



DIGITAL ACCESS TO SCHOLARSHIP AT HARVARD

Rodney King, Shifting Modes of Vision, and Anna Deavere Smith's Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992

The Harvard community has made this article openly available.
[Please share](#) how this access benefits you. Your story matters.

| | |
|--------------------------|--|
| Citation | Bernstein, Robin. 2000. Rodney King, shifting modes of vision, and Anna Deavere Smith's Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992. <i>Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism</i> 14(2): 121-134. |
| Published Version | https://journals.ku.edu/index.php/jdtdc/issue/view/266 |
| Accessed | February 18, 2015 7:53:43 AM EST |
| Citable Link | http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:HUL.InstRepos:3659693 |
| Terms of Use | This article was downloaded from Harvard University's DASH repository, and is made available under the terms and conditions applicable to Other Posted Material, as set forth at http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:HUL.InstRepos:dash.current.terms-of-use#LAA |

(Article begins on next page)

Rodney King, Shifting Modes of Vision, and Anna Deavere Smith's *Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992*

Robin Bernstein

On March 3, 1991, white Los Angeles police beat an African-American man in the course of arresting him for a traffic violation. This incident was by no means unique or even unusual; not surprisingly, no riots broke out in response to the event.

On April 29, 1992, a jury acquitted all the officers involved in the beating. Again, such a verdict was hardly unusual. Within hours, however, riots did erupt in Los Angeles. By the end of the day, over twenty-five blocks of central Los Angeles were in flames.

Only one factor differentiated the beating of Rodney King from those of scores of other African-Americans: George Holliday, a white bystander, happened to record it on videotape. In the United States and other countries, millions watched the 82-second video as it played again and again on television. As film theorist Mike Mashon pointed out, for the vast majority of television viewers, "the King tape clearly showed a helpless man being brutally clubbed by police officers, a kind of naked aggression that conjured up images of Selma and Birmingham."¹

In the courtroom, on the other hand, lawyers for the defense slowed down the video and removed the sound. Frame by frame, they used the tape to illustrate a narrative in which the police perceived King as a PCP-crazed threat who fully controlled his own beating; King, they argued, could have ended the beating merely by lying still on the ground.

The verdict, then, demonstrated a rupture between what the jury saw and what television viewers saw. In this essay, I argue that the defense was able to produce that rupture in part because it rode a wave of shifting vision in the United States during the late twentieth century. I use as my primary evidence Anna Deavere Smith's creation and performance of the play, *Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992*, which, I argue, revealed, critiqued, and ultimately resisted this shift in vision.²

In *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century*,³ Jonathan Crary argued that before the nineteenth century, the concept of visual subjectivity did not exist in Western cultures. Throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Westerners used the camera obscura—a device in which

Robin Bernstein is a doctoral student in American Studies at Yale University. She recently published an article in *Modern Drama* on the critical reception of Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun*.

light passed through a pinhole into a dark, enclosed interior and caused an inverted image to appear—as the model for understanding vision. Images produced by the camera obscura directly corresponded to those that could be seen with the naked eye; the images could even move. Furthermore, the camera obscura's observer was necessarily isolated both from the image and from other observers. This model, then, suggested that eyesight also directly reflected reality and that the individual viewer remained separate from the images he or she perceived.

In 1810, however, Goethe noted the existence of afterimages, which suggested the possibility that vision originated not just outside, but also within the human body. Other writers, including Immanuel Kant, Arthur Schopenhauer, and William Blake, reached similar conclusions.⁴ This change produced a new type of observer who understood his or her individual identity to affect his or her perceptions. As the camera obscura served as the paradigm for vision in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the stereoscope, a device through which one looks at a pair of two-dimensional images and perceives them as a single three-dimensional image, became a primary model for vision in the nineteenth century. The stereoscopic viewers understood that their bodies created the three-dimensionality of the image; vision, therefore, was subjective.

