

***Notes from the Field: Challenging the American Justice System and the School-to-Prison Pipeline in Anna Deavere Smith's Verbatim Theater***

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**Abstract:**

The current paper aims to explore Anna Deavere Smith's verbatim theater in investigating the American criminal justice system and the school-to-prison pipeline phenomenon as revealed in her most recent play *Notes from the Field* (2015). The school-to-prison pipeline refers to unjust criminal justice system in America that leads to mass incarceration of poor and colored children and young people who are being expelled from schools and sent to juvenile centers for minor classroom infractions. As a verbatim play, *Notes from the Field* extremely depends on testimonies and conducted interviews with people who are involved in real events. The analysis of the play is basically grounded on the critical race theory from which the critical whiteness theory extends. According to these two theories, the paper reaches the conclusion that ethnic minority people, especially African Americans, are more likely to be oppressed and experience class and racial inequities and traumatic events in a racially divided nation. Moreover, the double oppression of African American women is going to be explored. The analysis of the paper is also based on Augusto Boal's "Forum Theatre,"<sup>1</sup> that is mainly used to display the main plights of the oppressed people. The paper concludes that Smith, as a skillful artist, deftly maintains the authenticity of the events she investigates by preserving the acute truth through an interesting and creative performance.

**Keywords:** verbatim theater – Anna Deavere Smith – *Notes from the Field* – the criminal justice system –the school-to-prison pipeline – critical race theory – critical whiteness theory

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<sup>1</sup> In a Forum theater, the participant must intervene decisively in the dramatic action and change it.

## Introduction

The necessity to find a dramatic form capable of coping with the sufferings, sorrows, and frustration experienced by the people living in the last two centuries led to the development of a new genre that can critique the complex sociopolitical challenges facing the world and, most importantly, make the audience more engaged in the current events. Evolved from documentary theater, verbatim theater is a fact-based genre that depends on government records, eyewitness testimonies, and conducted interviews. These documentary materials are accurately selected, transcribed, and edited to be transformed into interesting theatrical performances.

The 1990s witnessed the beginning of verbatim theater in America with a group of innovative playwrights including Anna Deavere Smith (1950) who is a distinguished African American professor, actress, and playwright. Smith received numerous awards and is well known for pioneering the techniques of verbatim theater that depend on testimonies and conducted interviews. With Smith's solo performances, verbatim theater in America was mainly initiated. Smith's lifelong project *On the Road: A Search for American Character* (1990) includes a series of solo performances that extremely depend on testimonies and taped interviews with people who are involved in real events. Smith's project is composed of a series of plays including *Fires in the Mirror* (1992), *Twilight: Los Angeles 1992* (1994), *House Arrest* (2000), and *Let Me Down Easy* (2014).

*Notes from the Field* (2015) which investigates the American criminal justice system, and the school-to-prison pipeline phenomenon is Smith's most recent play in the project. The school-to-prison pipeline refers to the unjust criminal justice system in America that leads to mass incarceration of poor and colored children and young people who are being expelled from schools and sent to detention centers and prisons for minor classroom infractions. In *Notes from the Field*, Smith creates extended monologues that are based on verbatim excerpts from interviews she conducted with more than 250<sup>2</sup> personas. The interviews are accurately selected, edited, and recreated into an innovative solo performance.

Despite the growing interest in Smith's verbatim performances, her most recent *Notes from the Field* is rarely addressed. Hence, the current paper aims at investigating the verbatim technique Smith uses to expose the dysfunctional criminal justice system and the school-to-prison pipeline troubling phenomenon. The analysis of the play is basically grounded on the

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<sup>2</sup> That is how it is written in the original sources.

critical race theory from which the critical whiteness theory evolves. According to these two theories, the paper aims at proving that ethnic minority people, especially African Americans, are more likely to be oppressed and undergo class and racial inequities in the dominant community. Moreover, the double oppression of African American women is going to be explored.

The analysis of the paper is also based on Augusto Boal's "Forum Theatre," that is mainly used to investigate the main plights of the oppressed people. In his theater, Augusto Boal coins the term "spectator-actor" to rid the audience of their passive role and change them into active participants who are engaged in the dramatic action through discussing the presented issues to make change possible. The paper aims at exploring Smith's use of Boal's "Forum theatre" as in the first act of her play, Smith displays the predicaments of the oppressed people, and in the second act, she invites the audience for a debate. She divides the audience into small groups and asks them to discuss the problems presented in the show to suggest solutions, to interrogate those who are responsible for the problems, and to make commitments about what they are going to do. Furthermore, the paper attempts to prove whether Smith preserves authenticity of the facts she presents without losing theatrical creativity. The paper starts with an investigation of the important role verbatim theatre plays in addressing sociopolitical issues in different countries. In addition, the history of verbatim theater in the last two centuries is going to be traced.

### **Verbatim Theater: History and Development**

Verbatim theater, a fact-based one, is a new dramatic genre derived from documentary theater that depends on official documents, testimonies, and interviews. The term "verbatim" was first used by Derek Paget to denote a technique that is "firmly predicated upon the taping and subsequent transcription of interviews with 'ordinary' people, done in the context of research into a particular region, subject, area, issue, event, or combination of these things" (318). These documentary materials are accurately selected and edited to be transformed into an interesting theatrical performance.

