Berkeley, CA, July 2015. (Photo by Stephanie Schneider)*

Originally the idea was these staged readings and then I'd write a fictional play. But a fictional play would have taken another four years to get produced, right—and the mood of the country about race had shifted with the protests in **Ferguson**. It was an important time to offer

Founded by John O'Neal, Gilbert Moses, Denise Nicholas, and Doris Derby in 1963 at Tougaloo College, Mississippi, the **Free Southern Theater**'s motto was "To bring theater to those who had no theater." In 1964, when the FST's headquarters moved to New Orleans, the founders were joined by Richard Schechner who became one of the FST's producing directors. During "Freedom Summer" of 1964, the FST performed *In White America* (Martin Duberman), *Purlie Victorious* (Ossie Davis), and *Waiting for Godot* (Samuel Beckett) in rural Mississippi, Alabama, and Louisiana. The FST disbanded in 1980 (Dent and Schechner 1969).

Established in 1968, **Berkeley Rep** (Berkeley, CA) is a Tony Award–winning regional theatre. The Rep's mission is to "use theatre as a means to challenge, thrill, and galvanize what is best in the human spirit" (Berkeley Rep n.d.).

In **Ferguson**, Missouri, on 9 August 2014, an unarmed black man, Michael Brown, was shot and killed by a white police officer, Darren Wilson. Brown was 18 and had ostensibly stolen two packs of cigarillos from a liquor store. This incited protests against police brutality in Ferguson and nationwide, to which police responded with military-grade weapons. In November, the St. Louis jury decided not to indict Officer Wilson. Protestors in Ferguson responded by looting and burning buildings and vehicles and attacking officers in riot gear, who continued to respond with tear gas and rubber bullets (Buchanon, et al. 2015).

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something to the conversation. I went to two theatres that I knew would be interested. One was **A.R.T. [American Repertory Theater]**, the other was the **Second Stage Theater**. The **New York Theatre Workshop** artistic director, Jim Nicola, had also expressed interest. That's really how it changed from a social justice initiative with theatre as a place for convening people, into writing a play about the issue.

SCHECHNER: I wrote 25 years ago that you get really inside the people you're interviewing—"channeling" or "incorporating" [Schechner 1993]. You can't have a single point of view while you're doing your work.

SMITH: I have a single point of view when I go to vote.

SCHECHNER: Yeah, but—

SMITH: I have a point of view that a cop shouldn't throw a kid across the room.

SCHECHNER: Absolutely.

SMITH: I have a point of view that cops shouldn't shoot down a man. But as I am a humanist—I'm interested in human beings in the same way that doctors want to give you a heart operation, that's all.

SCHECHNER: In your earlier work, especially ***Fires in the Mirror***, and ***Twilight: LA***, you were very careful to give different points of view, different perspectives. In ***Notes From the Field***, there are a variety of perspectives but they're all on the same side. Is that because it's social action? Because we're in a greater crisis now? The pipeline from school to prison, and the other pipeline from Canada to the refineries.

SMITH: **Standing Rock**, yeah.

SCHECHNER: So?

SMITH: Well *Notes From the Field* is a social justice initiative. I am calling for people to jump on board to what I hope is a new civil rights movement based on a combination of looking at the criminal justice system and looking at education. I am upset, sad, horrified, and angry that so many people have been left out of having an education. I'm also upset from the position of my teaching very privileged people who, over the years, on the one hand, I am happy to teach, but on the other hand, I have a growing ambivalence about the advantages privileged people get as compared to those who basically have no chance, for whom the criminal justice system becomes where they get educated, get health care such as it is—get shelter such as it is.

SCHECHNER: In relation to privileged people at elite colleges, and going back to the Free Southern Theater, our primary directive was to play for people who had never seen theatre before. But your social action stuff—at the New York Theatre Workshop or A.R.T.—is very different. Would the prisons have you? Isn't what you do made for the incarcerated, one way or another?