According to Crary, the current proliferation of computer-generated imagery is causing vision to undergo another shift. In this new model, which I will call cybernetic, observers are unable to tell visually whether an image is representative (as in an unadulterated photograph), computer-enhanced, or wholly computer generated. A cybernetic image may or may not have an actual referent (Crary points out that “if [computer-generated] images can be said to refer to anything, it is to millions of bits of electronic mathematical data”⁵). Observers must depend, therefore, on an authority to interpret images; that is to say, the authority must provide the referent. The end result is that viewers are severed from their vision and unable to interpret images *either* as given truth (as per the camera obscura model) *or* as subjective perspective (as per the stereoscopic model).

By mediating the videotape of Rodney King's beating, the police's lawyers persuaded the jurors to abandon a stereoscopic model and adopt a cybernetic mode of vision (which is not to say that the King videotape itself was a cybernetic image—it obviously was not). Both the riots and *Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992* partially expressed resistance to this new way of seeing and rage over its political ramifications.

I argue that both the form and content of *Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992* initially valorized the subjective, stereoscopic model. After establishing its alliance to that mode of vision, the play then used videos of three events—the shooting of Latasha Harlins and the beatings of Rodney King and Reginald Denny—to reveal, criticize, and ultimately resist a shift from a subjective to a cybernetic mode of vision.⁶ And finally, the play and its surrounding publicity recommended specific

actions that spectators could take to resist the cybernetic mode outside the theatre and in the long term.

Twilight constituted one installation in an ongoing project Smith calls "On the Road: A Search for American Character." Since the mid-eighties, Smith has interviewed individuals and performed their words verbatim in clusters of monologues on a particular theme.⁷ She generally performs with minimal costuming and props; her simple shirt, trousers, bare feet, and slicked-back hair enhance her androgynous and racially indeterminate appearance⁸ and enable her to switch characters quickly across lines of race and gender.

Because Smith worked with several directors and altered the show frequently during its run, no definitive text of the play exists. Different versions' contents vary widely; for example, of the 53 pieces Smith performed in the production at the Ford Theatre in Washington, D.C. in 1997, fewer than half appeared in the published "script."⁹ Similarly, the production of the New York Shakespeare Festival at the Cort Theatre contained pieces that appeared in neither the Washington production nor the published version.¹⁰

This essay uses as evidence three equally weighted texts of the play. The first two, the published "script" (1994) and the New York Shakespeare Festival production (as videotaped in 1994 and archived by the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts), were chosen for their permanence and accessibility to other scholars. The third text, the production by the Berkeley Repertory Theatre (as documented by a program for the Ford Theatre's hosting of that production in 1997 and an interview with the show's stage manager, Joseph Smelser), was chosen because it is a more recent version of Smith's show.

When Smith constructed *Twilight*, she followed her usual procedure by interviewing approximately 200 people in connection to the riots in Los Angeles.¹¹ Unlike all her previous productions, however, *Twilight* opened in 1993, the year Smith's fame escalated. The work she had recently completed, *Fires in the Mirror*, which focused on anti-Semitism, racism, and events in the neighborhood of Crown Heights in Brooklyn, had been a finalist for the 1992 Pulitzer Prize for Drama. During the play's run, Smith appeared on "The Arsenio Hall Show," "The MacNeil/Lehrer NewsHour," and Phil Donahue's PBS special "The Issue Is Race"; plus she was featured in magazines such as *Newsweek*.¹² In June of 1996, Smith received a "genius grant" of \$280,000 from the MacArthur Foundation.¹³

Such public attention did more than enhance Smith's fame—it familiarized the theatregoing public with Smith's *process*. As early as 1994, a reviewer could write with confidence, "As everyone must already know, Smith selects and molds her performances from interviews she conducts herself."¹⁴

If a rare spectator entered the theatre without being aware of Smith's process, he or she could not remain ignorant. Notes in the program (and the introduction to the published "script") explained the process—and just in case the

spectator failed to read them, a summary of the process was literally projected on the stage. At the beginning of each monologue, a slide announced the character's name and profession—thus further reinforcing both the process and the individuality of the characters.

