

# Politics of identity in twilight los angeles



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In this essay on "Twilight Los Angeles" by Anna Smith, I would like to discuss some of the identity politics issues that are theoretically significant to multiethnic literature. Smith recognizes that her hybrid form of drama--an amalgamation of the forms of social documentary, journalistic interviews, and theater--has caused controversy, leading critics to ask whether Smith, who adopts multiple racial/ethnic identities, is re-enforcing stereotypes in her performances. In inscribing one discursive body, with all of its cultural constructions, upon another, Smith raises crucial questions of representation.

Smith's work questions the myth that we are living in a "color-blind" society in a post-identity age. Thus, in using Twilight as a catalyst for class discussion concerning identity politics, I chose a dramatic piece that raises fundamental questions concerning the politics of identity for my students. Although I will be focusing primarily on issues of race and ethnicity for the purpose of this essay, Smith's work also examines other categories of identity, including gender and class.

Smith is interested not in presenting a seamless illusion concerning theatrical representations; rather, she is interested in presenting the gaps and disjunctions that occur both in the performance of and discussions about the complexities of American character and identity. Smith acknowledges that her documentary theater is controversial, leading critics to ask whether her performance constitutes a play or a piece of reportage and whether she, in adopting multiple gendered racial and ethnic identities, is perpetuating negative racial and ethnic representations in her performances.

What, for instance, is the impact upon the audience when Smith, as a light-skinned black woman, plays such diverse roles as a white male juror from Simi or a Korean gunshot victim? Smith admits that the audience often feels uneasy with the display of difference, for she runs the danger of mimicking different groups and reifying negative cultural stereotypes. The question arises - is Smith adopting a complex version of minstrelsy, providing a white-, black-, brown-, and yellow-face show? In revealing the apparatus of representation, in allowing her own "unlikeness," her "difference," to be exposed, does Smith, in turn, expose the plural and multiple aspects of culturally constructed identity, juxtaposing various white, black, brown, and yellow culturally constructed bodies against her own? In her work, Smith attempts to foreground and disrupt the underlying ideological assumptions embedded in the theater of the media.

She, however, is not interested in inverting binary oppositions and thus privileging, for instance in this case, King over the police officers; rather, Smith is interested in creating a third, hybrid space depicting character as plural and multiple, as an ever emerging identity. Smith states that she is exploring "American character" not as a fixed and stable entity, but as an "identity in motion" (Smith 24). Her statement suggests that she combats stereotypes, which are fixed identities, by allowing identities to be "in motion."

But does she, as my students ask, fulfill her claims? In one of her most controversial vignettes, "Swallowing the Bitterness," Smith portrays Mrs. Young-Soon Han, a Korean American liquor store owner whose shop had been destroyed in the riots. Smith performs her speech in dialect; thus, my

students point out, Smith not only risks reifying cultural stereotypes, but, in imitating the voice of an immigrant, she risks caricaturing and offending Asian immigrants who often feel marginalized precisely because of their speech. Moreover, since Mrs.

Han discusses the tensions between the African American and Korean American communities, students wonder if Smith's black body is somehow discursively appropriating Mrs. Han's Asian American body. In a perceptive article entitled "New Urban Crisis: Intra-Third World Conflict," Edward Chang notes that the focus of race relations in multiracial cities like Los Angeles has shifted from white-black to intra-Third World relationships; moreover, white majority and black minority paradigms are inadequate in understanding the intra-Third World conflicts occurring between marginalized groups. Chang (1999) In such cities, issues of power and privilege are far more complex.

For instance, Chang notes that African Americans perceive Korean Americans as having greater economic advantage, while Korean Americans perceive African Americans as having greater political power. At one point, Mrs. Han cries: "I really realized that Korean immigrants were left out from this society and we were nothing. What is our right? Is it because we are Korean? Is it because we have no politicians? Is it because we don't speak good English?" (Smith 245). As she listens to and then performs Mrs. Han's "broken speech," Smith's body becomes a potential site of transcultural negotiation. A vehicle for Mrs. Han's praise ("They have fought for their rights over two centuries") and criticism ("They got their rights by destroying innocent Korean merchants") of the African American community,

Smith depicts the " processes of the social problems" (Smith 92) as a site of contest and possible negotiation and revision. Mrs.

