

Twilight— Los Angeles, 1992

by
Anna Deavere Smith

StoryLines California Discussion Guide No. 13

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Discussion questions

"They [whites] lost, oh, big time," says Paul Parker, chairperson for the "Free the L.A. Four Plus" Defense Committee. Who, if anyone, won or lost as a result of the riots in Los Angeles in March-April 1992?

Did you conclude that certain people and factions were more at fault than others? How did the author's selection of participants and quotations influence your conclusion?

Would there be more justice and less violence if we listened to one another more?

Additional readings

Sam Shepard. *True West*, 1979.
Luis Valdez. *Zoot Suit*, 1978.

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Anna Deavere Smith grew up in a black, middle-class neighborhood in Baltimore in the 1950s and early 60s, the eldest of five children. Her father was a businessman, her mother an elementary school principal. “There was segregation in Baltimore then,” Smith says, but because she was light skinned, at times she straddled the line between black and white. “I wasn’t allowed to try on clothes in certain department stores. I remember one saleslady saying to my mother, ‘She looks okay. I’ll let her sneak in.’”

In her late teens, Smith became acutely aware of racial tensions and injustices, especially after the assassination of Martin Luther King and the ensuing nationwide riots, which included gunfire and massive destruction in the Watts area of Los Angeles. Immediately after she graduated from college, Smith headed west to San Francisco with “eighty-five dollars and an overnight bag, looking for the revolution.” It was 1971. “I was very interested in social change, but I had no idea what I was going to do.”

Soon, however, in an acting class at the American Conservatory Theater, Smith discovered her calling: she fell in love with the theater, recognizing its power to move hearts and minds. Eventually she revolutionized the American stage with “documentary theater”—performances that featured the words of actual participants in historical events. These one-woman shows in which Smith played all the characters grew into a collection of theatrical works titled “On the Road: A Search for American Character.”

In 1992, Anna Deavere Smith was commissioned by the Mark Taper Forum in Los Angeles to create what became *Twilight—Los Angeles, 1992*, a search for the character of Los Angeles in the aftermath of the original Rodney King verdict. In that verdict, four white Los Angeles police officers were found not guilty of the beating of King, a black man who had been stopped for a traffic violation. The beating had been recorded on videotape and widely broadcast.

Earlier works in the “On the Road” series have achieved considerable acclaim, most notably *Fires in the Mirror*, a dramatic documentary of voices from a 1991 conflict between blacks and Hasidic Jews in Crown Heights, Brooklyn. Smith received an Obie Award, an honor given to distinguished Off-Broadway productions, for the work.

In *Fires in the Mirror*, as in Smith’s other works, she strove to give voice to both sides—or all sides—of the events her works addressed. Her goal was social change through consciousness-raising: if people could better understand their adversaries’ points of view, conflicts might achieve compromise before escalating into violence. In an August 1994 interview, Smith said:

Racism is this incredible, incredible reality that few of us are fully conscious of at any given moment. So there’s this lack of consciousness that is our weird common thread. But that’s where my optimism comes in. I think that if we ever came into full consciousness, it would be painful, but it would be glorious—and we would be free. And I don’t think that’s out of the question.

Nevertheless, the riots in Los Angeles after the Rodney King verdict presented unforeseen challenges to Smith. The riots are estimated to have led to 50 deaths, more than 2,000 injuries, and the burning, looting or damaging of 3,000 Los Angeles businesses. Smith said that although she was able to see both sides in *Fires in the Mirror*, *Twilight—Los Angeles* was more complicated. “I went to the second trial, and I can intellectually see some part of what the policemen felt. But I couldn’t say that I could watch the tape of the Rodney King beating and be completely objective. How many people could?”

In creating *Twilight—Los Angeles, 1992*, Smith taped interviews with more than 175 people over a period of nine months. Out of hundreds of hours of tape, she selected 50 monologues from 46 voices, listening closely for moments when her subjects spoke most tellingly. An anonymous juror, speaking for himself and fellow jurors, says, “We just felt like we were pawns that were thrown away by the system,” a sentiment that mirrored the rage and frustration of Rodney King supporters who took to the streets after the acquittal. Reginald Denny, the truck driver who was pulled from his vehicle and badly beaten by rioters, says, “I didn’t know the verdict had come down. I didn’t pay any attention to that because that was somebody’s else’s problem....” A few moments later, Denny is praising those who helped him and talking about “this weird common thread that connects us all.”

The title, *Twilight—Los Angeles, 1992*, was taken largely from an interview with Twilight Bey, organizer of a gang truce that helped to end the riots. Bey says his name means “twice the knowledge of those my age”—“twi” is twice without the “ce” and “light” is an ancient symbol of knowing. What does he know?

I can’t dwell forever in darkness. I can’t dwell in the idea of just identifying with people like me and understanding me and mine.

Twilight’s eloquent statement seems like a truth that human beings might have understood since the beginning of civilization. But events in Los Angeles in 1992 make it clear that modern man has not yet taken it to heart.

About the author

Anna Deavere Smith is the Ann O’Day Maples Professor of the Arts at Stanford University. Awarded a MacArthur Foundation “genius” grant in 1996, she lives in San Francisco.