The careful unmasking of the process emphasized one simple point: these characters were *real*. By capturing the characters' words verbatim, Smith functioned like a camera obscura. At the same time, however, the revealed process emphasized the characters as subjective individuals, each with a unique perspective. Smith's process (and the emphasis on that process) thus used the model of the camera obscura to valorize and reinforce the subjective, stereoscopic mode of vision.

The initial stage setting also saluted subjective vision. When viewers entered the Ford Theatre to watch the production by the Berkeley Repertory, they encountered a curtainless stage revealing a line of distinctly differentiated chairs—armchairs, desk chairs, folding chairs, etc.—and two hatracks hung with various elements of costumes and props. The audience knew Smith to be the show's sole performer (that fact, as well, was made abundantly clear in the publicity and program); therefore the chairs and costumes visually announced Smith's promise to embody multiple subjectivities.

Furthermore, Smith's process became explicit within several of the pieces. Elaine Young, the fifth character to speak in the New York production, said to Smith, "You can repeat whatever I say."¹⁵ Smith-as-interviewer similarly became visible in the piece featuring Judith Tur, which appeared in all three texts. In this piece, Tur showed Smith the video her brother shot of the beating of Reginald Denny and said, "this is the video we're going to be giving you for your show."¹⁶

And finally, several of the pieces actually alluded to the subjective model. Of these, perhaps the most poetic is that spoken by Homi Bhabha, which appeared in the New York production and the published script. Bhabha not only described the subjective model; he also explicitly connected it to "twilight," the play's title and one of its central images.

We have to interpret more in/twilight,/we have to make ourselves/
part of the act,/we have to interpret,/we have to project more./
But also the thing itself/in twilight/challenges us/to/be aware/of
how we are projecting on to the event itself./We are part of/
producing the event.¹⁷

The concept that "we are part of producing the event" is, of course, precisely what separates the model of the camera obscura from that of the stereoscope.

Through publicity, the program, and the set, then, Smith carefully aligned the show with the subjective mode of vision before she even stepped on stage; additionally, throughout the show, Smith reinforced the model through characters'

references to her process and to subjectivity. Indeed, the play's very form—repetitions of actual people's speech—can be read as a production of subjectivity: as Smith told the *New Yorker*, “people talk and talk in order to have an experience of themselves.”¹⁸ Through her interviews, then, people experienced their own subjectivity. Thus the play created individual consciousnesses and vice versa.

Having situated herself and the show within the subjective model, Smith began to unmask the defense's strategy and the ways in which it encouraged a cybernetic mode of vision. The lawyers for the defense mediated the videotape of the police beating King (and thus changed the tape's meaning) in three main ways: they slowed it down, removed the sound, and offered an alternative, dehistoricized narrative of the events.

In the first third of *Twilight*, the character of Charles Lloyd enacted an almost identical strategy while narrating for Smith (and the audience) a security camera's videotape showing Lloyd's client, Soon Ja Du, shoot a young African-American named Latasha Harlins. Lloyd narrated the video quickly; his harsh voice resembled that of a sportscaster.

Let's play that tape again. Now watch carefully. She [Harlins] hits the lady in the face four times, very viciously, she knocks her down twice. . . . Muhammad Ali couldn't do better than this. Boom! Like a billiard ball, she knocks her down. The lady throws a chair. The lady's reaching under the counter now, trying to get the gun out of the holster. The girl comes back to the counter with the orange juice. . . . She sees the gun, makes one step. They [the opposing attorneys] had the girl walking out the front door. Look at her head in relationship to the counter. Right under there, 36 feet from the front door. Isn't that sad? Isn't life cheap? Let's run it again.¹⁹

Lloyd resembled the policemen's lawyers in that he narrated a soundless video, using metaphors ascribing to the victim a threatening degree of strength (Harlins was likened to Muhammad Ali; King to an animal²⁰). Like the policemen's lawyers, Lloyd encouraged in the jury a dehistoricized, compassionless gaze. Sympathy was even ridiculed: “Isn't that sad? Isn't life cheap?” Through his authoritative mediation, Lloyd attempted to sever a jury from its own sight; thus he attempted, like the policemen's lawyers, to force the jury into a cybernetic mode of vision. Within *Twilight*, Lloyd functioned to illustrate and reveal the strategy of the lawyers for the police who beat King.