When I sat in the theatre watching you do a brilliant thing about someone who wasn't you, I had a good conventional theatre experience. At the same time, I wondered how your performance would go over at the police academy, in a jail, at a neighborhood school. I don't know if it's possible, but has it crossed your mind, to bring it to people who've never experienced your kind of theatre?

SMITH: It's not impossible but it's expensive. I did take it to the Yurok Reservation.

One reason why "race work" fails right now in this economy is that people underestimate what it costs. People want skill but they don't understand that skill is costly. Right?

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The **American Repertory Theater** (A.R.T.), a professional theatre at Harvard, was founded in 1980 by Robert Brustein. The A.R.T.'s mission is to "catalyze discourse, interdisciplinary collaboration, and creative exchange among a wide range of academic departments, institutions, students, and faculty members, acting as a conduit between its community of artists and the university. The A.R.T. plays a central role in Harvard's [...] undergraduate Theater, Dance, and Media concentration [...]. The A.R.T. Institute for Advanced Theater Training is run in partnership with the Moscow Art Theatre School" (A.R.T. 2012).

New York's **Second Stage Theater**, founded in 1979 to produce "second stagings" of 21st-century American plays and to develop new work, operates three theatres in Manhattan. Led by cofounder Carole Rothman, Second Stage emphasizes diversity both among its artists and its audiences. Smith's *Let Me Down Easy* opened at Second Stage in 2009, her *Notes From the Field* in 2016. Second Stage's more than 130 awards include 27 Obies, 23 AUDELCOs, 17 Lucille Lortels, 12 Tony Awards, 12 Drama Desks, 9 Theater Worlds, 7 Outer Critics Circles, 2 Clarence Derwents, and a Drama Critics Circle (Second Stage Theater 2018).

Founded in 1979 by Stephen Graham, **New York Theatre Workshop** in Manhattan's East Village both produces a full season of plays and serves as an experimental theatre laboratory where a diverse range of theatre-makers develop their original work in a collaborative, responsive, and inventive environment (NYTW n.d.).

***Fires in the Mirror**: Crown Heights, Brooklyn and Other Identities* explored the 1991 Crown Heights riots, which began when a Hasidic man accidentally ran over and killed Gavin Cato, a seven-year-old black boy. During the riots, Yankel Rosenbaum, a Hasidic scholar, was stabbed to death by 20 black men. The Crown Heights riots were New York City's most intense racial disturbances since the 1960s. In *Fires in the Mirror*, Smith portrays 26 characters based on interviews she conducted with Cato's father, Hasids, artists, clergy, and ordinary people (Rothstein 1992).

***Twilight: Los Angeles**, 1992* is based on the riots in the LA area during April and May of 1992. The unrest was set off by the acquittal of four police officers who arrested and beat Rodney King in 1991. Their actions were documented on video. *Twilight: LA* premiered in 1993 at Los Angeles's Mark Taper Forum and later toured, including a run on Broadway for which it was nominated for two Tony Awards. Smith portrays 40 persons—she interviewed around 300 individuals for the project (Johnson 2012).

Notes From the Field, which opened in 2016 at New York's Second Stage Theater, explores the devastating pipeline from schools to prisons. According to *New York Times* critic Ben Brantley: "Ms. Smith assumes the identities of 19 individuals. They appear separately to ruminate and ramble on topics that have made devastating headlines in recent years, including the 2015 death of Freddie Gray at the hands of Baltimore police officers and the slaughter of African American churchgoers in Charleston, S.C. that same year." Each monologue addresses "an awareness of the existential trap into which ethnic minorities fall in this country" (Brantley 2016).

The **Standing Rock** Sioux Tribe gained national attention for opposing the Dakota Access Pipeline, set to transport up to 570,000 barrels of crude oil every day from North Dakota to Illinois. Protests in 2016 were met by the police's rubber bullets and concussion cannons. The pipeline runs under the Missouri River, the tribe's main water source and under a Sioux sacred burial ground. The pipeline does not cross Sioux land but comes within 500 feet of its border. In 2016, arguing that "the [United States Army] Corps [of Engineers] effectively wrote off the tribe's concerns and ignored the pipeline's impacts to sacred sites and culturally important landscapes," the tribe sued, accusing the Corps of violating the National Historic Preservation Act and other laws. Later in 2016, the tribe's claim was rejected. The pipeline became operational on 1 June 2017 (Worland 2016).