The necessity to find a dramatic form capable of expressing the sufferings, sorrows, and frustration experienced by the people living in the last two centuries led to the development of verbatim theater, a genre devoted to dealing with recent historical, cultural, and political events and to "give

voice to otherwise marginalized members of their societies” (Flynn and Gale 1). In addition, verbatim theater, as Paterson asserts, is created for “a specific community and frequently explores the experience of minority communities rather than stories from the dominant culture” (110). Therefore, theatrical practitioners turn to verbatim performances to faithfully address the current sociopolitical situation. In this respect, they are concerned with the factual rather than fictional. As we move up to the modern verbatim theater, written historical sources have lost some of their supremacy and made way for interview-based materials. Because theater, especially verbatim, is considered one of the strongest types of media, it can critique the complex political challenges facing the world and, most importantly, make the audience more engaged in the current events.

Verbatim theater is expertly crafted to provide a genre that is not only a documentation of real events, but also an interesting performance. Actual words are selected from the conducted interviews to form the dialogue and construct the script of a verbatim play. Verbatim playwrights seek to transfer the audience from passive spectators to active participants who are involved in the action they are watching. Undistorted truth, testimonies of real people, and traumatic events are being brought on the stage in an aesthetic frame. In so doing, as Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub note, “the listener of trauma comes to be a participant and a co-owner of the traumatic event: through his listening, he comes to partially experience trauma himself” (26). Verbatim is a dramatic technique playwrights use to present a discourse that reveals the bare truth in a creative theatrical piece.

The origin of verbatim theater goes back to the beginning of the twentieth century. In Germany, verbatim theater was initiated by two prominent figures, Erwin Piscator and Bertolt Brecht in the 1920s with the political epic theater. Through verbatim technique, they introduced issues of social and class turbulences, and displayed the political world on the stage. Piscator’s play *Despite All!* (1925), a historical representation of the German Communist Party, is considered the first play to entirely consist of verbatim material such as “newspapers reports, testimonials, and projected slides figured prominently (Filewod 15). With the 1960s German dramatic movement, verbatim theater, also called “Theatre of Fact,” was greatly developed by a group of playwrights including Peter Weiss, Heinar Kipphardt, and Rolf Hochhuth who investigated current political and historical events using official legal documents in their verbatim plays.

From the “Theatre of Fact” in Germany evolved the English verbatim theater that has a prominent position on the English stage. Peter Cheeseman, one of the earliest pioneers of verbatim theater in England, produced various plays that were based on recorded interviews where he explored the cultural and economic decline in England after the period of deindustrialization in the 1970s. Cheeseman generated the scripts of his plays by using tape-recorded testimonies. His play *Hands Up – For You the War Is Ended* (1971) was constructed from people’s second world war memories. Also, his other play *Fight for Shelton Bar* (1974) was part of a campaign to save the local steelworks (Filewod 18). In the 1990s, innovative English playwrights including David Hare, Nicolas Kent, and Richard Norton Taylor were setting new standards for political and documentary drama on a global scale. The verbatim plays of the Royal Court and the tribunal plays at London’s Tricycle Theater “were developing new ways to work with factual material onstage” (Flynn 31).

Meanwhile, in 1990s Russia, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, a new genre emerged on the Russian stage to investigate a variety of issues including the revision of history and the rise of social indifference. Young Russian playwrights explored verbatim theater through displaying real everyday life experiences onstage. The beginning of the 21 century was an important turning point for Russian verbatim theater practice. Many Russian playwrights mainly cared for giving the marginalized members of society the chance to restore their voices and express their own perspectives. For example, *Bezdomnys (The Homeless, 2001)* by Maksym Kurochkin and Aleksandr Rodionov, and *Voina Moldovan Za Kartonnuin Korobku (The War of the Moldovans for a Cardboard Box, 2003)* by Rodionov were both constructed from conducted interviews with Moscow’s homeless people. In addition, Elena Isaeva’s play *Pervyimuzhchina (The First Man, 2003)* was based on interviews with women who are emotionally abused by their fathers (Flynn and Gale 74).

In America, the 1990s witnessed the beginning of the modern verbatim theater with a group of playwrights including Anna Deavere Smith (1950), Anne Nilson (1954), Erik Jensen (1970), and Jessica Blank (1975). Anna Deavere Smith is a distinguished African American professor, actress, and playwright who received numerous awards that include two Obie Awards and the National Humanities Medal from President Obama in 2012 (*Notes* iii). It is worthy to note that verbatim theater in America was mainly initiated by Smith’s solo performances. In her prominent lifelong project *On the Road: A*

*Search for American Character*, as Eddie Paterson notes, Smith “builds upon the history of American monologue by combining documentary materials, techniques and research in solo performance” (103). Smith’s project includes a series of plays, mainly solo performances, that explore American character and the diverse cultural identities in the American community. Smith’s performances extremely depend on testimonies, documentary materials and interviews with people who are involved in real events.