Smith did not, however, merely reveal the cybernetic mode of vision; she actively critiqued its reliance on authority and on potentially compassionless narratives for decontextualized images. In particular, Smith criticized and undercut

the power of authority in one of the most fascinating segments of the show: the Park family's set of monologues, which appeared shortly before intermission in New York and soon after the break in Washington. In both shows, the first speaker was Walter Park, father, husband, and store owner. In the published "script," Smith described Park as "a person who has full authority and ease . . . a person who has all the facts exactly straight. . . . He is sitting with his arms crossed and legs crossed, also in an easy but confident and authoritative position."²¹ His monologue is confusing, but moving:

I felt kind of/lonely,/you know,/in the store,/so I said/well,/I might need go/travel somewhere,/y'know,/and I said,/well, I'm gonna probably go see/my mom/or, you know,/somebody./So I try to go to Korea.²²

Although a slide informed the audience that Park was a gunshot victim, it was not clear from this monologue that he was brain-damaged (the show included several other characters shot or otherwise injured during the riots, but none of these sustained brain damage). His slightly confused speech did not seem out of place; many of Smith's characters meandered and stammered—furthermore, many spoke idiosyncratic English. When Smith performed Park, then, she offered information about him mainly through his manner. The audience had no reason to distrust his authoritative narrative.

In the subsequent monologues by Park's son and wife, Smith revealed the "truth" behind the first monologue—that a bullet had lobotomized Park. Suddenly, the audience became aware of a disjunction between Park's authoritative manner and the lack of literal meaning to his words. (Smith noted in the published version that during the interview, Park's "wife and son shake their heads to let me know that he doesn't know the answer to the question."²³) Park's half-dreamed story had no referent (or at best, a hazy referent). By revealing the disjunction, Smith exposed authority's power to create a narrative with no literal truth—just as the police's lawyers convinced the jury that King constituted a threat to the police and that King controlled his own beating. Although Smith did not hint at any criticism of Park personally, her dramatic unmasking of his authority implied a critique of that power.

As Smith emphasized through the Park monologues, context is crucial to the reception of truth (the "truth" of Mr. Park's story was not discernable without the contextualizing monologues of his son and wife); Smith therefore implied a critique of the cybernetic model, which eliminates that context. In particular, she implied a criticism of the defense for excising two particular fields of context: history and sound.

Lani Guinier, in a monologue that appeared in the New York production, directly attacked the defense's cybernetic, decontextualizing use of the videotape: "the legal structure focuses almost in a misleading way on the peculiar events that were captured on videotape. It's like the camera focuses on a close-up, but it doesn't pull back to show you the events leading up to that particular moment in time." Guinier went on to describe those contextualizing events as systematic, insidious racism.²⁴ Queen Malkah, whose words appeared before, after, and interspersed with Lloyd's, similarly demanded the restoration of a historicized view of the Harlins videotape. Like Guinier, Queen Malkah demanded acknowledgement of antiblack racism—that is to say in part, acknowledgement of black people's subjective experiences: "We all know that as we sit here today, as black people, if any one of us had killed a Korean child, shot them in the back, and it was recorded on videotape? We would not be sitting here talking today."²⁵

Sound—and its elimination—also played a crucial role in the defense's strategy. As Smith noted in her introduction to *Twilight*, King's aunt cried upon "hearing him holler" on the videotape. The jury in the civil trial, however, had difficulty hearing King until, during deliberations, they removed the visual images and focused solely on the sound. The jurors then agreed that King was responding to the beating and was not, as the police claimed to have believed, impervious to pain.²⁶

In this case, removing the visual image did not serve to decontextualize the events (as did removing the sound) because the images had already been hyper-scrutinized. Rather, removing the visual images enabled the jurors to counteract the defense's attempts to force them into a cybernetic mode of vision.