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Figure 4. Anna Deavere Smith portrays Taos Proctor (Yurok fisherman/former inmate, Yurok Tribe, Klamath, CA) in a performance of Notes From the Field *at Baltimore Center Stage, December 2015. (Photo by Diana Walker)*

I am happy about the times we were able to bring people to us. High school students respond very well to this show. One high school principal told me that she asked them when they got back to school, "Do you think that you're in a school-to-prison pipeline?" A couple of them said yes and then somebody else said that there're holes in the pipeline and "we slip through." And then somebody else said, "Yeah, but they can plug up the holes." Then students from LaGuardia High School [New York City's school of music and performing arts] came. I had to pay for it. The theatre wouldn't even give them a free show, made me pay full, me and one of the parents.

SCHECHNER: Right.

SMITH: So there's a lot of work to do if one wants to do social justice work in the in-between space where I am.

SCHECHNER: You know Michelle Obama?

SMITH: Yes, I do.

SCHECHNER: This would seem to be absolutely up her alley.

SMITH: But you know this about people like that: You could stand this close, they know who you are, ask you how's the play going, right? But she's gonna have a million people coming to her, from Anna Wintour [artistic director of Condé-Nast, publisher of *Vogue*] to...God knows who.

There's an idea I've been talking about now a lot—the idea of a "radical welcome," a "radical hospitality." The people helping me think about this are all young, all have read the book by and about the Free Southern Theater [Dent and Schechner 1969]—I know you must be tired of me always calling that up, but that's the bedrock upon which I'm continually inspired

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and trying to think about. How do you open up the walls of these arts institutions? It's naïve to think you can do like people did in the '60s. You can't.

SCHECHNER: No, no, you can't. It's both better and worse. They were killing people in a different—

SMITH: In a different way.

SCHECHNER: A different way.

SMITH: They're killing people now.

SCHECHNER: They've been killing people all the way through. We didn't have the cameras to see it.

SMITH: Absolutely.

SCHECHNER: People say there's an increase in violence. No, there's an increase in that we're seeing it. But violence has always been there. Liberal white society has just not wanted to see it.

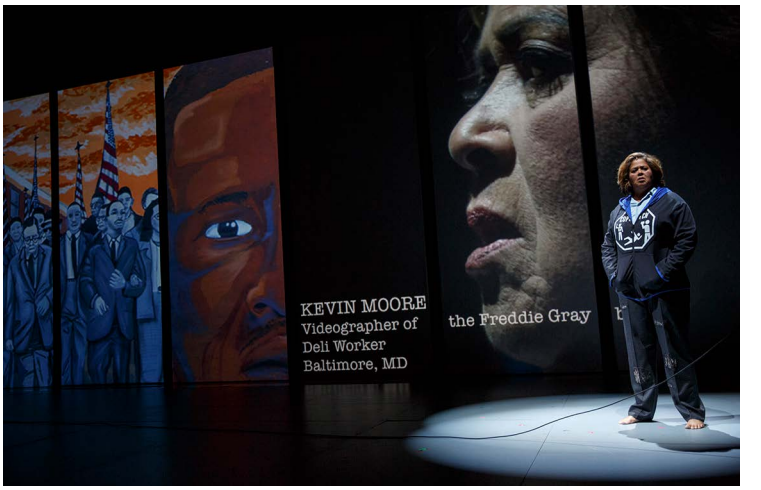


Figure 5. Anna Deavere Smith portrays Kevin Moore (videographer of the Freddie Gray beating, deli worker, Baltimore, MD) in Notes From the Field. *Second Stage Theater, New York, NY, 2016. (Photo by Joan Marcus)*

SMITH: For *Notes From the Field*, I did research in four areas: Northern California, Philadelphia, and Baltimore—where we ended up really by accident, right after the **riot**. The Baltimore I grew up in is now completely different, I didn't even recognize it, don't understand what happened. But it's 'cause of my wishing for the Baltimore that I knew, in terms of all the teachers I knew, and the level of their commitment, that I'm doing this at all. We also went up and down what's called the "Corridor of Shame" in South Carolina. So called because of how bad the condition of the public schools was at one point. They have made some improvements. This is the hardest thing I have ever done.

