

## (Ch)oral History: Documentary Theatre, the Communal Subject and Progressive Politics

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Some of the hottest tickets to a theatrical event in the 1990s provided entrance not to the bombastic Disneyfied musicals that have come to define Broadway, nor to the intense, intimate, family psychodramas of playwrights like Tennessee Williams, Arthur Miller, or Sam Shepard. In fact, some critics may be hard-pressed to call the creators of these pieces “playwrights” at all, since the texts are taken almost entirely from “real life” in the forms of interviews and court transcripts. That docudrama and oral history performance have migrated from film and television to occupy a prominent space on the American stage speaks to a changing perception of and heightened urgency to rethink conventional notions of community, subjectivity, and even what constitutes human drama. And that much of the body of 1990s American docudrama is assembled by playwrights with progressive social agendas—including feminism,<sup>1</sup> queer theory, critical race theory, and Marxism—indicates the degree to which progressive ideologies and sympathies are at work in revising these notions. These oral history plays take the discourse of history- and life-writing, and shift their discursive conceptions of the subject from the single protagonist to the greater community. This radical approach to subject formation not only disrupts the empowered status of the subject’s authority, but also encourages the integration of the audience into the tenuous sense of community created by the theatrical event itself.

This still-forming category of documentary theatre can be dated as far back as Georg Büchner, whose play *Danton’s Death* (1835) “rightly should be the beginning point of inquiry into this field of drama,”<sup>2</sup> according Gary Fisher Dawson. More recently, documentary theatre’s roots derive from the 1920s theatre work of Bertolt Brecht and, more directly, Erwin Piscator, whose epic theatre tactics used “film, music, epic successions of tableaux and the immediacy of news coverage [to invigorate] the stage with new techniques while simultaneously calling for social action.”<sup>3</sup> In the United States, these ideas were adopted by the American Living Newspaper, an initiative of the New-Deal-era Federal Theatre Project that staged fictionalized versions of contemporary social debates, often with a Marxist-materialist thrust. The formal and political influence of Piscator and the Federal

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Theatre Project on contemporary staged oral histories cannot be underestimated. Even though many contemporary playwrights using docudrama (particularly Anna Deavere Smith) often hide their ideological sympathies in claims of political neutrality, the leftist politics of radical 1930s documentary theatre inform the stances of these new playwrights as much as they influence their form.

More recent German post-war documentary theatre frequently drew from court transcripts to expose what playwrights saw as miscarriages of justice. Peter Weiss's *The Investigation* (1965), Heinar Kipphardt's *In the Matter of J. Robert Oppenheimer* (1964), and Rolf Hochhuth's *The Deputy* (1964) critically examine Nazi war-trials, Oppenheimer's contested loyalty to the United States, and the complicity of Pope Pius XII with European fascism, respectively. Each draws on diaries, court documents, letters, and interviews to reconstruct a distilled version of events that challenges the accepted truths of their initial context.<sup>4</sup> The genre that has grown out of these works and has taken root on the contemporary American stage is, like the documentary theatre of the sixties and seventies, drawn from "real life" sources, most often interviews, but also occasionally court documents and other documentary material. But unlike these plays, contemporary oral history plays tend to focus less on "what happened" than on the discourse that surrounds crisis events. And as Melissa Salz points out in her dissertation on what she calls "theatre of testimony," "documentary theatre since 1980 often represents multiple points of view rather than a single point of view."<sup>5</sup>

Salz divides theatre of testimony into two camps: the social/political and the personal/autobiographical. Following John Brockway Schmor's concept of confessional performance,<sup>6</sup> theatre of testimony features the self-reflexive presentation of admittedly subjective accounts of the recent past, tying the genre to postmodern notions of identity and history. Yet both "theatre of testimony" and "confessional performance" are broader categories than I intend to explore, and the term docudrama, which describes "based-on-a-true-story" tales commonly found on television, is slightly inaccurate in describing the mode I want to examine. Perhaps more accurate is the movement that Dawson identifies as a new form of documentary theatre, exemplified by the work of Emily Mann. This category, he suggests, features plays that draw upon "private oral histories and testimonies that, in the process, give platform to larger societal concerns in the public arena."<sup>7</sup> Therefore, I will use the term "staged oral history," which closely corresponds with both Dawson's description of the new phase of documentary theatre and Salz's social/political theatre of testimony as she describes it in two statements: theatre of testimony is "aestheticized documentary drama that dramatizes oral history in the form of fractured and fragmented memory"<sup>8</sup> and, more specifically, "social/political contemporary documentary drama combines interviews, trial transcripts and multi-media materials to create a kaleidoscope of images, perspectives, and memories."<sup>9</sup>

The distinctions that Salz makes regarding this last grouping conform not just to the subject matter that her heading seems to indicate, but also to the formal qualities she identifies that mark these plays—an emphasis on fracturing, fragmentation, and multiplicity that applies to narrative, perspective, and medium. And while the multimedia format seems to reveal a hybrid with filmic documentary, the fragmentation of narrative and perspective seems also to point to another dramatic influence, specifically a category of plays that rose to prominence with the success of Ntozake Shange's 1975 "choreopoem" *for colored girls who have considered suicide / when the rainbow is enuf* and includes later plays like Diana Son's *R.A.W. ('Cause I'm a Woman)*, Madeline George's *The Most Massive Woman Wins*, Glenda Dickerson and Breena Clarke's *Re/membering Aunt Jemima: A Menstrual Show*, and much of the work of Spiderwoman Theatre. The commonality of these plays is their conception of voice, what Susan S. Lanser describes as the sequential communal voice, "in which narrative authority is invested in a definable community and textually inscribed . . . through multiple, mutually authorizing voices"<sup>10</sup> and "in which each voice speaks in turn so that [a] 'we' is produced from a series of collaborating 'I's.'"<sup>11</sup> Shange's play is perhaps the best illustration of the communal voice on stage, dramatizing as it does a range of African American women's voices, portrayed by a cast of women whose only differentiating markers are costume colors. In this way, the actors in Shange's play enact the communal voice of a large category of women. This general type of play positions characters in such a way as to create dialogue amongst them, investing none of them with a greater authority than another and creating narrative by way of an accumulating discourse rather than by representing the perspective of a single, unified protagonist.

In what follows, I will examine the work of three playwrights—Anna Deavere Smith, Emily Mann, and Moisés Kaufman and the Tectonic Theatre Project (a communal author)—each of whom are working in staged oral history. These are by no means the only theatre artists working in the form, and we might look to the multi-cultural work of Ping Chong's *Undesirable Elements* series, Eve Ensler's *Vagina Monologues* or her work with Bosnian rape camp victims, Barbara Damashek's *Whereabouts Unknown*, or Julie Crutcher and Vaughan McBride's *Diggin In* for other examples. But what the four plays I focus on have in common is their point of origin, their theatrical response to a specific moment of violence, and the way that they stage debate and dialogue from across a spectrum of political ideologies. Occasionally, other texts will come to bear on the discussion, and all of them help to round out a form that I argue is a largely progressive intervention into documentary theatre, specifically, and the discourse of staged life-writing more, generally. Staged oral history radically fragments the unitary subject and creates montages of voice that indicate a polyphonic subjectivity (which I will explore in part through Lanser's notion of the sequential communal voice), redefining the

traditional narrative of life-writing by shifting its focus from a linear subject-oriented trajectory to a multi-voiced community-oriented one.