A part of Smith’s project is *Fires in the Mirror* (1992), a play that investigates the 1991 race riots in Crown Heights, Brooklyn, and *Twilight: Los Angeles 1992* (1994) that displays the Rodney King riots. Another play that belongs to the series of Smith’s project is *House Arrest* (2000) which discusses the changes that happened in the American presidency in the last 200 years. Smith’s project also includes *Let Me Down Easy* (2014) that explores the American health care system. *Notes from the Field* (2015) which investigates the American criminal justice system, and the school-to-prison pipeline phenomenon is Smith’s most recent play in the project.

### ***Notes from the Field: Theory and Analysis***

According to critical race theory, race is a social structure, and, as a result, racial discrimination has been deeply rooted in social American institutions. Defined by D. G. Solorzano, critical race theory is “a framework or set of basic perspectives, methods, and pedagogy that seeks to identify, analyze, and transform those structural and cultural aspects of society that maintain the subordination and marginalization of people of color” (6). Understanding how oppressive behaviors and racial inequities manifest themselves in school, as one of the most significant institutions in America, is a key component of critical race theory. As Derrick A. Bell notes, the public schools present “a far more compelling symbol of the evils of segregation and a far more vulnerable target than segregated railroad cars, restaurants, or restrooms” (6). In *Notes from the Field*, Smith exposes the dysfunction in the educational system as, in Sherrilyn Ifill words, “the Prince Edward County School Board decided to close the schools in Virginia for five years rather than – rather than integrate. Close the schools for five years. We – we broke our contact with education” (120). Moreover, Denise Dodson, a student, and an inmate in Smith’s performance, lacks quality education because she is black, and emphasizes the importance of education:

I think that had I had a better education, had – I would  
have made better decisions. I would have been

more upright, so to speak. Because when I didn't have that education, I always felt less than. You know, my self-esteem wasn't the way it shouldn't have been. Had I been educated to know that, you know, I am somebody, I am a good person uhhm. (89)

Smith addresses the impact of structural racism on generations of young black people who are involved into criminal charges with the juvenile courts rather than pursuing a good education.

In her essay "Race, Reform, and Retrenchment: Transformation and Legitimation in Antidiscrimination Law," Kimberle Williams Crenshaw, a black American law professor, critical race theorist and activist, asserts that black people experience two aspects of oppression, symbolic and material. Inferior to white people, black people are "not included in the vision of America as a community of equals" (114). In *Notes from the Field*, Smith impersonates Bryan Stevenson, an African American executive director and equal justice initiative founder, explaining his experience as a kid while having polio shot: "Black people had to get in the back – go through the back door. So we line up out back. And it was a cold day. They gave all the needle shots to the white kids before they gave any shot to the black kids. . . They had little sugar cubes they were giving the white kids" (128). Poor people and those of ethnic minorities, especially African Americans, are symbolically segregated and oppressed in the dominant American community. In addition, they undergo material subordination in all fields of life including employment and education.

Evolved from critical race theory, critical whiteness theory condemns racial discrimination in various social institutions that bias white people. Whiteness is a structural social system that privileges white people and maintains the dominant culture. More than one hundred years ago, W. E. B. Du Bois (1868-1963), a distinguished African American sociologist, author, and civil rights activist, wrote his most famous statement "The problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color line" (12). Du Bois's statement evoked an issue about African American racial plight that is still existing till today. White people deny the existence of racial inequities, Du Bois's "color line," or being privileged over others because, for them, whiteness is the norm, and, as a result, any other races are extremely ignored. For critical whiteness theorists, as Miller and Fellows remark, white people "must move from thinking of racism as something individual, malicious, overt, and possibly exaggerated by people of color, to seeing it as a pervasive reality that they themselves have a responsibility to address" (49). In *Notes*

*from the Field*, Bryan Stevenson, the executive director and equal justice initiative founder of National Memorial for Peace and Justice, remarks: “What happened to Native people in this continent was genocide. . . But we didn’t call it genocide because we said, ‘those Native people are different.’” For him, the great evil of American slavery was “this ideology of white supremacy, this idea that black people are not fully human” (124).

As a socially constructed category, whiteness has a set of concepts that frame and affect social relationships among people of diverse races. These concepts include white supremacy, indifference toward non-whites, and self-centeredness. In her book *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the literary Imagination* (1992), Toni Morrison points to the need for a new perspective of the concept of whiteness to “avert the critical gaze from the racial object to the racial subject; from the described and imagined to the describers and imaginers; from the serving to the served” (90). Unfortunately, white supremacy and white privilege apparently prevail in the educational system. Colored students have unequal educational opportunities though they are quite aware of the importance of education as Denise Dodson states: “how connected education and survival are in me as a person. Y’know, and still have more room to grow” (*Notes* 91). Furthermore, Sherrilyn Ifill who is responsible for the educational fund for black people criticizes the strategy of policy makers in the federal government who decided to “cut the budget and so we’re not investing in education. . . We’ve taken it to the prison system” (*Notes* 6). Moreover, white students, according to Miller and Fellows, used to think that “privilege in the United States is awarded on the basis of merit. To consider that racism is institutionalized to the extent that simply having light skin affords them opportunities not afforded to people of color (49). Like critical race theory, an important concept of critical whiteness theory is to identify the existence of repressive disciplines and forms of racial discrimination in school as one of the most important institutions in America.