SCHECHNER: Why is that?

SMITH: Because in a subtle way that I don't understand, it's more personal than anything I've ever done. It was painful. I got to the theatre at 2:00 to prepare for a 7:00 show. It took up my whole life. All I could do in the morning was go to the gym, but not even work at full tilt because I was so exhausted.

SCHECHNER: Why do you think it was so much more personal?

On 12 April 2015 in Baltimore, Freddie Gray was violently handcuffed and thrown into the back of a police van by six officers who said Gray was carrying a knife. By the time the van reached the police station, Gray was in a coma. His spine was severely damaged. Gray died on 19 April 2015 with protests starting the day before. After Gray's death, the protests intensified and the police responded with force. The **riots** escalated for more than a week after Gray's funeral. Windows were broken and police cars burned. The authorities declared a state of emergency, imposed a curfew, and arrested about 100 people. The City of Baltimore settled at $6.4 million prior to the Gray's family filing suit (Woods and Pankhania 2016; Wikipedia 2018b).

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Figure 6. Audience members convene on stage for a facilitated dialogue as part of Notes From the Field. *Baltimore Center Stage, December 2015. (Photo by Joe Giordano)*

SMITH: Because my mother was a teacher. My mother, all my aunts except for two, were teachers. That's what black women—negro women, colored women—could do in the '50s if they were educated. I grew up with all those people who taught really poor children. The kids my mother taught, you could smell the poverty. I didn't know anything about the school-to-prison pipeline. I was with a group of people who were doing work on the school-to-prison pipeline. One of the people in the group was from Baltimore. I hadn't really gone home since I was 16. That's a long time ago. And one of them told a story about a kid who peed in a water cooler in Baltimore and they were gonna arrest him. Now that I think about it, I'm like "of course." But at the time, I'd just never heard anything like that. You'll be amused by this. A British actress was working on ***Nurse Jackie*** with me, and we were in hair and makeup and I said, "It's amazing, I heard about a kid who peed in a water cooler and he's gonna be arrested." She said "Well, whatever happened to mischief?" That just put it all together for me. Rich kids, even middle-class kids, get "mischief" but poor kids—they're either incarcerated or, just as bad, pathologized.

SCHECHNER: So you're taking your skills and putting them into the service of something directly social. Your earlier work was evidence and this is testimony. And your work on television and your writing, do they pay the rent?

SMITH: What I make in the theatre, the top salary for an actor, is $894 a week.

SCHECHNER: You're kidding me.

SMITH: That's the top Equity salary.

SCHECHNER: Incredible.

SMITH: The royalties are nothing to speak about, but the acting and the royalties allow me to refine the very, very particular process I have, and of course that's gratifying. The same way you enjoy writing and thinking, I enjoy this process I began developing in the late '70s.

The Showtime series ***Nurse Jackie***—about a high-functioning drug-addicted emergency room nurse, Jackie Peyton (played by Edie Falco)—ran for seven years starting in 2009. Smith played Gloria Akalitus, a hospital administrator and former nurse with a tough exterior but a heart of gold. Smith praised *Nurse Jackie* for its insight into America's broken health care system. In 2012, the activist organization, National Nurses United, awarded Smith the Golden Bedpan Award. While filming *Nurse Jackie*, Smith was creating *Let Me Down Easy* (2009), a play about health care made from more than 300 interviews (Deggans 2015).

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SCHECHNER: Right.

SMITH: It takes time to understand what you're doing and then to train other people to do it with you.

SCHECHNER: Right.

SMITH: I don't mean actors, I mean the most talented coaches, to work with them to come up with a process and a methodology.