### Oral History as Progressive Theatre

The relationship of staged oral history to progressive ideologies is a difficult one to parse out, since the form is not *inherently* politically-charged, nor does every play of the genre take any one specific ideology as its primary subject. And yet contemporary oral history plays are, as I have described, both amenable to progressive ideologies and influenced by feminist and other oppositional discourses. The narrative form of these plays virtually presupposes an ideological opposition to the dominant discourse, employs non-traditional, narrative trajectories, emphasizes the notion of community over the individual, and redefines the notion of the subject to denote that emphasis. The result is a form that is, if not by definition progressive, at least distinctly compatible with the narrative demands made by the theories of many oppositional discourses. In short, by examining staged oral history as a category inflected by progressive ideologies, we begin to see the political uses of narrative structure as rhetoric; this is a form whose very nature can be used to reinforce the political claims it contains.

Anna Deavere Smith's work is perhaps the most famous of this genre, and she is the most frequently invoked when discussions of the form emerge. Her work in the 1980s developed into a series of site-based performance pieces entitled "On the Road: A Search for American Character." In this series, Smith would travel from commission to commission, creating pieces based on her interviews with members of the various communities that employed her. She would then invite her subjects to the performance to see themselves being performed.<sup>12</sup> She only gained national acclaim in the early 1990s, however, when she brought this format to two contemporary moments of cultural and physical violence: the Crown Heights riots of 1991 and the Los Angeles riots of 1992. The resulting pieces, *Fires in the Mirror* (1992) and *Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992* (1993), are hallmarks of contemporary, staged oral history, dramatizing as they do a remedy to the polarization of these communities by presenting Smith's interviews in dialogue with one another. Indeed, while Smith works very hard to present an ethos of neutrality in any debate, many feminists have been eager to claim her work, as an interview with Carol Martin, the critical work of Tania Modleski, and the critical work of Charles and James Lyons all demonstrate.<sup>13</sup>

Perhaps more easily aligned with feminist ideology—although certainly not directly so—is the work of Emily Mann, which she calls "Theatre of Testimony," the term that Salz adopts. Mann's body of work extends back to 1980 with *Still Life*, a play that she describes in her production notes as being "about violence in America. The Vietnam War is the backdrop to the violence at home."<sup>14</sup> This and other plays, including *Annulla* (1985), *Execution of Justice* (1982)—concerning

the murders of Harvey Milk and George Moscone—and *Having our Say* (1995), takes documentary theatre as its formal inspiration with subjects ranging from a single interviewee (*Annulla*) to the courts and people of San Francisco (*Execution of Justice*). Here I will concentrate on Mann's most recent work, *Greensboro*, which remembers the massacre that occurred at an anti-Ku Klux Klan rally in the title city in 1979. It draws on interviews and court proceedings to create a dialogue some seventeen years after the event.

The work of Moisés Kaufman and the Tectonic Theatre Project is most closely aligned with queer theatre, and like Smith's and Mann's, Kaufman's work utilizes a structure<sup>15</sup> that is influenced by a progressive aesthetic. Kaufman's most famous work (by which I mean the collaborative work of the Tectonic Theater Project) includes the two recent plays *Gross Indecency: The Three Trials of Oscar Wilde* (1997), and *The Laramie Project* (2000), both of which use a format similar to Mann's in *Execution of Justice*<sup>16</sup> and *Greensboro*, compiling interviews and court transcripts, among other documents, to create dialogue onstage. *The Laramie Project*, an exemplar of the staged oral history, covers the brutal 1998 murder of gay University of Wyoming student Matthew Shepard and the subsequent media blitz that surrounded both the murder and the trial of the assailants. *Laramie* is of particular interest here because of the way that the community of performers integrates with the community represented in the piece, a phenomenon that I will explore more fully below.

In terms of their ideological positioning, the staged oral histories of these playwrights—and indeed of the genre at large—almost necessarily claim a stance in opposition to the dominant discourse of their cultural context, and that stance is frequently a politically leftist one.<sup>17</sup> Lanser notes that “unlike authorial and personal voices [which in life-writing correspond to biography and autobiography, respectively] the communal mode seems to be primarily a phenomenon of marginal or suppressed communities; I have not observed it in fiction by white, ruling class men, perhaps such an ‘I’ is already in some sense speaking with the authority of a hegemonic ‘we.’”<sup>18</sup> Indeed, when we apply Lanser's observations on narrative fiction to the stage, the same holds true: historically, from Piscator on down, documentary theatre has often functioned as a mouthpiece for leftist thought, at least in part because of the traditionally leftist leanings of avant-garde theatrical practitioners. And while Gary Fisher Dawson notes that documentary theatre can be both de-politicized to a certain degree and used for conservative or totalitarian purposes, in many instances, he identifies “the anti-hegemonic purpose that documentary theatre serves.”<sup>19</sup> Therefore, because the ideologies presented in staged oral history are often not “official,” the “truths” that these plays advance are often similarly alternative ones. Staged oral histories often seek to reveal a hidden truth, to give voice to silenced voices, or to expose what has been kept hidden. This

challenge to official authority and patriarchal discourse suggests a certain sympathy between staged oral histories and the progressive aims they frequently espouse.

### Oral History and Community

Throughout this argument, I suggest that the creation of some notion of community is central to the progressive political goals of the staged oral histories that I examine. However, we need first to interrogate the term “community,” which can be applied in at least four different ways in this discussion: 1) as the larger represented community of all voices in the play; 2) as smaller represented communities that can be grouped together by perspective or by ideology; 3) as the community of actors who represent these first two communities; and 4) as the community of audience members and actors who together experience an individual theatrical event. At the widest level, the notion of community can serve as the most heterogeneous collection of voices represented by these texts: Laramie, Greensboro, Crown Heights, or Los Angeles serve as tangible locales that provide the communities for the texts of Kaufman, Mann, and Smith. Indeed, it is no coincidence that the names of these geographical communities all appear in the titles, at once defining the boundaries of community as the city itself, and setting that community off from larger, more universalized, categories. The first “moment” in *The Laramie Project* defines this explicitly, calling upon many of the characters in the play to define the town in which they live, and providing definitions ranging from “a good place to live”<sup>20</sup> and “a beautiful town”<sup>21</sup> to “Now, after Matthew, I would say that Laramie is a town defined by an accident, a crime. We’ve become Waco, we’ve become Jasper. We’re a noun, a definition, a sign.”<sup>22</sup> Inherent in each of these definitions is a commonality located in a connection to place, and yet the differences between them signals a polyvocality, a dialogical nature that encompasses difference even as it asserts that commonality.

We must note that this notion of community is different from the ones that follow inasmuch as it is an accidental community, a community forced together by place, but one not inherently defined by the connections between people that it harbors. This notion of community more closely resembles what German sociologist Ferdinand Tönnies termed *Gesellschaft* (often translated as “society”), a space in which people congregate to do business, but not *Gemeinschaft*, a community with a self-edifying membership in which actual connections, personal exchanges, and communal ties are established.<sup>23</sup> Yet while this notion of community may by definition be little more than a shared space, a commonality defined by place, part of the goal of these plays seems to endow the *Gesellschaft* with features of the *Gemeinschaft*: to establish in the city at large a dialogue that engenders more meaningful connections across the smaller, more insular communities that it harbors, a goal that many of these plays, in fact, accomplish.

The second possible meaning of community is a subset of the first, and more naturally corresponds to the *Gemeinschaft* where these plays find the greatest potential: self-identified communities within the larger site-specific communities of these plays. In Smith's *Crown Heights*, we might locate the Lubavitcher and African-American communities as distinct parties within the larger debate. In Mann's play, the communities break down along political lines, and in *Laramie*, a local detective, Sergeant Hing, breaks the town into three groups: "What you have is, you have your old-time traditional-type ranchers, they've been here forever—Laramie's been the hub of where they come for their supplies and stuff like that. . . . And then you got, uh, the university population. . . . And then you have the people who live in Laramie, basically."<sup>24</sup> While *The Laramie Project* does not define communities as gay/straight, there is some sense that university community contains a radical element. And yet Kauffman's choice to pose the communities along lines other than ideological ones suggests how much these communities blend and intermingle.

