

## The Imminent Other in Anna Deavere Smith's Performance

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**Abstract :** This paper discusses the concept of community in Anna Deavere Smith's performance, one that challenges and explores existing notions of justice and the other. In contrast to unwavering assumptions of essentialism that have helped to propel a discourse on moral agency within the black community, Smith employs postmodern ideas in which the theatrical attributes of doubling and repetition are conceptualized as part of what Marvin Carlson coined as a 'memory machine.' Her dismissal of the need for linear time, such as that regulated by Aristotle's *The Poetics* and its concomitant ethics, values, and emotions as a primary ontological and epistemological construct produced by the existing African American historiography, demonstrates an urgency to produce an alternative communal self to override metanarratives in which the African Americans' lives are contained and sublated by specific historical confines. Drawing on Emmanuel Levinas' theories in ethics, specifically his notion of 'proximity' and 'the third,' the paper argues that Smith enacts a new model of ethics by launching an acting method that eliminates the boundary of self and other. Defying psychological realism, Smith conceptualizes an approach to acting that surpasses the mere mimetic value of invoking a 'likeness' of an actor to a character, which as such, resembles the mere attribution of various racial or sexual attributes in identity politics. Such acting, she contends, reduces the other to a representation of, at best, an ultimate rendering of me/my experience. She instead appreciates 'unlikeness,' recognizes the unavoidable actor/character gap as a power that humbles the self, whose irreversible journey to the other carves out its own image.

**Keywords :** Anna Deavere Smith, Emmanuel Levinas, other, performance

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