SCHECHNER: To get people to commit to doing something?

SMITH: Not that far. We just wanted people to say where they are in this geography of the school-to-prison pipeline. Most people didn't even know it existed; I didn't know it existed.

So, if you're a person of color, a black person in particular, there's a likelihood that somewhere on your family tree there's somebody who's incarcerated. But most people, if we took a poll, would not know that or think it has anything to do with them. But we all know, as one of the people in the play who was incarcerated says so beautifully, "We are all connected somehow." So to help people in the audience ponder how they're connected—not how they are guilty, because unfortunately that's where white people go—it's not a call to realize your guilt, but a call to see "Where am I in this ecosystem?" first, and then "Maybe there is something I can do." I actually think there's a greater potential in the facilitators than in the audience. I think of the facilitators more like the Free Southern Theater. New theatre workers, not actors, people who are already doing this work wherever they live. Maybe a teacher, maybe somebody in a corporation.



Figure 7. Audience members convene on an outdoor terrace at the American Repertory Theater for a facilitated dialogue as part of Notes From the Field. *Cambridge, MA, September 2016. (Photo by Daniel Rattner)*

SCHECHNER: What would you expect them to do?

SMITH: I expect them to continue to do what they do when they're finished working with me but to feel more empowered to do it. And to have a network of people who are also doing it, that they would not know about otherwise.

SCHECHNER: But how do we disrupt the pipeline?

SMITH: There're so many ways. I did 250 interviews. I started to see how many different kinds of people are trying to disrupt it in their own way: from parole workers at the Indian reservation to a world-famous neuroendocrinologist at Rockefeller University.

SCHECHNER: Pardon me for being naively fundamental, but isn't the basic cure to end poverty?

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SMITH: Certainly. But it's also to intervene where poverty has done damage already, because we're talking about how generations of poverty have gnawed away at the dignity of people's lives.

SCHECHNER: Right. But, am I wrong, aren't the schools a mess?

SMITH: The schools are a mess. But it's wrong to call the school the pipeline. It's not fair to blame the teachers. The teachers are told, "You're gonna lose your job if you don't do this, that, and the other." Progressives say, "Lower the suspension rates." So what do you do if you're a principal or teacher? Say "go home" and don't document it. Your rates are down but you just sent a kid home.

SCHECHNER: What do you think of charter schools?

SMITH: I deliberately dodged that. Many people I interviewed feel that charter schools are an arm of racism. Charter schools push kids out because, you know, they gotta. You meet somebody, some business man, white business man usually, a trillionaire, whatever, at a cocktail party and he asks, "What do you do?"

"I'm an actor."

"What did I see you in?"

You say, "Well what do you do, sir?"

"Well, I do bla bla bla, but I have six schools—take my card—and my six schools, everybody graduated, everybody's in this, that, or the other college." Well there's a lot of things that aren't right: If a kid's not perfect, they're out, 'cause somebody not perfect brings down the numbers. Bad kids make bad data. I stayed away from charter schools.

SCHECHNER: The public system becomes a system of and in poverty. Resources are cut. Teachers are overworked and blamed. What's happening is like privatizing prisons. We no longer have a public sphere that is fully public. It used to be segregation, Jim Crow, very visible, "whites only." Jim Crow's still there but it's economically based. Some people cross the line and get out of poverty, 10 percent, or 15, or whatever percent of the black population living on the other side of the river Jordan.

SMITH: Let me ask you a question. How do you feel about the fact that you and I teach in a place [NYU] that is elitist? We're teaching in a place that's the end result of this river Jordan thing.

SCHECHNER: Correct. I know my teaching's affected people. I am an effective teacher with a social conscience. And you?

SMITH: I decided a long time ago at Stanford[3] to keep teaching. While I was doing *Nurse Jackie*, I taught on Sundays for four hours straight. Stanford was a place where the answer was always "Yes." It was the first time in my life that the answer was always "Yes." In my second year they let me do a year-long fellowship at Harvard and paid half my salary. That changed my life. In my teaching I try to disrupt the trajectory that people are on, not professionally, but as people. At NYU I try to cause a revolution in the room where people fall in love with each other and protect each other. To do that you almost have to structure it like a kindergarten class where every single person has a role they're expected to play. What I have learned is that the revolution can begin with love, hospitality, and grace.