To varying degrees, these plays often try to represent dialogue between these different communities, if not by representing an actual dialogue, then by placing their monologues in close proximity to one another. Indeed, this might be the art by which we call these artists playwrights: if their words are not always theirs, the context they give to the words represents their greatest achievement, both aesthetically and politically. Take, for example, the section entitled "Territory" in Smith's *Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992*, which contains a monologue from community activist Michael Zinzun, who talks of his experiences with and work against police brutality—a monologue in which he refers to policemen as "pigs."<sup>25</sup> It is immediately preceded by a monologue from former LAPD Police Commissioner Stanley Sheinbaum who, while he maintains, "This city has abused the cops," also wonders, "Why do I have to be on a side? / There's a problem here."<sup>26</sup> The same section also contains a monologue from Cornell West (who wrote the Foreword to *Fires in the Mirror*), in which the African-American scholar places blame on both the police and the oppressed, black male for buying into a machismo cowboy mentality. In short, while various characters place blame on one another, many also often acknowledge the complicity of their own community, and when placed up against one another, they create a dialogue unlike what is typically heard in the streets.

This juxtaposition is another marker of the sympathies between feminist politics and the art of playwrights like Mann, since the tactic works against the monologic nature of the interview—in which a single speaker engages in a one-sided discourse with a captive interviewer—and places the monologue of the speaker in dialogue with a range of other conflicting voices. By placing these smaller communities in discursive conflict with one another on the space of the stage, these playwrights not only disrupt the monologic control inherent in the form of the interviews from

which their text is taken, they also replace that singular, hegemonic voice with a dialogue of voices that presupposes a more democratic conception of power. Since each interviewee speaks to the playwright as if in a monologue, the playwright radically alters the notion of subjectivity as it is conceived in the initial interviews, not in terms of the words being spoken, but in terms of their context. When Edward Dawson, the complicit KKK informer to the Greensboro police, speaks in his real-life interview with Emily Mann (represented onstage only as “interviewer”), his subjectivity is hermetic, one-sided, an “I” in contrast to every other “I” in the play, including the police, the Klan, and the Communist Workers’ Party (CWP).<sup>27</sup> In the play itself, though, his voice is interspersed among all the other voices; it is made a part of the whole dialogue instead of remaining a discrete identity that conceives of the rest of humanity as “outside,” as “other.” In this sense, these plays are radical realizations of Bakhtinian heteroglossia; the dialogic is a necessary part of communal subjectivity because in order to imagine these personae as part of a whole, none of them may be invested with an authority, as dialogue, above another. However, this disruption of the monologic voice is not without its consequences, since the wresting of authority from the interview subject—be that subject empowered or disempowered in the public sphere—inevitably means the playwright is vested with much of that authority, which plays out in the politically charged processes of editing and ordering in the final script, an issue I take up later on.

Nonetheless, the close proximity of these voices also suggests how these rigid communities are more porous than we might imagine. The title character of *Twilight*, Twilight Bey, says in her monologue, “I can’t forever dwell in the idea / of just identifying with people like me and understanding me and mine.”<sup>28</sup> And in *Fires in the Mirror*, cultural critic Angela Davis notes that, “For many years in African American history / ‘race’ was a synonym with community.”<sup>29</sup> But she goes on to note that:

We have to find new ways of coming together,  
not the old notion of coalition in which we anchor ourselves very solidly  
in our  
specific racialized communities,  
and simply voice  
our  
solidarity with other people.  
I’m not suggesting that we do not anchor ourselves in our communities;  
I feel very anchored in  
my various communities.  
But I think that,  
to use a metaphor, the rope  
attached to that anchor should be long enough to allow us to move



into other communities,  
to understand and learn.<sup>30</sup>

Davis's metaphor of the rope that allows movement from community to community corresponds directly with Smith's philosophy about the function of her theatre: to create a bridge between communities "that makes unlikely aspects *seem* connected. The bridge doesn't make them the same, it merely *displays* how two unlikely *aspects* are *related*."<sup>31</sup> Moreover, the image of the rope, of one cord composed of multiple strands, nicely illustrates the relationship between these first two notions of community in these plays.

The third notion of community—the group of performers who "bring to life" the communities in the text—is not necessarily present in each of these performances and is certainly not unique to the mode of oral history, but rather, native to the collaborative nature of theatre. This onstage community can provide a crucial link between the voices of the play and the audience watching. Of course, many of these performances (Anna Deavere Smith's and some performances of Eve Ensler's) are presented as solo pieces, and solo performance carries with it an authority that seems to run counter to the appearance of dialogue that the scripts suggest. At one end, we might laud such performances for presenting us with an image of unification that encompasses many voices in one body. Smith, for example, is frequently praised not only for her virtuoso ability to portray Black men and Jewish women with equal skill, but also for the implicit respect for those divergent voices along the spectrum of identities. If one woman, this line of reasoning contends, can speak each of the voices, then the audience is provided with a model for understanding the other. Yet, consolidation of voices also represents a consolidation of authority on stage, and the appearance of neutrality created by such performances elides the control over the voices that stands behind each voice.

While Smith's own primary *modus operandi* is solo performance, the bodies of the actors in other plays in this mode provide a concrete visual image of dialogue in the performance that at once represents the contextualized dialogue created by the playwright and also represents for the audience a concrete example of dialogue in real time. By serving as a bodied image of community that encompasses both similarity and difference, a community of performers can drastically alter the reception of the dialogue presented onstage. For example, the members of Moisés Kaufman's Tectonic Theater Project represent themselves as not only transparent actors but as part of the communities they interview, recognizing their own biases and anxieties in the process of creating dialogue in Laramie. Their initial prejudices are noted onstage when they begin by setting "safety rules,"<sup>32</sup> while another company member reveals his anxiety about an interview by noting, "So here we go: seven-thirty a.m., two queers and a Catholic priest."<sup>33</sup> But the company's own parts in the dialogue and in establishing connections are also clearly results of the

project. One character makes sure to tell a company member, "I love you honey,"<sup>34</sup> while another seems interested in auditioning for the play. And more than once, company members in the text of the play speak of their emotional responses to the voices around them, which in turn encourages the audience to invest themselves in the dialogue being represented onstage.

The final notion of community is the one created anew each time the curtain rises: the ad hoc community established in the theatre itself, one that can encompass difference and similarity in much the same way as the broadest notion of community discussed above. Indeed, Smith's early performances in her *On the Road* series were site-specific performances, generated for the audiences for whom they were to be performed, so the community represented in the play was often the community who witnessed the play. In most oral history performance, however, the goal of the playwright is to create in her audience the kind of community that she imagines onstage, so as to create extra-textual dialogue. Anna Deavere Smith notes in her introduction to *Fires*, for example, that post-play discussions were a crucial element of the performance process, for "When the audience talks, they are talking as much to each other as they are to me."<sup>35</sup> And in her introduction to *Twilight*, she similarly notes, "I played *Twilight* in Los Angeles as a call to the community. I performed it at a time when the community had not yet resolved the problems. I wanted to be a part of their examination of the problems. *I believe that solutions to these problems will call for the participation of large and eclectic groups of people.*"<sup>36</sup> The degree to which Smith wants to involve her audience in these dialogues speaks to her imagining of the audience as its own community.