Smith critiqued the cybernetic mode videographically through her incorporation of the King tape to *Twilight*. In the Washington production, this videotape ran immediately after the segment on Latasha Harlins, which included the monologues by Charles Lloyd and Queen Malkah. King's entire tape ran in slow motion with the original sound removed and musical accompaniment added.²⁷ Although the show's presentation of the tape resembled that of the defense's in that both removed the sound and ran the tape in slow motion, the context of the play altered the tape's effect. As the defense, in Mashon's words, "persuade[d] the jurors to see the video 'through the eyes of the police officers,'"²⁸ Smith, by embedding the subjective mode of vision so deeply in *Twilight*, persuaded the audience to view the tape through a multiplicity of perspectives.

After this showing of the tape in the Washington production, Smith performed the character of Josie Morales, a woman who witnessed King's beating:

I was scheduled to testify/. . .because I had a lot to say/and during the trial I kept in touch with the/prosecutor,/Terry White/. . . I said, "Well, are you going to call me [to the witness stand] or

not?"/And he says, . . . "I don't think we're going to be using you. . . ./And I faxed him a letter/and I told him that those officers were going to be acquitted/and one by one I explained these things to him in this letter/and I told him, "If you do not put witnesses,/if you don't put one resident and testify to say what they saw,"/And I told him in the letter/that those officers were going to be acquitted./But I really believe that he was dead set/ on that video/and that the video would tell all,/but, you see, the video doesn't show you where those officers went/and assaulted Rodney King at the beginning.²⁹

In this extraordinary monologue, Morales attacked the prosecutor's failure to understand two points. First, the video alone—without human eyewitness testimony—could not "tell all"; within a cybernetic model, an authority could mediate the tape and change its meaning. Second, the tape required context—in Morales' example, the events leading up to the beating (here Morales echoed Guinier).

Morales' critique was followed by a ten-second clip, run at normal speed and with the original sound, of the King videotape. This clip, which was the only one in the Berkeley production without musical accompaniment,³⁰ demanded that the audience view the tape not only from multiple perspectives (which was accomplished by the first playing of the King tape), but, as Morales urged seconds earlier, with context and an awareness of the sinister power of the cybernetic mode. In other words, the first playing of the King videotape criticized and undermined the cybernetic mode of vision; the second, musicless clip (in conjunction with Morales' monologue) *resisted* it. The first clip repositioned the tape within a subjective model, and the second restored the sound and (through Morales) the context. In fact, *Twilight* itself could be regarded as a restoration of sound. Smith described her play as "first and foremost a document of what an *actress heard* in Los Angeles."³¹ In this construction, then, the entire play resisted the cybernetic mode of vision.

In addition to the play's restoration of sound (of both the videotape and of previously silenced individuals such as Josie Morales), *Twilight* resisted the cybernetic mode of vision in two other ways: the play restored both history and compassion.

Twilight located the riots within the context of the history of racism through the character of Maria, a juror in the second, civil trial, who "said she wept watching the King beating tape because it reminded her of the flogging of African slaves."³² The play insisted on connecting not only the beatings of King and Denny (which the media linked in such a way that they neutralized each other—"See, white people are awful, but so are black people—therefore the problem is humanity, not racism'),

but also the shooting of Latasha Harlins; thus, the play restored both Harlins and the existence of antiblack racism to the history of the riots.

Finally, the play resisted the cybernetic model by foregrounding the importance of compassion in two main ways: through the use of the tape of Reginald Denny's beating and through the form and content of certain aspects of the overall production.