SCHECHNER: "Grace" in the religious sense?

3. Anna Deavere Smith came to Stanford in 1990. From 1990 to 2000 she was the Ann O'Day Maples Professor of the Arts in the Department of Drama. In 2004, she was commissioned by the Stanford Medical School to create a project on diversity, which would later influence *Let Me Down Easy*.

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SMITH: No. "Grace" in the way of kindness.

My father refused to help at all in financing my college education because I chose not to go to a historically black college. He said if I didn't go to a historically black college I wouldn't have a social life. This from a man who was stricter than strict. Cut to many years later, 2012, at **Spelman**, which is the only black school that's recognized me, giving me an honorary degree. I walked into this room for breakfast on the morning of the ceremony. And Latanya Richardson, as you know a wonderful actress, came over to me, embraced me, and said, "Welcome to the sisterhood." And I burst out crying. I realized exactly what my father was talking about by social life. He meant the deep way that colored women, black women, have congregated for the betterment of others. When I sat on that stage and looked out on a sea of black women who I would rarely ever see congregated together again, I knew they would go off and be more likely to do something of service to their community than a lot of white kids are gonna be doing.



Figure 8. Anna Deavere Smith portrays choreographer Elizabeth Streb in Let Me Down Easy *at Second Stage Theater, New York, 2009. (Photo by Joan Marcus)*

SCHECHNER: Where did you go to school?

SMITH: **Beaver College**.

Spelman College is a historically black college for women founded in 1881 as the Atlanta Baptist Female Seminary and renamed Spelman College in 1924. As of 2018, Spelman has more than 2,100 students from 41 states and 15 countries. Spelman's current president, Mary Schmidt Campbell, was dean of NYU's Tisch School of the Arts from 1991 to 2014 (Spelman College 2017).

Smith received her BA from **Beaver College** in 1971. Founded in 1853 in Beaver, PA, as Beaver Female Seminary, it became a coed college in 1872. From 1907 to 1973 enrollment was limited to women. In 1925, Beaver College moved to Jenkintown; in 1928 it opened a branch in Glenside, the location of the current campus. In July 2001, upon attaining university status, Beaver College changed its name to Arcadia University. Currently, Arcadia has 4,000 students (Wikipedia 2018a).

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SCHECHNER: How do you see the relationship between your earlier work—pieces like *Fires in the Mirror* or *Twilight: LA*, or even ***Let Me Down Easy***—to *The Pipeline Project* and *Notes From the Field*? Also, *Nurse Jackie*, ***The West Wing***, and movies, which are another kind of work. I'm intrigued by people who live multiple lives.

SMITH: The academy is yet another kind of work. Teaching is another kind of work.

SCHECHNER: So how do you relate these to each other or are they each in their own silo?

SMITH: Nothing is separate. My academic work gives me a chance to be in the company of people like you.

SCHECHNER: Right.

SMITH: It's why I never left the academy. I need to sit with people like you and Diana [Taylor].[4] Television is a different culture entirely. There I have no authority. I don't make any decisions except the artistic decisions I make in a scene. Television is an opportunity to work in a larger community of artists, different kinds of artists. I enjoy that.

SCHECHNER: When you prepare *Nurse Jackie*, or some other role like that, how different is it from interviewing and then bringing those people—

SMITH: Completely different.

SCHECHNER: And can you specify that?

SMITH: In television, the person who has the most power, the most voice, whose worldview it is, is the writer. In movies it's the director. The actor is a piece of the puzzle. I never know what's going to happen. I go to work, I leave work, and I don't know what time I have to be at work the next day. Someone will call me at 11 o'clock at night, or 12, or 1 and say, "You're gonna get picked up at 4am," or whatever. You can go to work in your pajamas. Main thing is get in the van on time. You get to your dressing room. Everything is there including your underwear. You sit there until somebody knocks on your door and says it's time to come to the set. Decisions are made for you.