This last category of community, which conforms closely to what Victor Turner calls *communitas*, seems to be the goal of these oral histories: to create in the audience a sense of community that encourages dialogue, that allows for the peaceful confrontation of individual identities and that incorporates them all into the utopian space of the theatre. Turner (often quoting his own earlier writings) defines it as "a direct, immediate and total confrontation of human identities, a deep rather than intense style of personal interaction. 'It has something "magical" about it. Subjectively there is a feeling of endless power.'"<sup>37</sup> It is important to note that Turner's definition both incorporates the confrontation of identities—Jew/Black, Communist/Conservative, homosexual/heterosexual, male/female—that these plays embody, and also accounts for the empowerment of the disempowered that Cornell West identifies in Anna Deavere Smith's performances. West writes, "*Fires in the Mirror* is a grand example of how art can constitute a public space that is perceived by people as empowering rather than disempowering,"<sup>38</sup> noting the historical disempowerment that African Americans in particular have experienced in the public sphere. In short, this notion of *communitas* sees the clash of communities and empowers each of them in the space of the theatrical event.

This affective notion of community can be experienced in what Jill Dolan calls the “utopian performative,” for which she locates the *potential* in all theatre, but which she identifies as exemplary in the feminist/queer performance art of Holly Hughes, Peggy Shaw, and Deb Margolin.<sup>39</sup> This notion is not precisely a model for what should happen on stage, but for how what happens on stage should *feel*, its experiential element for the audience, one that resists hierarchy, encourages community, and in its very definition, imagines human interaction as it should exist, but not as it does in the world at large or has in the recent past. These plays seem to be creating theatrical utopias by representing real world dystopias, a commitment to social change that ties these plays to progressive ideology whether, like Anna Deavere Smith, they purport to be impartial chroniclers, or like Mann, are clearly positioning their audience to band against repressive groups like the KKK and the American Nazi Party, in a move that both creates community in the audience and points to a renewed urgency for action.

Moreover, the emphasis of these plays on multiple viewpoints and multiple communities enveloped into a broader notion of community creates a safe space for dialogue within the audience. These plays specifically encourage the audience to configure themselves not only as a community of spectators, but also as members of the various ideological and identity-based communities represented on the stage. Such boundary-crossing is made possible for the audience in these plays because it begins with the performers onstage, for as Smith imagines it, “The spirit of acting is the *travel* from the self to the other.”<sup>40</sup> Janelle Reinelt links the performers’ boundary crossings explicitly to those of the audience:

The relationship between interviewer and speaker is mobile—it changes—and since the audience is positioned in the direct address sequences to “be” Smith, they are positioned to experience the activity of bridging, working with difference. This effect is the most radical element of Smith’s—it engages the spectator in radical political activity to the extent that the spectator grapples with this epistemological process.<sup>41</sup>

With this fourth notion of community, then, we can begin to see how each of these configurations of community—the community represented, the ideological sub-communities, the community of performers, and the audience community—begin to bleed into one another. Since ideological communities make up the *Gesellschaft* of the play, the audience can place themselves within these smaller ideological communities; the audience and the performers can imagine themselves as a separate community within the theatrical space; and the performers (especially Kaufman’s) can begin to imagine themselves as part of the larger community being represented onstage, even as they are doing the representation. Angela Davis’s metaphor of the rope and the anchor becomes radically realized in these plays; an audience

member can come into the theatre allied with one specific community, but during a performance, can imagine herself traveling through multiple communities, including the ad hoc community created each night in the theatrical space. The ultimate result is a narrative theatrical experience that lays the groundwork for progressive political action through acknowledgement and consideration of the other through dialogue about community.

### Oral History and the Communal Subject

Perhaps the closest connection between staged oral history and feminism is not found in the notion of community itself, but in the way that the narrative emphasis on community configures subjectivity. Indeed, many critics have identified something significantly feminist in these plays' staging of subjectivity. Melanie Smith, for example, notes that "Mann's characters continue the feminist work of defining women in the subject position,"<sup>42</sup> and later asserts that *Still Life* in particular "counters the omission of woman in the historical, social and cultural world."<sup>43</sup> Many critics of Mann (Melanie Smith included) also note how Mann roots the aesthetics of her theatre of testimony in women's experience. In an oft-quoted 1987 interview, Mann says:

Women sit around and talk to each other about their memories of traumatic, devastating events in their lives. Even women who don't know each other well! . . . Most of what I know about human experience comes from listening. That's why it's very natural for me to believe in direct address in the theatre. It is an extension of listening. When I put these stories on stage, the audience experiences a direct interaction which is in the moment.<sup>44</sup>

Whether or not Emily Mann's formal innovations are specifically feminist, they, like Anna Deavere Smith's, seem to have had a distinctly feminist effect on the debates they address, and by extension, on how we conceptualize the parties in those debates. Cornell West writes:

Smith explodes this narrow framework by taking us into the private spheres of American society where the complex discourses of women often take place in patriarchal America. This is especially so in Hasidic and Black America where the access of women to public space—especially major leadership roles—is frowned upon. Yet Smith neither romanticizes nor idealizes Hasidic, Black, or secular Jewish women. Instead, she humanizes the Black-Jewish dialogue by including the diverse and often conflicting voices within Black and Jewish America. . . . In short the gendered character of the Black Jewish Dialogue often produces obstacles that

compound the problems and render us more paralyzed. Smith's deepening of this dialogue by *de-patriarchalizing* our conversation is a major contribution in this regard.<sup>45</sup>

Despite indulging in a bit of wishful overstatement,<sup>46</sup> the depatriarchalized conversation that West identifies serves as a way to imagine the affinities between the feminist impulses that I identify in these plays and the other oppositional discourses clearly at work, and also seems to me to be a way to imagine this affinity without essentializing based either on the gender of the playwright or on the experience of the playwright among women. And if the conversation is depatriarchalized, its coherence, its univocality, and its status as authoritative are similarly disrupted. While I will suggest some qualifiers to the utopian image created by Smith's performances, the result is a staged conversation that, to some degree, is similarly depatriarchalized and anti-hegemonic in comparison to the often violent discourse that surrounded the historical events on which these plays focus.

Although we imagine the subjects of these plays as the locales in which they take place—Greensboro, Los Angeles, Crown Heights, Laramie—these are certainly not unified subjects; they are fragmented and multivalenced. This fragmentation plays out most clearly in the way that the different communities within a specific site are able to maintain identity, what Ntozake Shange in *Fires in the Mirror* calls:

a way of knowing that no matter where I put myself  
that I am not necessarily  
what's around me.  
I am part of my surroundings  
and I become separate from them  
and it's being able to make those differentiations clearly  
that lets us have an identity.<sup>47</sup>

And yet there is a tension between Shange's notion of identity as the differentiation between self and other and Angela Davis's metaphor of the anchor and the rope that allows for some crossover from community to community. In the four plays examined here, this tension works to mitigate the dilemma that Susan Lanser identifies in the communal voice, when she notes that:

In the warnings of Marie Ponsot and Rosemary Deen (themselves a "we"), 'where no community exists, 'we' may seem to presume too much.' If 'we' dissolves the Other/Self dichotomy, its danger lies in its power to reduce each Other to an explicit—or perhaps more troublingly—implicit norm. The utopian value of the 'we' is counterbalanced, then, by the

equally strong dystopian danger of speaking for women, or a particular group of women, in general.<sup>48</sup>

By both highlighting the ideological and identity communities within larger local communities and using the theatrical space itself to encourage the audience to identify with multiple voices in the continuum, each of these plays maintains an Other/Self dichotomy while building bridges that allow for the “confrontation of identities” that Victor Turner identifies as *communitas*.