Han expresses her desire to live with blacks, but fears that the fires of the riots could re-ignite at any time. She has learned to rely upon the rules of economic and social systems that many disenfranchised blacks have found to be a series of coercive repetitions that they wish to subvert. For Mrs. Han, reconciliation may come at too high a cost. Perhaps a cathartic unity would offer only a false sense of closure.

The points of disjuncture in Smith's work provide greater possibilities for discussion and negotiation, despite our own yearning for resolution. pening up categories of identity, freeing individuals from essentialist stereotypes, has been liberating for many people; others, however, fear that a perspective of multiplicity and hybridity can ultimately undermine difference and identity positions that are often necessary for those who need to further a social and/or political agenda. For Smith, an affirmation of process and multiplicity, a desire to free oneself from essentialist definitions, does not preclude the adoption of a subject position or exclude an understanding of a historically and culturally embedded community.

The questions she raises are also significant for academic communities and our pedagogical practices; hence, I do think it is noteworthy that Smith uses academics such as Homi Bhabha and Judith Butler in her actual drama. Indeed, it is significant that Smith's *Twilight* is filled with individuals who bear " ex-identities": ex-police chiefs, ex-convicts, ex-liquor store owners, ex-nuns, and ex-gang members. In fact, Smith named her play *Twilight* after *Twilight Bey*, an ex-gang member and an organizer of gang truce.

Resignifying his identity from gang member to truce organizer, Twilight Bey offers us an "identity in motion" as well as his own pedagogical model. In the revised version of her play, a text also in motion, Smith gives Twilight Bey the final words of Twilight, in which he depicts the violent and violating environment of his neighborhood as well as the possibility of hope in "understanding others" and creating a truce.

He states, "I see the light as knowledge and the wisdom of the world and understanding others, and in order for me to be a ... rue human being, I can't forever dwell in darkness, I can't forever dwell in the idea of just identifying with people like me and understanding me and mine" (Smith 255). In inscribing herself with the words of her characters, Smith allows us to see that "difference" does not have to lead to binary oppositions--that is, simple black and white reductions of complex issues. We can see how Smith's characters open up spaces and gaps for us.

Her text encourages us to recognize the importance of shared spaces borderlands, cultural hybridity, a "third space of enunciation"--and to recognize the multiple identities that reside in a number of racial/ethnic categories and in an ever-emerging cultural self. In fact, in *House Arrest*, Smith borrowed a biological term, *introgression*, to describe her aesthetics. She asked Marcus Feldman of Stanford for a term that would describe one species moving out of its habitat into another, allowing for the possibility of transformation.

Feldman noted that in most cases, the species tended to appropriate the other habitat, enacting a biological imperialism. However, he suggested that a possible term might be *introgression*, which describes the integration of

genes of one species into a gene pool of another species. Smith appropriates this term for her own creative purposes. Through her artistic introgression, she desires to establish a reciprocal relationship between the audience and the art, a space that allows for civic dialogue. Smith's desire for introgression can also be enacted in classroom spaces.

Smith urges us to interrogate ourselves: to explore how we are culturally constructed, to be aware of how " we are projecting onto the event itself. " In her documentary theater, she makes us aware of how we, like she herself, are all inscribed with the " other," and that hope may lie not in the boundaries separating groups, but in the ways that we allow ourselves to be performatively transformed by the " other. " Smith herself argues that identity must be seen as something in motion, continually under negotiation.

She warns that there is an inevitable tension in America: if that tension does not move an identity forward, it threatens to explode (Smith 35), as she demonstrates in her works. Within her drama and within our classrooms, Smith provides us with a twilight space, a trans-ethnic crossing, which demands that we look at ourselves and the ways in which we are socially inscribed recognizing that if we are to survive we must engage in introgressive spaces, in a dialogue with one another.