In addition to the critical race theory and critical whiteness theory, Augusto Boal’s “Forum Theatre” exposes the oppression people of ethnic minorities undergo in the dominant community. In his book *Theatre of the Oppressed* (1985), Augusto Boal, a Brazilian critic and theater practitioner, announces that “all theater is necessarily political” (ix). For Boal, as this quote shows, theater is mainly used to investigate crucial issues for the oppressed, the poor and ethnic minorities. As Boal remarks, theater is a “language” that is “capable of being utilized by any person, with or without artistic talent,” and he tried “to show in practice how the theatre can be placed at the service of the oppressed, so that they can express themselves and so that, by using the new language, they can also discover new concepts”



(121). Boal's "Forum Theatre" gives audience the chance to participate in the dramatic action by discussing the presented issues to make change possible. In so doing, Boal attempts to break down barriers between actors and spectators, and coins the term "spectator – actor" because he thinks that one of the main objectives of the theater of the oppressed is "to change the people – 'spectators,' passive beings in the theatrical phenomenon – into subjects, into actors, transformers of the dramatic action" (122). Following Augusto Boal's Forum theater, Smith invites the audience of *Notes from the Field* to participate, through theatrical actions, in solving political and social problems to make a change. As noted by Anne Anlin Cheng, "Smith reminds us that there is no such a thing as 'merely' watching" (181). Smith uses the productive power of the theater to convert the monologues of her solo performance into dialogues among her diverse audience. In so doing, she gives them the chance to talk and express their perspectives about violence, education, and social and racial inequities.

In the first act of her play, Smith displays the crucial problems and in the second act, she invites the audience for a debate. She divides the audience into small groups and asks them to discuss the problems presented in the show to suggest solutions, to interrogate those who are responsible for the problems, and to make commitments about what they are going to do. In an interview with Richard Schechner, Smith says: "I stopped the show after the first act and said, 'this isn't a show. This is about a real problem. I want you to go off into groups and talk about what you're gonna do'" (37). In *Notes from the Field*, Smith employs the theatrical language to give voice to the poor and ethnic minorities.

In *Notes from the Field*, Smith creates extended monologues that are based on verbatim excerpts from interviews she conducted with more than 250 personas. The interviews are selected, edited, and recreated into an innovative solo performance. Any playwright using verbatim theater paradigm is confronted with the problem of achieving authenticity by exposing the acute truth to the detriment of dramatic creativity. In this respect, the playwright Steve Waters notes that "the playwright's imagination should be chastened, but not defeated, by actuality: in a world flooded with information, its task remains to reveal the facts behind the facts". The complicated stories, numerous identities, and diverse ethnicities that were part of social and cultural background of the 1990s and 2000s in America are explored in Smith's performances. With the playwright's craft, Smith takes the role of an oral historian who creates an innovative theatrical performance from testimonies and verbatim excerpts taken from real taped interviews.

On the other hand, in his book *Contemporary British Drama* (2010), David Lane expresses his suspicion on the ability of verbatim theater to present the drastic truth: “verbatim theatre often carries a promise to present the unmediated truth [. . .] a promise that it cannot hope to achieve” (66). As a skillful playwright, Smith uses her creative one-woman shows to expose the truth without losing the theatrical creativity, and strictly keeps the details of the conducted interviews after making some selections and editing. As mentioned in the introduction of *Notes from the Field*, “the play is a living document of speech in a moment and time in history” (xxi). In *Notes from the Field*, Smith selects verbatim parts from the interviews she conducted with diverse people in four different regions of America that express their social and psychological perspectives. Out of 250 interviews, Smith enacted nineteen characters including students, parents, instructors, pastors, judges, politicians, and public figures who are all alive and actually named. As Carol Martin notes, “Smith’s ability to move within and throughout various identity categories gives her performance a powerful double edge, at once magic and familiar” (83). In her verbatim performance, Smith uses props, costume changes, slides, and footage to accurately present the persons she interviewed in different settings.

In verbatim theater, nontraditional tools and techniques are used to serve the authenticity of the work. As Jeffery W. Fenn declares, “it is only since the advent of twentieth century technology that enabled the facsimile reproduction of current and historical events on the stage, did documentary theater challenge late nineteenth century realism in its attempts to present actuality in the auditorium” (66). In *Notes from the Field*, Smith uses digital technology to display the evils of the American criminal justice system and the school-to-prison pipeline issue. Television screens with slides that contain the name and position of the enacted character with the title of the piece are presented on stage. In addition, footage of specific real events that will be displayed in the play are included in the slides.