The communal subjectivity of these oral histories, then, is marked by a subject that can be configured as a larger community. This community is represented not by one single voice but by a communal voice. Lanser identifies this type of narration as that which “allows each narrator a separateness and indeed a separate authority, yet each also helps create the portrait of an identifiable group.”<sup>49</sup> She continues by discussing a novel narrated in the sequential communal voice, noting that each speaker “has her own narrative style and preferences, and through the metanarrative act of creating characters not simply as voices, but as storytellers, the novel legitimates every woman’s diegetic and mimetic authority.”<sup>50</sup> Similarly, these plays invest many of their characters with a diegetic authority that is always counterbalanced by the other voices in the conversation. And it is this distribution of “diegetic and mimetic authority” that Smith responds to when asked, “Did you find any one voice that could speak for the entire city?” To this question, she answers that “in order to have real unity, all voices would first have to be heard or at least represented.”<sup>51</sup> This rhetoric is perhaps undermined by the very real power that Smith has over the conversation that she mediates, since the excerpts she chooses to dramatize invest some characters with more nobility than others; to claim that each voice is presented as equally right or ethical or moral would be naïve. Similarly, Mann represents voices of the KKK and the American Nazi Party, despite her obvious bias against them, alongside those of the CWP with whom she more clearly sympathizes. Nonetheless, this side-by-side representation of multiple voices at once stages the idea of democracy at work while subtly taking part in that democracy by shaping the conversation. Indeed, one might be convinced that instead of a collective “we,” these plays merely offer a series of “I’s” that at best add up to a few smaller “we’s.” And yet the push to transform the *Gesellschaft* into the *Gemeinschaft*, to bring dialogue and democracy to the normally hierarchical space of the city similarly suggests a push to imagine the individual “we’s” of smaller communities as a collective, but fragmented community, a communal subject marked both by commonality and difference.

In the theatre, this tension can be illustrated by the different approaches to casting these plays, or more specifically, whether they are cast performances or solo performances. For while a complete cast does indeed enable a greater sense of “communitas” on the stage itself, it perhaps dampens the impact of the communal

subject. For example, while *Greensboro* may in part create a powerful theatrical experience because of the multiple performers on stage, a representation of the connections and dialogue that the play hopes to encourage, Anna Deavere Smith's performance on the other hand, more fully illustrates the conflicted nature of these subjectivities. In this case, Smith's body represents a single subjectivity, one that contains within it many fragmentary identities.<sup>52</sup> This is in part facilitated by Smith's skin color (she is a light skinned African American) and by her skills as a performer. Nonetheless, in simultaneously appearing to an audience as a single body and multiple voices, the communal subjectivity is made explicit.

Furthermore, the communal nature of the subject onstage is in part realized in the style of acting that such pieces demand. In most cases (Mann's work is an exception), these plays require their performers to shift from role to role, acquiring the character of Brecht's actor in "The Street Scene" who is always working in *gest* to *show* what happened, instead of to *become* the character to whom it happened. As a result, the characters appear primarily as surfaces.<sup>53</sup> And because they appear in a play of surfaces, these individual characters are not afforded a complete and fully developed subjectivity, but merely fragments of—the external markers of—subjectivity. Coupled with the comparative invisibility of the actors' external markers of subjectivity—and in the case of Anna Deavere Smith, her consistent refusal to make her own position known—a central subjectivity, or even a fully conceived subjectivity seems remarkably absent (even though it operates powerfully behind the scenes). And yet what so many critics call the overwhelmingly human character of these plays is created by the cumulative effect of those fragments, a subjectivity that arises from the body of voices, the many voices of the local community being presented by each piece.

It is perhaps this tension that defines contemporary oral history: the tension between community and fragmentation, the tension between chorus and polyphony. We are in one room, this genre declares, but we speak in different voices. The collective yet diverse nature of the subject onstage in these plays seems to grow out of a feminist critique of the subject and theorizations of subjectivity and voice that look toward investing women and other marginalized groups with the authority that hegemonic discourse has traditionally denied them. Indeed, this conception of the subject as a balance between unity and diversity is a hallmark of progressive politics: issues of equal representation across ethnic, gender, and class categories signal a singular concern for egalitarianism that is rarely found in other formal categories. This radical version of polyvocality allies staged oral history itself with progressive politics not just because it espouses something of a democratic form, but also because it works to level the marginalized and the center and gives voice to the typically silenced. While, as I explore more fully below, the evaluative project of selecting and arranging voices is clearly at work and speaks to the power of the playwright not as neutral observer, but as ideologue, the range of voices

presented in these plays stages a communal conversation that makes dialogue more possible for the audiences in attendance.

### Oral History as History

Given that the label I assign to this genre is “staged oral history,” it becomes important to imagine how history plays out in the politics of these performances. While revisionist history is a common element among oppositional texts, these plays do not primarily attempt to re-envision what happened in the past. They are not unearthing information that was not previously made available, nor are they doing revisionist literary history the way retellings are, nor are they even deconstructing an event the way that many performance artists do. Instead, these plays are enacting a formal revision, choosing instead to recapitulate *how the past is handled, considered, and presented*. More specifically, in choosing to create a dialogue of actual voices from the pages of the past, staged oral histories do not attempt to change the substance of what we know about, say, the Los Angeles riots. But they do change *how we look at them*. By reframing the past not as a series of individually held views, but rather as the kind of dialogue that can prevent future misunderstanding, these plays are revising the discourse around the past. They are creating dialogue around violent events where none existed, and the dialogue is being presented as a remedy for the moment of violence itself. And of course, this is how they are doing their political work: instead of revising the events that happened, they are (re)constructing a dialogue that never existed in the hopes of inciting new dialogue.

This is an explicitly stated goal of *The Laramie Project*. University of Wyoming Theatre Professor Rebecca Hilliker says of her initial reaction to the proposal to create the play:

When you first called me, I wanted to say, You’ve just kicked me in the stomach. Why are you doing this to me? But then I thought, That’s stupid, you’re not doing this to me. And, more important, I thought about it and decided that we’ve had so much negative closure on this whole thing. And the students really need to talk. When this happened they started talking about it, and then the media descended and all dialogue stopped.<sup>54</sup>

Don Shewey, in his article in *American Theatre*, links this phenomenon specifically “to Greek Tragedy, in which the outcome is known from the beginning and the play provides an opportunity for the community to talk about the things that are on its mind.”<sup>55</sup> And Kaufman himself echoes this goal in his article in the same issue, noting, “Many questions have been answered and many more will be posed. And that is a good thing.”<sup>56</sup> Nor does this dialogue extend merely to the members of the



Laramie community who went to Denver to see the premiere, for the play not only grapples with how the town itself handled the event, but poses larger questions about hate crimes, about how much homosexuality is or is not accepted in the range of American moralities, about the role of the media in creating a martyr, and even broader questions like the ones posed by New York *Daily News* writer Albor Ruiz: "What makes a community, what can tear it apart and what needs to be done to hold it together?"<sup>57</sup>

The (re)construction of dialogue is perhaps a less explicit but even more crucial goal of Mann's *Greensboro*, since the event in question was not being talked about at all, nor had it ever really been. Early on in the play, the interviewer, whom we take to be the playwright herself, asks one of the original protesters why the American public had not heard more about the massacre, and he notes that the hostages in Iran were taken the next day. And so the massacre "got pretty much pushed off the front page."<sup>58</sup> In a sense, this concern with recovery places the rhetorical situation of Greensboro as much in line with feminist biography plays, which are working to resurrect a lost history, as with oral histories; but the goal seems to be different, for as Athol Fugard notes in his introduction to Mann's plays, "There was an even deeper process at work. The word that immediately came to mind was 'healing.'"<sup>59</sup> This is what we hear from the characters in the other plays of this genre: that these plays are not trying to revise what happened, but rather to come to some kind of healing through giving testimony, through memorializing the event, through replacing the violence with words. Indeed, in an interview with Melissa Salz, Mann pointedly notes, "I think what I rather do is provoke discussion . . . Now there are multiple points of view given in the Greensboro piece, multiple, but I'm not validating them. I want people to hear them."<sup>60</sup> One of the Greensboro widows notes specifically that "we were fighting armed men with ideas, with *words*,"<sup>61</sup> and this commitment to words as political action resonates throughout the play.