Like the Harlins tape, the Denny video was narrated in *Twilight*. In this case, however, the narrator was not a lawyer like Lloyd, but was rather a reporter, Judith Tur, whose brother filmed the beating from a helicopter. Unlike the defense lawyers who narrated the King and Harlins videos, Tur persuaded her audience to look at the victim with compassion.

Here's Reginald Denny passing by./If you saw an animal being beaten, you would go over and help an/animal./Okay, here's a black man/going and helping./I think his name is, um,/Larry/Tarvo,/T-a-r-v-o./And this gentleman here is getting his glasses and trying to help him/and. . ./He risked his life doing that./Now you'll see Reginald Denny/and I look at this and each time I see this/I get angrier and angrier. . . . Sorry for getting emotional,/but I mean this is not my United States anymore./This is sicko./Did you see him shoot him?/Did you see that?/(Rewinds the tape)/This is like being in a war zone./This is the guy with the gun./Pulls out the rifle./You see/the shot?/He missed Reginald Denny./He missed him./But he doesn't even run across the street./You would think he would want to run/and disappear.³³

Tur's narration resembled Lloyd's in some ways (for example, both were interested in helping their respective audiences see details that might be easily missed). It differed, however, in that Tur's monologue resisted the cybernetic model by retaining the element of compassion. Tur's identification floated from Denny, to Tarvo, back to Denny, and even to one of Denny's assailants (she imagined that if she were in his situation, she would want to "run and disappear"). Whereas Lloyd referred to "the lady" and "the girl," Tur named several of the figures in her video (and even spelled one of the names). Unlike Lloyd, Tur maintained an emotional connection with her individual subjects.

The three videotapes, then, functioned in the Berkeley production³⁴ as a progression. First, the Lloyd monologue with the Harlins tape replicated and thus revealed the policemen's lawyers' strategic use of the cybernetic mode of vision. Second, the doubling of the King tape resisted this mode of vision by a) locating it within a subjective model, b) restoring sound, and c) restoring context and history.

Third, Tur's narration of the Reginald Denny tape resisted the cybernetic mode of vision by restoring compassion and reifying the possibility of multiple identification.

As in Tur's monologue, compassion played an important role in Smith's overall performance and her carefully revealed process; thus Smith's performance and process similarly resisted the cybernetic model. Smith's performance required empathy for all her characters, even the racist or otherwise hateful ones. Smith's black, female body portraying racist white men constituted a spectacular feat of compassion.

Smith claimed that *Twilight* was "not really an attempt to find causes or to show where responsibility was lacking."³⁵ Many people have exclaimed over her supposed neutrality; for example, Randy Shulman declared in the *Metro Weekly* that Smith "is like a mirror—reflecting us at our best and our worst. And like a mirror, she never passes judgement. That, she leaves up to the audience."³⁶ Richard Stayton described Smith's "aura of mystery. . . a compelling ambiguity."³⁷ Even her surname represents the ultimate in bland neutrality.

Smith has encouraged people to read her as unbiased. "Why do I have to be on one side?" she complained to *Newsweek*.³⁸ "I'm not concerned about good guys and bad guys," she told *Metro Weekly*.³⁹ And to the *Los Angeles Times*, she said, "If you think of what acting is supposed to be, my job is to disappear."⁴⁰ In her many interviews, she has taken great care to reveal nothing about her private life. Audiences have obviously noticed her silence: when Smith appeared on the cover of *Metro Weekly*, a free paper serving Washington's gay community, the headline teased, "Who Really Is Anna Deavere Smith, Anyway?"⁴¹ The unspoken question was, "Is this cross-dressing androgyne a lesbian?" The interview in that issue, however, revealed no personal information of any sort.