Throughout her play, Smith presents some of the most flagrant videos of actual events that show racism and violence against black people and expose the evils of criminal justice system. In *Asphalt Justice: A Critique of the Criminal Justice System in America* (2000), John Raymond Cook states: “Instead of lessening the crime rate and changing the behaviors of those who commit crime, the criminal justice system engenders a disrespect for society and human rights all the while increasing the levels of violence in our society” (x). One of the main events displayed in Smith’s *Notes from the*

*Field* is the death of Freddie Gray, an African American twenty-five-year-old man, who is arrested by the Baltimore police for possession of a jackknife. Violently beaten by the police, Gray suffers fatal injuries, and dies after a seven-day coma. Through the video screen, actual documentary footage is presented to show Gray screaming in pain as his spinal cord is nearly severed.

For Gray's death, Smith interviews Kevin Moore, an eyewitness and the videographer of Freddie Gray's arrest and severe beating by the police: "They had him all bent up, and he was handcuffed and, like face down on his stomach. But they had the – the heels of his feet like almost in his back. . . Put leg shackles on a man that can't walk. . . [and] toss him in the back of the paddy wagon like a dead animal" (*Notes* 12). Moreover, the actual footage of Gray's funeral is displayed on stage: "Dignitaries including Jessie Jackson are behind the pulpit. A packed megachurch. Casket, lines of people paying respects" (24).

The funeral footage is followed by Smith, in a priest's cloak, performing the character of Jamal Harrison Bryant, the pastor who sermonizes in the funeral of Freddie Gray in April 2015: "After this day, we gonna keep on marching. After this day, we gonna keep demanding justice. After this day, we gonna keep exposing a culture of corruption" (25-26). At the end of the pastor's speech, he urges the audience to get their "black self up and change this city" (27). For African American young people "there's really no other alternatives or options. . . prison or death" (*Notes* 36). In her show, Smith presents another flagrant video that shows "a burst of noise, sirens, police, chaos. . . [and] protests to take down the confederate flag from the capital building" after the racist shooting of African American churchgoers at Mother Emanuel AME Church in Charleston, South Carolina on June 17, 2015 by a white man while at a prayer meeting (130). By documenting these hideous events, Smith condemns the criminal justice system, and investigates how ethnic minorities and people living in poor communities, especially African Americans, are victims of the biased social justice system.

In addition to Smith's nontraditional techniques such as video clips, footage, and lighting, she employs live music onstage, especially jazz and jazz improvisation, to support diverse voices, transitions, and various movements and to represent moments of release and tension in her play. From the beginning of the twentieth century, blues served as the major musical medium for expressing the suffering and distinct experiences for

black people. In *Notes from the Field*, the blues is employed as “a central language, one that springs from field hollers, blues shouts, blues cries, work songs, prison songs, and griot storytelling” (*Notes* 145). The instruments used are “tenor saxophone” with “live bass” to poignantly give the required implications. To emphasize the important role music plays, the musician stays onstage for the entire length of the play to accentuate the monologue. As a prominent performer, Smith’s theatrical voice is “buoyant, and her timbre is full and distinct, especially when undergirded by the dark tone of a bass” (*Notes* 147). In *Notes from the Field*, Smith’s expressive voice with the aid of jazz music is successfully used to reveal multiple perspectives of black people.

As previously mentioned, Smith uses her theatrical skill as a performer to maintain the authenticity of the events she investigates by presenting the acute truth through a creative theatrical piece. In her solo performance, Smith attempts to preserve the interviewee’s character by recording his/her personal experiences and accurately observes patterns of language, physical and emotional reactions to the issue discussed, emulates her interviewees in gestures and vocal tones, and, as David Savran points out, “calls up live spirits” on stage (251). Therefore, Smith’s audience, as Sandra Richards remarks, are delighted with “the accuracy of Smith’s rendition of speech patterns” (37). Seated in a straight-backed chair in DC Congressman’s office or on a bench by the riverbank, barefoot or wearing sandals, donning a suit, a brightly colored jacket, or an orange fishing wader, Smith skillfully enacted nineteen characters in her creative solo performance. With the accurate impersonations and the logic of her work, as Carol Martin remarks, “viewers lost the subjective and authorial presence of Smith, in favor of a beguiling array of completely different people” (89). In Smith’s verbatim play, the witness’s voice is given a lot of attention more than the playwright’s. Though words and acts of Smith’s interviewees are selected and edited, they remain parts of oral history.

As a verbatim play, *Notes from the Field* is characterized by the adaptability of scenes with the events. This refers to the playwright’s skill in selecting and editing specific parts of the conducted interviews to create harmonious scenes and achieve realistic depiction of events in the show. Smith’s accurate selection and editing of specific parts of her interviews show her theatrical skill in making logic transition from one testimony to another that keeps the consistency of narrative without losing authenticity of the truth she presents. The show begins with Smith, as Sherrilyn Ifill who is

the president and director council of the NAACP<sup>3</sup> Legal Defense and Educational Fund, talking about the criminal justice system as being the most important civil rights issue. She describes how the criminal justice system becomes the most significant investment the American government makes. Ifill condemns the US policy that invests in “prison system” instead of investing in “mental illness” and “education” (6). At the end of her speech, Ifill urges black people to “make a way. . . out of no way” (7). For black people, education is a crucial step toward gaining equality, participating in civic life, and improving their economic conditions. Despite the various challenges imposed on them, black people must find ways to learn to protect themselves from exploitation and abuse.