#### **Caveats: the Hegemony of "We"**

The notion of Mann's play as rhetoric and political action marks a significant difference between her work and that of Smith, since Mann is willing to choose sides. Speaking with Salz, Mann admits that despite her refusal to specifically validate one position or another in Greensboro, she is steering the audience toward a conclusion. She explains, "Well I guess I'm hoping that the decision is so obvious, but I suppose I come down on the side of the good guys. . . . There are bad guys and good guys in this. The bad guys aren't all bad, and the good guys aren't all good, but still you can make value judgments and I have made value judgments. So yes, I suppose I am leading people."<sup>62</sup> This willingness to lead the audience immediately calls attention to the tension in these plays between form and substance. That is, if the playwright chooses to privilege

the politics of the form—which are invested in opening up dialogue and in avoiding the hegemony of the univocal voice—then the rhetorical effectiveness of the plays would seem necessarily to be diminished. If Mann were to actually give the same space and emphasis to David Duke as she does to Nelson Johnson, a CWP leader, then she would undermine her own political position. And indeed, she acknowledges this power when she says, “With a different point of view, I could take the skinhead and Nazi and Duke and say: look how smart they are, they’re saying all the right stuff.”<sup>63</sup> The power that the interviewer can take through the appropriation of the communal voice is not negligible; the combined power afforded by the illusion of “Truth” and the collective voice makes for potent polemic.

Playwrights and theorists alike acknowledge that potency and its attendant dangers. While Mann notes and tries to account for how much her own stance inflects the “true story” she presents, others have critiqued the appearance of objectivity in these plays and the rhetoric that this appearance conceals. Janelle Reinelt, commenting on the videotaped production of *Fires in the Mirror* for American Playhouse, deconstructs Smith’s image as “bearer of truth, accuracy and validity”<sup>64</sup> and its relationship to “the claims of authority and historical truth presented by her piece.”<sup>65</sup> While Reinelt does acknowledge that the text in question is a video and not a live performance, many of her critiques pose a challenge to Smith’s live performance and to many of the texts presented here, relying as they do upon the codes of journalism and documentary to endow their performances with a truth-value. Tania Modleski takes this critique of Smith in a slightly different direction, noting an affinity with Smith’s performance and what Shoshana Felman terms “‘the crisis of witnessing,’ the conflict between the necessity of telling all and the impossibility of ‘speaking the unspeakable.’”<sup>66</sup> And anthropologist Ruth Behar recapitulates this crisis of witnessing as a tension between objectivity and subjectivity. She calls the impulse to hide one’s own subjectivity as the invisible “observer” a way to “drain anxiety from situations in which we feel complicitous with structures of power,”<sup>67</sup> but notes that, ironically, the authority that this invisibility affords aligns the observer with these same structures. In short, the claims of objectivity and truth value of staged oral histories serve to mask the actual power that the playwright has to construct rhetoric out of context as much as text.

Lanser raises a similar caution with regards to the communal voice. She writes:

Perhaps the very communality of such a narrative project means that certain values and norms may end up constituting their own hegemony. That is, while all narration is of course limited to and by the voices who tell it, this limitation may be obscured in communal narrative situations precisely by narrative plurality; whatever similarities emerge across differences, whatever spaces are not opened to dialogue, are bound to be reinforced.

Here indeed, is the insidious underside of the single author's power to masquerade as a self-reinforcing community.<sup>68</sup>

In the case of Smith, then, "the voices who tell it" are both multiple, dialogic, and open on the one hand, and authoritative, singular, and univocal on the other hand, for the voice is always hers, even if the words are not. And while the actors of *The Laramie Project* are themselves polyvocal, they share values that the subjects whom they interview do not necessarily share—in this case, a smaller "we" co-opts the voices of a larger and very different community. And while Emily Mann makes the "I" behind the "we" somewhat explicit in the onstage form of the interviewer, the assumptions and rhetorical bent of that interviewer are that much more prominent.

Curiously enough, one play that falls into this trap most egregiously is perhaps the most famous avowedly feminist staged oral history, Eve Ensler's *The Vagina Monologues*. Ensler is clearly embarked on what she believes is a progressive project: she is working to destabilize objectifying notions of women's bodies in order to give voice to what she imagines as "a community, a culture of vaginas."<sup>69</sup> Yet in her attempt to raise a strong voice against sexual violence and to leverage the power of the choral voice, she imagines a community that elides the differences in those voices. The end result, through her own editing of the text, and through the presentation of her own body as a cipher for her audience, is a community that can only be read through Ensler's positionality as a white, middle-class woman. In short, by subsuming the "we" of all women into her own very distinctive voice, she writes out the diversity that supplies the form of staged oral history with its most radical potential.

Yet the greatest conundrum of this form is that these two caveats—the hegemonic dangers native to both life-writing and the communal voice—seem to either compound one another or guard against one another. That is, one might make an argument that the truth-value of these many voices—that these words were all spoken by real people—guards against the hegemony of the playwright; Emily Mann is bound by what her subjects actually say. And the contextual dangers of life-writing seem to be ameliorated by the sheer plurality of the project; *Laramie* quotes at least four clergy, two law enforcement officers, several GLBT residents of Laramie, etc. Many voices from the larger communities corroborate these individual voices, which reinforces the idea that no one voice was taken drastically out of context, and the accumulation of voices seems to refute and guard against any impulse of the playwright to severely manipulate one or a few voices. This apologist position, however, seems to ignore the control that the playwright has, not only in collecting the interviews, or in speaking them, but most powerfully in choosing what gets spoken. We might therefore see these illusions of objectivity and plurality as upholding one another. While the playwright's ability to construct

the context of these voices is powerful, the impulse to protest, "But these voices are real, and there are so many of them!" is almost irresistible. And yet these plays clearly have a set of values that go virtually unquestioned—not the least of which is the privileging of dialogue over either silence or unquestioning submission to authority—all of which by extension inherently question existing power structures. There is a temptation for progressive activists to take this as a sign that we can trust the genre; if the assumptions of the formal structures are anti-hegemonic, then the subjectivity behind them should be similarly so. But there is no guarantee in this correlation; to assume so grants even greater power to the playwright. As Lanser reminds us, "form is only possibility, the necessary but never sufficient means for transforming both fiction and consciousness."<sup>70</sup> Therefore, analysis of staged oral history must be constantly aware of the values that underpin the dialogue being crafted before us.

So how is the playwright to proceed? Where does one cross the line from challenging hegemony with an open form and constituting hegemony by hiding behind the guise of an open form? Emily Mann's solution in *Greensboro* seems to be to overtly contextualize the subjectivity of the interviewer onstage.<sup>71</sup> She essentially becomes Behar's vulnerable observer when we see her outrage on behalf of CWP organizer Nelson Johnson, and we witness her discomfort with Eddie Dawson's racism. But she also exposes her own rhetoric by showing us her handling of Dawson in interviews. For example, when Dawson inquires about the purpose of the interviews, the interviewer vaguely replies: "I'm writing about the Greensboro event . . . maybe a play . . ." <sup>72</sup> When he replies "Yeah? I like plays," her only response is "Good"<sup>73</sup> which does not even remotely point to the fact that he certainly will not like this one. And yet, while she does lay bare her own subjectivity, there are certainly elements that are left unquestioned: a privileging of education and articulate speech, for example. Dawson is revealed to be not only racist, but stupid, misspelling "Titan," T-I-T-I-A-N.<sup>74</sup> Mann foregrounds this stupidity in the titles to her scenes, an element to the play that remains uncontextualized, left intact in its documentary codes. The first interview with Dawson is labeled "An Escape Goat,"<sup>75</sup> after his own malapropism.<sup>76</sup> This is contrasted with the previous interview, entitled "Extremist Informant," with the very intelligent and articulate Nelson, who uses this phrase to characterize Dawson's relationship with both the Klan and the FBI.<sup>77</sup> When confronted with this same moniker, Dawson interprets it as applying to his fearlessness: "We had a reputation. They needed anything done—cross-burning, intimidation—they called James Buck and Eddie Dawson . . . If anything had to be done, they'd call the extremist. You didn't scare me. I put up a good front."<sup>78</sup> By relentlessly exposing and highlighting Dawson's low level of education, Mann positions the audience to look down upon him, and to identify more clearly with Nelson and the CWP. Whether or not contextualizing her own position mitigates the textual hegemony of her rhetoric in

relation to the communal voice (her voice is clearly one of many, but also the one with the most authority in encouraging audience sympathy), her rhetoric is still present, and to some degree masked by the conventions of documentary theatre that Reinelt identifies in Smith's work.