SCHECHNER: How do you grab the TV role? When you're interviewing and then embodying, I think I understand. But TV?

In ***Let Me Down Easy*** (2009) Smith performs "a collection of testimonials" based on more than 300 interviews she conducted about the American health care system. Among those Smith portrays are cyclist Lance Armstrong and playwright/activist Eve Ensler. Most of the people in the play aren't famous, but they all speak about the vulnerability of the human body (Isherwood 2009; Lunden 2009).

In the long-running television series ***The West Wing*** (1999–2006), Smith played Nancy McNally, Democratic President Josiah Bartlet's (Martin Sheen) national security adviser. The show was praised for the range of issues it explored from racism and terrorism to nuclear proliferation, child labor, feminism, and gay rights. Although some episodes stretched credibility, others were obviously taken from actual news headlines (Parry-Giles 2016).

4. Diana Taylor is currently University Professor and Professor of Performance Studies and Spanish at New York University. She came to NYU in 1997 and served as chair of the Department of Performance Studies from 1997 to 2002.

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SMITH: It's so different. A lot of it is about what your persona is. In my own work, in my own method, my persona disappears. But in television, it gets bigger and bigger and bigger so that it's on the side of a bus or it's, you know, it's—you see it everywhere, "That's Anna Deavere Smith." It's two completely different processes, my own work and my TV work. I would never be cast as any of the people I portray onstage.

SCHECHNER: So how do you get into the TV roles you play?

SMITH: How? Number one is that you are present in who you are and that's what's attractive to the television people. Next you hope that you can take the text that you're given, the written words... It's very different than the spoken word. Very different. Written words that aren't how anybody talks. It seems to be how people talk, but in a very efficient and economic way. You are moving the action along. Basically, you're bringing forward your own persona and putting that in the service of a story that's being told.

SCHECHNER: It's almost opposite to what you're doing in your interview pieces where you're not bringing forward your own persona—

SMITH: —at all!

SCHECHNER: But also having seen you perform all these times over so many years, there are certain gestures and tones of voice—

SMITH: —that are me.

SCHECHNER: Yes. A kind of Anna Deavere Smith language and gestures. You meet dozens of people, you interview them, you become them. Do you like them?

SMITH: The ones who end up in the show I come to love.

SCHECHNER: Even if they have views totally different than yours?

SMITH: The views don't matter. What are views? I mean, that's my problem. If you go back and reread this interview, you'll see that I will constantly be devaluing views.

SCHECHNER: But would you do Trump?

SMITH: I would. I didn't vote for him. I'm very disturbed about what's happening in the country, but if somebody said "You perform Trump, and not like Alec Baldwin, but really do what you do," I wouldn't turn it down. I'd make enemies.

SCHECHNER: You would love him?

SMITH: I don't know 'cause I haven't done him.

SCHECHNER: So what do you mean by love in this regard?

SMITH: Care.

SCHECHNER: Care?

SMITH: Care for.

SCHECHNER: To represent their point of view?

SMITH: To pay attention.

SCHECHNER: That's probably the deepest definition of love.

SMITH: I call it love because there are ways in which people didn't pay attention to me when I was a girl. I'm paying an extraordinary amount of attention to five minutes of somebody's life.

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SCHECHNER: When you prepare them, do you videotape them?

SMITH: I didn't use to, so the early works, including one that you were in, the one I did in Bellagio,[5] no video. *Let Me Down Easy*—the 16th or 17th show in this big series, ***On the Road: A Search for American Character***—was the first time I used video.

SCHECHNER: And the difference between working from just a sound recording and video?

SMITH: Very big difference. I'm not as successful in reenacting the physical details as I am the sounds. Now with video, I spend a lot of time studying the physical details.