Directly after Ifill’s performance, the scene shifts to the splenetic footage of Freddie Gray’s arrest and beating by Baltimore police. As Carol Martin remarks, Smith’s presentations are “accurate but selected, true to the person but edited. In that selection and editing, a sharp socially critical mind is at work. Smith’s presentations are neither puffs nor roasts, but constructive, re-presentations seasoned with a critical consciousness” (84). To keep compatibility and logic transition of her scenes, Smith positions another part of Ifill’s interview in the last part of the play as she reappears to provide a sobering perspective. She denounces the phenomenon of mass incarceration and emphasizes the importance of education: “how do we give people the opportunity to be people with a future. And education is a central piece of that” (120). Ifill criticizes the dysfunctional educational system in a country where “more prisons than universities are being built” (Savran 259). As a matter of fact, educational reformation is the fundamental principal of the civil rights movement that will make change for black people’s oppressed life possible.

In the recent years, the school-to-prison pipeline has become a major phenomenon in the American community. For minor classroom misbehaviors, school students may be arrested by the police, transported to detention centers, and introduced into the criminal justice system. *Notes from the Field* is an intense investigation of the mass incarceration of colored and poor school students who are suspended from schools into prisons. These suspensions, as Christopher A. Mallett observes, “are often a result of inflexible zero-tolerance officers’ presence” at schools (42). In the introduction of her play, Smith declares that black American and poor children get suspended and expelled more often than middle-class or rich kids, and they are “disciplined more harshly from kindergarten onward, and

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<sup>3</sup> NAACP stands for National Association for the Advancement of Colored People.

the police are called in more frequently. Incredibly, even five-year-olds have been handcuffed for having tantrums in school” (xviii). To investigate the school-to-prison pipeline, the nation’s most turbulent issue in recent years, Smith interviews diverse characters who are involved in this process such as students, educators, parents, prisoners, politicians, and public figures.

In *Notes from the Field*, Smith asserts the necessity to draw school students close to discover the reason behind their misbehavior instead of expelling them from school into prison. Stephanie Williams, an emotional support teacher in Smith’s performance, claims that what she must do with a violent student at school is to “grab him in the tightest hug” (112). Smith’s play is “a social justice initiative,” and “a new civil rights movement” to reconsider education and the criminal justice system (Schechner 38). In her play, Smith emphasizes the necessity of reform in the most important institutions in America, school and prison.

The pipeline project Smith adopts criticizes the prejudiced criminal justice system that pushes children and young men into jails and focuses on rigid rules rather than justice. Judge Abby Abinanti, another character performed by Smith, exposes the corruption in the American criminal justice system: “every society needs rules – but the whole thing about having a law or having a process or having courts was to ensure fairness and right behavior and justice! It’s not about that anymore. It’s about money. It’s about. . . whoever has the power to. . . I think the country’s broken. I really do” (51). Those who are involved in the criminal justice system exacerbate the situation. John Raymond Cook notes that politicians who make the laws, judges who interpret the law, and the police who inform the laws adopt “a culture that leads to the detriment and endangerment of society. Instead of lessening the crime rate and changing the behaviors of those who commit crime, the criminal justice system engenders a disrespect for society and human rights all the while increasing the levels of violence in our society” (x). One of the interviewees Smith impersonates on stage is Taos Proctor, a Yurok fisherman and a former inmate, who was expelled from school at the age of eight for being violent and hitting his teacher. Then he was sent from high school to different prisons. For Proctor, “prison don’t do nothing but make you a worsen person. Made me where I didn’t care if I hurt someone. . . And the longer you stay in prison, the more you lose your feelings about even caring” (44).

Public school teachers call for having police officers in schools to control, or more accurately to frighten, students. Tony Eady, a student concerns specialist in Smith’s performance, remarks: “I need police officers

in the school. . . I need a police officer to take control. I need a kid to see that there is an authority in a school” (62). In his book *The School-to-Prison Pipeline: A Comprehensive Assessment* (2016), Christopher A. Mallett states that colored students, more likely than others, receive “punitive” and not “rehabilitative discipline responses” from the school. He also notes that “these disparity arrest and punishment rates correlate to the increased police presence in schools, with some finding the power of the school resource officers becoming greater than that of the teachers and administrators of the school, thus criminalizing more student problems” (44). In addition, police presence at school with their violent attitude deteriorates the educational process and affects the cognitive ability of students.

In an agonizing monologue, Smith takes on the persona of Niya Kenny, an African American high school student who was arrested and pulled from school to prison because she filmed her classmate Shakara while being handcuffed and violently thrown on the floor with her face down by a police officer because she uses her cell phone in the classroom: “He’s – he’s like, wrestling, trying to get her arms behind her back at this time. On the floor. . . This man is, like, three hundred pounds, body builder. . . I was like, ‘Is nobody gonna help her?’ I’m like: ‘Somebody record this! Put it on Snapchat!” (72). As previously mentioned, unlike theatrical traditional techniques that were prevailing in the 1980s and 1990s, modern technological devices are used in verbatim theater to reveal the evils of the educational system and the criminal justice system in the dominant American community. Kenny’s cell phone video exposes the oppression and violence experienced by poor and black students when expelled from schools into incarceration at an early age.