But despite this similarity, Smith's work onstage configures subjectivity in almost the exact opposite manner. While she hides her own subjectivity in both the guise of objectivity and in the multiplicity of voices she embodies, her claims to neutrality seem on the surface to be far more valid than any that Mann might make. While Reinelt relentlessly identifies the many ways that Smith's performance quietly establishes her authority to speak for the many people she interviews, to serve as a neutral and fair-minded persona, she chooses not to expose any rhetorical ways that Smith takes advantage of this perceived authority. In fact, as I have noted above, Smith implicates her audience in radical political activity not through the substantial rhetoric of her words, but in the formal positioning that forces them to grapple with difference. Cornell West praises Smith's neutrality, noting "Not to choose 'sides' is itself a choice—yet to view the crisis as simply and solely a matter of choosing sides is to reduce the history and complexity of the crisis in a vulgar Manichean manner."<sup>79</sup> By suggesting that the complexity of her subject matter is overlooked by a more rhetorically-charged treatment, West ties Smith's neutral appearance to her effectiveness in prompting her audience to "examine ourselves even in a moment of ugly xenophobic frenzy."<sup>80</sup> West's praise here may succumb to an either/or fallacy, however, since Smith's rhetoric chooses sides while seeming not to, and at the very least, she employs an implicit value structure that gives greater voice to the disempowered than the empowered, which is itself a political shift from the norm. This shift, then, represents a *de facto* stance, perhaps less importantly on the crises themselves, but clearly on how these crises should be approached. So again, we see the dilemma for the progressive playwright: on one hand is the impulse to take a radical stance with this open communal form; but on the other, there is the danger of co-opting the communal voice in service of an ideal that runs counter to the community that is being represented.

*The Laramie Project* handles this fine line most subtly through its choice to dramatize the integration of the community of performers into the community of Laramie itself. In fact, the second "moment" of the text, entitled "Journal Entries," expresses Kaufman and his company's anxieties about the project. Yet unlike Mann, who highlights her interviewer's biases, Kaufman and company have a less obvious political agenda. True, the play villainizes the Reverend Fred Phelps and company, but the issue of hate crime legislation, which seems to have the support of the acting company members, is given an equally compelling refutation by a police officer's wife,<sup>81</sup> whose voice is, unlike that of *Greensboro*'s Dawson, left relatively unmediated by the voices of the acting company. That is, even though the actor playing Sherry Johnson delivers the monologue, this voice is not

undermined by narration or by a staged interviewer who might challenge her claims. This moment immediately precedes a meeting of two company members with Father Roger Schmit, in which the priest implores the company to “Just deal with what is true. You know what is true. You just need to do your best to say it correct.”<sup>82</sup> This plea from a priest acknowledges the gap between truth and performance and the ability of his interviewers to negotiate that gap. In including this meta-discursive instruction, Kaufman points out his company’s own positionality in bringing these moments to the stage. Through this Brechtian *gest*, Kaufman and company point to the rhetoric of the many voices being presented and to their own presentation of those voices. In doing so, the play works to defuse the hegemonic danger of both the journalistic and communal aspects of these plays. Whether it does so successfully depends as much upon an individual production as it does on the tactics of the playwright.

While each of these examples represents a different approach to presenting the playwright’s authority, these plays also reveal an anxiety about the authority of the interview subject. I have argued that part of the work of these plays is to equalize the authority of the voices who speak and that, in doing so, the shift from the monologic to the dialogic necessarily involves leeching the privilege from some voices and empowering others. This act endows the playwright with considerable power, as I have just suggested, but it also provokes a specific anxiety in many of the interview subjects, an anxiety about how their words are going to be used. *Greensboro*’s Dawson wants to know what the purpose of his interview is, and *Laramie*’s Father Roger Schmit implores his interviewers to “to say it correct,”<sup>83</sup> while taxi driver Doc O’Connor talks about taping his interviewers from *Hard Copy* as a way of fighting back lest the tabloid news program misrepresent his words. And while these figures acknowledge how much power they forfeit when they give an interview, other characters—in each case, characters who are otherwise in positions of power—clearly view the interview as a platform. LAPD Commissioner Stanley Sheinbaum commands Anna Deavere Smith’s attention with verbal cues, clearly understanding his relationship to the media;<sup>84</sup> *Greensboro*’s David Duke speaks as he would in any political setting; and when given the chance, the Baptist Minister of *Laramie* moves past his initial reticence to speak, using his time with the interviewer to condemn homosexuality as he would in the pulpit.<sup>85</sup> These moments at once speak to a sense of privilege that these interview subjects feel they may take. But by presenting this privilege within the text of the plays, the playwrights deconstruct that privilege, essentially relying on the Brechtian *gest* to underscore the presumed authority of the speaker, while hiding the authority that the performer and playwright have to critique the interview subject. The best solution to this power imbalance may be the one used by Ping Chong in his *Undesirable Elements* series, in which the actors are telling their own stories and the stories of their families. In each case, the actor is given final edit over his or

her own story to ensure their comfort with the script.<sup>86</sup> But ultimately, it may be impossible to stage public debate the way these plays do without divesting the interview subjects of control over their words. The playwright, therefore, is forced to negotiate the line between producing political theatre and respecting the authority of their subjects, and how they negotiate that line depends as much on their own political beliefs as it does on the form they choose to advance those beliefs.

To summarize, it seems that staged oral history may not be utopian in form, but the radical potential that it offers to present difference in the context of community itself has a rhetorical value, even if the politics of the voices presented are often presented in the guise of balance. The form evokes oppositional discourse in its alternative presentation of truth, while it invokes egalitarianism in its refusal to privilege the voices traditionally empowered. Moreover, the form's rhetorical impulse to revise the past through a discursive shift—capitalized upon by progressive playwrights—suggests that these values are necessary to an activist project. This is especially true when playwrights seek to remedy the damage done in moments of crisis, using the possibilities of form to circumvent violent crisis by instituting the more democratic notions of dialogue that staged oral history can be made to demonstrate. Of course many of these effects are as tied to the politics espoused by the plays as to the form of the plays, and political playwrights will always exploit the rhetorical power afforded them by form. Concerted analysis of the discourse of these plays must therefore attend to the uses of power throughout, whether or not we agree with their politics. Furthermore, the moments of violence confronted by the four plays examined above do not come out of gender-based biases. Nonetheless, the formal remedy that these plays offer up to assuage the wounds of the past are certainly influenced by an aesthetic that arises in part out of a feminist challenge to linearity, an emphasis on community and a collective subjectivity, and the use of that community to acknowledge and tolerate difference, even as the audience acknowledges and tolerates the commonalities between the self and the other. While Eve Ensler's *The Vagina Monologues* may fall short on some of the theoretical rigors of the form, other plays, including *Size Matters* by Susan Snyder and *I Think I Like Girls* by Tectonic's Leigh Fondakowski,<sup>87</sup> grapple with substantive issues of gender and sexuality using staged oral history. In these manifestations, the oral history play is not simply a form that is used by progressive playwrights; it is one whose formal features serve as a vehicle for the engaged activism of these artists.