Smith constructed herself—on stage and in interviews—as a neutral ear or an empathic mirror. She did, however, recommend a specific course of action for addressing events such as the riots in Los Angeles. Apparently without deliberate irony, Smith recommended that everyone imitate *her*. In the introduction to the published "script," Smith wrote, "In order to have real unity, all voices would have to first be heard or at least represented"—which is precisely what she does in "On the Road." She continued, "Many of us who work in race relations do so from the point of view of our own ethnicity. This very fact inhibits our ability to hear more voices than those that are closest to us in proximity." In other words, everyone should "disappear" or maintain a "compelling ambiguity" like hers. "Few people speak a language about race that is not their own. If more of us could actually speak from another point of view, like speaking another language, we could accelerate the flow of ideas."⁴² Of course, this is precisely what Smith did in *Twilight* and does in all the installments of "On the Road." Her eponymous character, Twilight Bey, expressed identical sentiments on the necessity for multiple identification: ". . .in order for me to be a, to be a true human being,/I can't forever

dwelt in darkness, I can't forever dwell in the idea, of just identifying with people like me and understanding me and mine."⁴³

Through her example of *Twilight* as well as her explicit statement in her introduction, Smith called for others to imitate her. The implicit call did not go unnoticed by critics; John Lahr wrote in the *New Yorker*, "In making the audience hear the characters, Smith is also showing us how to listen to the strangers in its midst."⁴⁴ Furthermore, Smith included in *Twilight* an example of someone who followed a process similar to hers and achieved spectacular results. That individual, Maria, was one of the jurors in the second, civil trial of the police who beat King. Maria acted out the way in which the jury reached its verdict—thus, she fulfilled every one of Smith's above recommendations and partially mirrored Smith's example.

According to Maria's description, the jury stagnated for the first few days of deliberation. Several days into the process, however, all the submerged tensions about race came to the surface and the jury engaged in what Maria called an "AA Meeting":

[E]veryone broke. All that stuff that did not have nothing to do with the case, right? Once everybody, y'know, everybody's guilty—y'know, whatever they had inside, y'know, that they was feeling, that was guilty that they had in the back of their minds, that was guilty about the defendants—well, what I'm trying to say is, once everybody's personal guilts came out onto the table and was pushed aside, then we could look at the testimony. The evidence. And we came to a verdict on Powell like that (claps). Guilty! Nobody cried! . . . We just went through the evidence. . . . It took us five days, four and a half days to get to that AA meeting; after that AA meeting, it took us two days to come to a verdict on all four of them.⁴⁵

Maria's monologue, which received a huge round of applause in New York and which several reviewers mentioned as a highlight of the show, testified to the redemptive power of subjectivity. Only after the jurors vented their individual perspectives on race, only after they rejected the decontextualized, cybernetic mode of vision accepted by the first jury in the criminal trial, only then could the jurors rationally "just go through the evidence." Only then could justice be achieved.

Ultimately, however, *Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992* did not simply resist or reject the cybernetic mode of vision; the play was not merely a reactionary call for a return to nineteenth-century ways of seeing. Rather, Smith's exhortations that spectators imitate her (and Maria) pointed to an even deeper and simpler demand: it called for people to *witness*. Witnessing entails sight informed by

context, history, and compassion. Witnessing means honoring individual, subjective, human perspectives. Witnessing implies responsibility; this responsibility precludes viewers being severed from their vision—and from each other. The publicity image for the New York production (the same image that was used on the cover of the published “script”) announced this project: it depicted Smith’s eyes (with an ambiguous expression that could signal concern, anger, or perhaps an accusation) staring directly into the eyes of the viewer. It was an image of Smith witnessing, and the copy exhorted the reader also to witness: “Listen to the voices of a city and a nation on the edge.”⁴⁶

This call to witness was made most eloquently by Josie Morales, who described in that central monologue her decision to watch the police beat King:

My husband said, “Let’s go inside.”/He was trying to get me to
come inside/and away from the scene,/but I said, “No.”/I said,
“We have to stay here/and watch/because this is wrong.”⁴⁷

A thinking, feeling human witness, as Morales and Smith both understood, is anathema to the cybernetic mode of vision.

Notes

1. Mike Mashon, “Losing Control: Popular Reception(s) of the Rodney King Video,” *Wide Angle: A Film Quarterly of Theory, Criticism and Practice* 15 (April 1993) 12.