As a matter of fact, reformation of the educational system and criminal justice system is necessary for the success of the civil rights movement. In his essay “Serving Two Masters: Integration Ideals and Client Interests in School Desegregation Litigation,” Derrick A. Bell notes: “For many civil rights workers, success in obtaining racially balanced schools seems to have become a symbol of the nation’s commitment to equal opportunity – not only in education, but in housing, employment, and other fields where the effects of racial discrimination are still present” (10). As this quote shows, social interaction among students of diverse races, mainly black and white, can help to remove racial prejudices and will have a positive impact on the development of students’ cognitive conditions. Also, it is highly important that teachers devote more effort to promote dialogue and understanding in the classroom, and to show love and care for their students. In *Notes from the Field*, Denise Dodson, a student and a former inmate in Maryland

Correctional Institution for Women, states: “If the teachers were more. . . involved, with the school work and the children as people, as the little people that they really are, I think that they would progress better. I think that they would be better. . . people” (91). For minor infractions, black students are confronted with severe punishments and harsh school disciplines that negatively affect their performance at school. The schools need to reevaluate regulations that allow teachers to adopt severe penalties on black and poor students such as suspension and/or incarceration.

Another important issue Smith highlights in her performance is the double oppression of black women. When Stephanie Williams, the emotional support teacher, is asked “Why do you have to work harder than everybody,” she simply answers: “because I’m black and I’m a female” (109). African American women’s dilemma, as Kimberle Williams Crenshaw remarks, is “their intersectional identity as both women and of color within discourses shaped to respond to one or the other, women of color are marginalized within both” (“Mapping” 358). Intersectionality, a main concept in critical race studies, exhibits how race, class, and gender interconnect to shape the experiences of poor and ethnic minorities. Plagued with this intersectionality, black women are subjected to gender, class, and racial discrimination. In the American community, “a full human being was a landowning white male! Here! That’s what made you a full human being, that’s what made you worthy of having a vote. And everybody else is some lesser form of human” (*Notes* 132). Like Crenshaw, in his essay “Punishing Drug Addicts Who Have Babies: Women of Color, Equality, and the Right of Privacy,” Dorothy E. Roberts asserts that black women suffer from different forms of oppression simultaneously “as a complex interaction of race, gender, and class that is more than the sum of its parts. It is impossible to isolate any one of the components of this oppression or to separate the experiences that are attributable to one component from experiences attributable to the others” (385). To their distress, black women are trapped in multiple types of oppression they cannot escape.

Trauma is a serious psychological consequence of oppression. People who experience racial, gender or class discrimination undergo anxiety, depression, and deleterious mental health problems. For them, “nihilism and trauma and violence is just so routine and so normal” (*Notes* 35). In *Notes from the Field*, Smith deals with trauma and the disastrous effects on the individuals who are exposed to traumatic events. Dr Victor Carrion, a psychiatrist, and the director of the Stanford Early Stress Research Program at Stanford University in California, is another character impersonated by Smith. He discusses his research on trauma, especially historical trauma, and



its effects on people: “Historical trauma exists, not only in history. It exists in our daily life. And I think as a society we sometimes experience symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder. Specifically, avoidance” (98). Exposure to traumatic events such as long-term abuse, violence, and class and racial inequities can result in symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder, a lifelong mental health condition that drastically affects individual’s life.

Post-traumatic stress disorder, as A. L. Roberts et al remark, “develops in response to exposure to a traumatic event during which an individual feels extremely fearful, horrified or helpless” (71). In addition, excessive rage is thought to be a common response to traumatic events. Stephanie Williams, the emotional support teacher in Smith’s performance, explains how an eleven-year-old colored student “pull – a – tree? Out – of – the ground. Out of the ground! So angry that he pull – he could pull a tree out of the ground. So angry that he could take a table and turn it over. Beat somebody up” (111). Living in racially oppressed violent communities has a negative impact, especially on children. In the preface of *Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder*, Dan J. Stein et al note that the diagnostic classifications of post-traumatic stress disorder stated by both the World Health Organization (WHO) and the American Psychiatric Association (APA) “include the same broad symptom categories (e.g. re-experiencing, avoidance/numbing and arousal) and emphasize that exposure to extremely stressful events can produce profound alterations in cognitions, emotions and behavior that may persist for decades or a lifetime” (xi). Generations of black American people experience traumatic events and are exposed to lifelong psychological and mental disorders.

It is worthy to note that Smith provides her interviewees with a kind of psychological relief after expressing their suffering and traumatic experiences, a way that greatly helps in the victims’ recovery: “Recovering repressed memories and articulating them as stories – the so-called talking cure has been recognized as a powerful therapeutic technique” (Jackson 23). In *Talk to Me: Travels in Media and Politics*, Smith encourages the interviewee to talk: “I know an actor who looks like you. If you give me an hour of your time, I will invite you to see yourself performed” (55). In her solo performance, Smith grants her characters, especially the marginalized and the oppressed minority, the opportunity to restore their voice to fight the over-aggressive disciplines they experience in a lifetime.