Figure 9. Anna Deavere Smith and cellist Joshua Roman in 2013, rehearsing On Grace *at Georgetown University. (Photo by Diana Walker)*

SCHECHNER: For *Notes From the Field* you have a bass player onstage. I don't think you ever had a musician onstage before—

SMITH: I did in two of my other plays. I recited Martin Luther King's "Letter from Birmingham Jail"—which he didn't speak, he wrote and then recorded, but the recording is just for documentary purposes.[6] I worked with violinist Bobby McDuffie and pianist Anne Epperson. And in *On Grace* [2013] with cellist Joshua Roman. He is much younger than me, he's very beautiful, looks like an angel. And the two of us, it was a powerful project.

The "Letter from Birmingham Jail" is a long text to learn. I didn't understand until working on this how much King really loved. He loved till it hurt. Till it hurt him. I don't think society asks us to do that very much anymore. Nowadays, many of us love till we *get*, you know.

On the Road: A Search for American Character is the overall title of Smith's ongoing project started in 1983 that includes her *Fires in the Mirror, Twilight: Los Angeles, Let Me Down Easy, The Pipeline Project,* and so on (MacArthur Foundation 2005).

Black Lives Matter is a response to the acquittal on 13 July 2013 of George Zimmerman, who shot and killed unarmed 17-year-old African American Trayvon Martin on 6 February 2012 in Sanford, Florida. BLM is a member-led network, currently with 40 chapters globally, building local power against violence inflicted upon black communities by state authorities. "It is an affirmation of Black folks' humanity, our contributions to this society, and our resilience in the face of deadly oppression." After the shooting of Michael Brown in Ferguson, BLM gave tremendous support to the protests. Ferguson was the impetus driving the creation of the Black Lives Matter Global Network (Black Lives Matter n.d.).

5. During the 1990–91 academic year, Smith and Schechner participated in a conference at the Rockefeller Foundation's Bellagio, Italy, Study and Conference Center.

6. *Letter from Birmingham Jail*, March 2014, Grace Cathedral, San Francisco; and April 2015, Broad Stage, Santa Monica.

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Which is narcissistic. Trump won because he's the Narcissist-in-Chief. We have an epidemic of narcissism. I mean, you have it, I have it, everybody we know has it. But certain people have it in greater quantities. The narcissist says they love until they get, they capture that object they want. That's very different than the kind of love I learned about in learning "Letter from Birmingham Jail" where King is really truly weeping about his disappointment in the white church, out of his great love of Christianity.



Figure 10. Anna Deavere Smith portrays Stephanie Williams (emotional support teacher at Huey Elementary School in Philadelphia, PA) in Notes From the Field. *Second Stage Theater, New York, 2016. (Photo by Joan Marcus)*

SCHECHNER: His kind, Gandhi's kind, they don't come often.

SMITH: No, they don't come often.

SCHECHNER: Right. Are you optimistic?

SMITH: About what?

SCHECHNER: In the '60s, for all the shit, we were very optimistic. We knew we would win, whatever "win" meant then. The right to vote, the end of Jim Crow, the end of segregated schools, the end to the Vietnam War. The '60s was a movement not only of faith but of confidence. Do we, does youth, feel optimistic?

SMITH: I think that's a wonderful question. You have to ask that question of somebody in **Black Lives Matter**, 'cause I'm not on the front lines. I am essentially an artist. I get so much pleasure thinking about what is possible. I'm very excited about the kind of talent I know exists that could be applied to solving the problem of how poverty...how schools could intervene in poverty. I've never met so many people with great ideas. I'm filled with joy and excitement, but I don't know if that's the same thing as optimism.

There's a lot of work to do to turn this thing around. The only other option is to continue to incarcerate people and kill them or allow them to kill each other. I don't need to tell you. Chicago, black kids killing each other. Baltimore. Extinction from poverty and violence. Extinction of poor black people and also Native Americans. I went to one of those funerals. I could do a whole piece on those funerals.

I'm not really answering your question, "Am I optimistic" in terms of thinking, "there's this evidence everything's gonna be alright"? No, but I'm excited because I see the potential to turn it around. To lead us to all kinds of new knowledge as humans, right?

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