2. I do not mean to ascribe any intentionality to Smith; this article aims to analyze the meanings produced by her creation, not to divine her ideas or goals.

3. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1990.

4. Crary 70.

5. 2.

6. The Washington and New York productions did use additional, different video montages. This essay, however, focuses exclusively on the three video clips that appeared in both productions.

7. Smith claims she repeats the interviews verbatim. However, a comparison between a videotaped production and matching sections of the published script revealed significant differences. Phrases varied slightly and occasionally sections of speech were ordered differently. One must therefore question Smith’s claims that both the published and performed texts reproduce the interviews exactly. The accuracy of her claim, however, is irrelevant to this essay.

8. A light-skinned African-American, Smith was once told by an acting agent that he “couldn’t send [her] out [on auditions] because [she did not] look like anything” (Richard Stayton, “The Voices of the City,” *Los Angeles Times Calendar*, 25 April 1993, 76).

9. Program, “Berkeley Repertory Theatre Production of *Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992*,” dir. Sharon Ott, Ford Theatre in Association with Arena Stage, 1997; and Anna Deavere Smith, *Twilight:*

Los Angeles, 1992 (New York: Anchor Books, 1994).

10. Program, "The New York Shakespeare Festival Production of *Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992*," dir. George C. Wolfe, Cort Theatre, 1994.
11. Smith, Anchor Books xvii.
12. Stayton 76.
13. "Genius Grants to the Rescue," *New York Newsday*, 18 June 1996, A20.
14. Linda Winer, "Watching 'Twilight: L.A.' Become Drama," *New York Newsday*, 22 April 1994, B3; emphasis added.
15. Anna Deavere Smith, *Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992*, dir. George C. Wolfe, 1994, videocassette, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts. All quotations by permission of Anna Deavere Smith.
16. Smith, Anchor Books 94-95.
17. 233. The monologues are printed in the form of free-verse poetry.
18. John Lahr, "Under the Skin," *New Yorker*, 28 June 1993, 93.
19. Smith, 1994, transcribed from videocassette. Lloyd's piece also ran in Washington, D.C.
20. Marc J. LaFountain, "Foucault and Rodney King: The 'Rationality' of a Legal Beating," *Humanity & Society* 16 (1992) 567.
21. Smith, Anchor Books 142-43.
22. 143.
23. 142.
24. Smith, videotape.
25. Smith, videotape.
26. Smith, Anchor Books xix-xx.
27. Joseph Smelser of the Berkeley Repertory Theatre, interview by Robin Bernstein 17 April 1997, Washington, D.C., notes, private collection of the author, Washington, D.C..
28. Mashon 14.
29. Smith, Anchor Books 67-68.
30. Smelser.
31. Smith, Anchor Books xxiv. Emphasis Smith's.
32. Mary Talbot, "'Twilight's' Best Gleaning," *New York Daily News*, 23 March 1994, 37.
33. Smith, Anchor Books 95-97.
34. The New York production also included all three videotapes, but with some differences. In New York, the King tape ran in slow motion and with musical accompaniment at the opening of the show, before Smith appeared on stage. The use of the Harlins and Denny tapes was largely the same in both productions.
35. Smith, Anchor Books xxi.
36. Randy Shulman, "The Mirror has 50 (Or So) Faces," *Metro Weekly*, 6 February 1997, 23.
37. Stayton 76.
38. Jack Kroll, "Fire in the City of Angels," *Newsweek*, 28 June, 1993, 63.

39. Shulman 25.
40. Stayton 76.
41. Cover, *Metro Weekly*, 6 February 1997.
42. Smith, Anchor Books xxv. Although I have interspersed my comments with Smith's quotes, her words appeared unbroken in the book.
43. 255.
44. Lahr 93.
45. Smith, videotape.
46. File, "*Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992: Clippings*," New York Library for the Performing Arts, Billy Rose Theatre Research Collection.
47. Smith, Anchor Books 67.