## Conclusion

I would like to conclude that Anna Deavere Smith, as a skillful verbatim artist, deftly explores the criminal justice system and the school-to-prison pipeline phenomenon in an interesting and creative performance while maintaining the authenticity of the events she investigates. In Smith's play, as Paterson notes, she "reanimates the stories of these everyday subjects to reveal a more complex and shifting relationship with notions of truth, memory, identity and authenticity" (112). In *Notes from the Field*, Smith accurately observes her interviewees' pattern of language, physical and emotional reactions to the issue discussed, and emulates their gestures and vocal tones. Though words of Smith's interviewees are selected and edited, they present undistorted truth and, as a result, remain part of oral history. Smith's accurate selection and editing of specific parts of her interviews show her theatrical skill in making logic transition from one testimony to another. In so doing, she keeps the compatibility of scenes and the consistency of narrative without losing authenticity of the truth she presents. Directly after Sherrilyn Ifill's speech about the huge investments the federal government makes in the criminal justice system, Smith presents the flagrant video of Freddie Gray's arrest and severe beating by the police to expose the unjust criminal justice system and the police abuse of power.

Moreover, the research has found that in her solo performance, Smith follows the creative technique of Augusto Boal's "Forum Theatre" as she breaks down barriers between actor and spectator to create, in Boal's words, a "spectator-actor" who is no longer a passive receiver but an active participant. In the first act of her performance, Smith displays the problems, and in the second act, she invites the audience for a debate. In so doing, she uses the productive power of the theater to convert the monologues of her solo performance into dialogues among her diverse audience. Through these dialogues, her audience can interrogate the institutional structures, provide a vast assortment of personal perspectives, and participate in solving sociopolitical problems to make change possible.

In addition, the research has proved that, according to critical race theory and critical whiteness theory, ethnic minority people, especially African Americans, are more likely to be oppressed and undergo class and racial inequities in a racially divided nation. As a result of this oppression, generations of colored people experience traumatic events and are exposed to lifelong psychological and mental disorders. Another important finding of research in this respect is the double oppression of African American women who are plagued with, in Crenshaw's words, "intersectional identity" for

being women and of color. Moreover, a principal concept of the mentioned theories is understanding how biased disciplines and racial prejudice manifest themselves in school as one of the most important institutions in America. Furthermore, the research shows how white students are privileged for their light skin whereas colored students have unequal educational opportunities in a country that invests in the prison system rather than investing in education. Smith's *Notes from the Field* is a thrilling exploration of the biased discipline and racial discrimination in the dominant American community, and her monologues bear witness to important moments in history.

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ملخص:

ملاحظات من الميدان: تحدي نظام العدالة الجنائية الأمريكية وخط الانابيب من المدرسة الى السجن في المسرح الحرفي لانا ديفير سميث

تهدف الورقة البحثية الحالية لاكتشاف المسرح الحرفي للكاتبه انا ديفير سميث وذلك للبحث في نظام العدالة الجنائية الأمريكية وظاهره خط الانابيب من المدرسة الى السجن كما هي منعكسه في أحدث مسرحياتها " ملاحظات من الميدان " عام ٢٠١٥ . وترجع ظاهرة خط الانابيب من المدرسة الى السجن الى نظام العدالة الجنائية الجائر بأمريكا والذي يؤدي الى السجن الجماعي للأطفال والشباب الفقراء والملونين الذين يتم طردهم من المدرسة وارسالهم الى مراكز الاحداث و ذلك لارتكابهم مخالفات بسيطة في الفصول الدراسية. كمسرحيه حرفيه تعتمد مسرحية "ملاحظات من الميدان" بشكل كبير على شهادات واجراء مقابلات مع اشخاص مشتركون في احداث حقيقيه. ويعتمد تحليل المسرحية بشكل اساسي على نظرية العرق النقدية ونظرية البياض النقدية التي اشتقت منها وطبقا للنظريتين توصلت الورقة البحثية الى ان الاقليات العرقية وخاصة الامريكيين من اصل افريقي هما الاكثر اضطهادا ويعانون من عدم المساواة الطبقيه والعرقية والاحداث المؤلمة في امه منقسمه عنصريا. كما سيتم اكتشاف القمع المزوج للنساء الامريكيات من أصل افريقي. وتحليل الورقة البحثية ايضا مبنيا على " مسرح المنتدى" للناقد البرازيلي اوجستو بول والذي يتم استخدامه اساسا لكشف المشكلات الرئيسية للمضطهدين. وتثبت الورقة البحثية ان انا ديفير سميث كفنانة ماهره حافظت بشكل بارع على مصداقيه الاحداث التي تحقق فيها وذلك بالحفاظ على الحقيقة الثاقبة من خلال عرض مثير ومبدع.

**الكلمات المفتاحية:** المسرح الحرفي - أنا ديفير سميث - ملاحظات من الميدان - نظام العدالة الجنائية - خط الأنابيب من المدرسة إلى السجن - نظرية العرق النقدية - نظرية البياض النقدية.