#### Notes

1. Because my background is in feminist theory, I will primarily use this lens to discuss these playwrights individually and oral history more broadly. The discourse of feminist theory can be read as

inflecting the formal attributes of oral history, even if none of the plays discussed in this article specifically articulate feminist concerns. Nonetheless, the theories of the other discourses listed here might also fruitfully be applied through both formal and political readings.

2. Gary Fisher Dawson, *Documentary Theatre in the United States* (Westport, CT: Greenwood P, 1999) 1.

3. Melissa Salz, "Theatre of Testimony: The Works of Emily Mann, Anna Deavere Smith, and Spalding Gray," diss, U of Colorado, 1996, 1-2.

4. Salz 19-35.

5. 36.

6. John Brockway Schmor, "Confessional Performance: Postmodern Culture in Recent American Theatre," *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism* 9.1 (1994): 157-72.

7. Dawson 164.

8. Salz 3-4.

9. 2.

10. Susan Sniader Lanser, *Fictions of Authority: Women Writers and Narrative Voice* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1992) 21.

11. Lanser 256.

12. Anna Deavere Smith, *Fires in the Mirror: Crown Heights, Brooklyn and Other Identities* (New York: Anchor Books, 1993) xxiii.

13. Smith has been hesitant to call herself a feminist, and her work is more consistently aligned with discourse on race. Nonetheless, her rhetoric of neutrality disguises a stance that is unmistakably based in pacifism, critical race theory, and feminism. See Anna Deavere Smith, interview with Carol Martin, "Anna Deavere Smith: The Word Becomes You," *The Drama Review* 37.4 (1993): 45-62; Tania Modleski, "Doing Justice to the Subjects: The Work of Anna Deavere Smith," *Old Wives' Tales, and Other Women's Stories* (New York: New York UP, 1998) 101-25; and Charles R. Lyons and James C. Lyons, "Anna Deavere Smith: Perspectives on her Performance within the Context of Critical Theory," *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism* 9.1 (1994): 43-65.

14. Emily Mann, *Testimonies: Four Plays* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1997) 34.

15. Kaufman is so interested in the notion of structure that his company, Tectonic Theater Project, has incorporated it into their name.

16. I doubt that it is coincidence that *The Laramie Project* includes a reference to the Moscone/Milk murders, an indirect homage to Mann's work.

17. Peter Weiss's *The Investigation* stands as a notable exception. While his play seeks to expose what he believes is the inherent connection between fascism and capitalism, the play was roundly and scathingly panned for its refusal to place blame on Nazi practices (see Salz 32-33). And yet even this is in opposition to the dominant condemnation of Nazism in Germany circa 1965, so while the play is certainly not uniformly leftist, it does stay consistent with the tradition of staged oral history as an alternative truth.

18. Lanser 21.

19. Dawson 162.



20. Moisés Kaufman and Tectonic Theater Project, *The Laramie Project* (New York: Vintage Books, 2001) 8.
21. Kaufman and Tectonic 9.
22. 9.
23. Ferdinand Tonnies, *Community and Society*, trans. Charles P. Loomis (New York: Harper and Row, 1957).
24. Kaufman and Tectonic 6-7.
25. Anna Deavere Smith, *Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992* (New York: Anchor Books, 1994) 19.
26. Deavere Smith, *Twilight* 15.
27. It is perhaps a bit of a false dichotomy to suggest that Dawson's "monologues" are diametrically opposed to the more radically contingent context of the stage, since the real-life circumstances of his speech are also contextual and shaped by discourse. Nonetheless, there is certainly a sense that Dawson approaches his speech as if imbued with an unshakeable hegemonic authority.
28. Deavere Smith, *Fires in the Mirror* 255.
29. 27.
30. 31.
31. Deavere Smith, *Twilight* xxix; emphasis original.
32. Kaufman and Tectonic 10.
33. 65.
34. 100.
35. Deavere Smith, *Fires in the Mirror* xxxviii.
36. xxiv; emphasis original.
37. Victor Turner, *From Ritual to Theatre: The Human Seriousness of Play* (New York: Performing Arts Journal Publications, 1982) 47-48.
38. Cornel West, Foreword, *Fires in the Mirror: Crown Heights, Brooklyn and Other Identities* (New York: Anchor Books, 1993) xix.
39. Jill Dolan, "Performance, Utopia, and the 'Utopian Performative'" *Theatre Journal* 53 (2001): 455-70.
40. Deavere Smith, *Fires in the Mirror* xxvi; emphasis original.
41. Janelle Reinelt, "Performing Race: Anna Deavere Smith's *Fires in the Mirror*," *Modern Drama* 39 (1996): 615.
42. Melanie Smith, "Total Denial: Emily Mann's Feminist Techniques in the Context of Popular American Entertainment Culture," *Studies in the Humanities* 17.2 (1990): 135.
43. Melanie Smith 136.
44. Kathleen Betsko and Rachel Koenig, eds., *Interviews with Contemporary Women Playwrights* (New York: William Morrow, 1987) 281.
45. West xviii-xix.
46. West's utopian view of Smith's work never acknowledges that power over the conversation that Smith maintains, and that I suggest is always present when the guise of neutrality is claimed in staged oral history. Therefore, his claim that Smith *completely* depatriarchalizes the conversation ignores the power she does maintain.

47. Deavere Smith, *Fires in the Mirror* 3.
48. Lanser 262.
49. 264.
50. 265.
51. Deavere Smith, *Twilight* xxiv.
52. Tania Modleski critiques the notion of Smith's body as containing multiple identities as being stereotypical of the female body as container, as vessel, but ultimately finds Smith's performance radically progressive as political theatre.
53. Lyons and Lyons 48.
54. Kaufman and Tectonic 11.
55. Don Shewey, "Town in a Mirror," *American Theatre* (May/June 2000): 15.
56. Moisés Kaufman, "Into the West: An Exploration in Form," *American Theatre* (May/June 2000): 18.
57. Albor Ruiz, "A Private Wyoming," *New York Daily News* 4 May 2000, final ed.: 52.
58. Mann 263.
59. Athol Fugard, Introduction, *Testimonies: Four Plays* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1997) xi.
60. Qtd. in Salz 216.
61. Mann 315.
62. Qtd. in Salz 216.
63. Qtd. in Salz 215.
64. Reinelt 611.
65. 610.
66. Modleski 110.
67. Ruth Behar, *The Vulnerable Observer: Anthropology that Breaks Your Heart* (Boston: Beacon, 1996) 6.
68. Lanser 26.
69. Eve Ensler, *The Vagina Monologues* (New York: Villard, 1998) 3.
70. Lanser 266.
71. The facts that the interviewer is a character just as Nelson and Dawson are and that the playwright herself is not an actor in any production of the play helps to further diminish the univocal quality of the interviewer's rhetoric.
72. Mann 267.
73. 267.
74. 306.
75. 265.
76. Titles to scenes are projected in performance on a multi-media screen, thus taking on the textual authority of that invisible author-journalist, as opposed to the more overtly subjectified interviewer.
77. Mann 263-64.
78. 310.

79. West xviii.
80. xviii.
81. I offer this with its own caveat, since the 2002 HBO production of the play portrays this character as narrow-minded and ignorant, a sense I do not get from the text of the play.
82. Kaufman and Tectonic 66.
83. 66.
84. Deavere Smith, *Twilight* 14.
85. Kaufman and Tectonic 69.
86. Philippa Wehle, "What's Fiction When You Have Real Life?: Ping Chong's *Undesirable Elements* Project," *Theatre Forum* 21 (summer/fall 2002): 37-42.
87. Shewey 16.

