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The reflexive interview and a performative social science

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ABSTRACT The reflexive interview is located within the structures of the cinematic-interview society. The concepts of performance interview, narrative collage, postmodern interview, performative writing and ethnodrama are developed. The work of Anna Deavere Smith is also discussed.

KEYWORDS: *interview society, narrative collage, performance writing, reflexive interview*

At the beginning of a new century it is necessary to re-engage the promise of qualitative research as a form of radical democratic practice. The narrative turn in the social sciences has been taken. We have told our tales from the field. Today we understand that we write culture, and that writing is not an innocent practice. We know the world only through our representations of it.

Overview

For a full century the interview has been the basic information gathering tool of the social sciences. Holstein and Gubrium (1995: 1) estimate that 90 percent of all social science investigations exploit interview data; increasingly the media, human service professionals and social researchers get their information about society via interviews. We have become an interview society, a cinematic society, a society which knows itself through the reflective gaze of the cinematic apparatus (see also Atkinson and Silverman, 1997; Denzin, 1995: 1).

My discussion unfolds in seven parts. I begin with an interpretive framework which locates the reflexive interview within the structures of the cinematic-interview society. This leads to a discussion of the concepts of the performance interview, performative writing and ethnodramas (Miencazkowski, 1995, 2000; Pelias, 1999; Pollock, 1998; Schechner, 1998; Sedgwick, 1998). I then use Trinh T. Minh-ha's film, *Surname Viet Given Name Nam*

(1992), as a vehicle for comparing and contrasting the reflexive and traditional interview forms (see also Heyl, 2000). I next explicate Anna Deavere Smith's project, especially her concepts of performance, and the poetic text. I move from Smith's arguments to a performance text based on a reflexive interview with Mrs Anderson, a woman who led the battle to desegregate the schools in Edge City in the mid-1960s. I conclude by returning to my utopian themes, and the promises of the reflexive interview for a free and just society.

This essay is a utopian project. I search for a new interpretive form, a new form of the interview, what I call the reflexive, dialogic, or performative interview. The reflexive interview is not an information gathering tool per se. It is not a commodity that you hire someone to collect for you, or that you pay someone to give you. It belongs to a moral community. On this point I borrow from Leopold (1949: viii) who says of the land: 'We abuse land because we regard it as a commodity belonging to us. When we see land as a community to which we belong, we may begin to use it with love and respect.' We do not own the land, the land is a community to which we belong.

Substitute the words 'interview' and 'research' for the word 'land'. As researchers we belong to a moral community. Doing interviews is a privilege granted us, not a right that we have. Interviews are things that belong to us. Interviews are part of the dialogic conversation that connects all of us to this larger moral community. Interviews arise out of performance events. They transform information into shared experience.¹ This reflexive project presumes that words and language have a material presence in the world; that words have effects on people. Words matter.

I imagine a world where race, ethnicity, class, gender and sexual orientation intersect; a world where language and performance empower, and humans can become who they wish to be, free of prejudice, repression and discrimination. Those who write culture using reflexive interviews are learning to use language in a way that brings people together. The goal is to create critically empowering texts which 'demonstrate a strong fondness . . . for freedom and an affectionate concern for the lives of people' (Joyce, 1987: 344). These texts do more than move audiences to tears. They criticize the world the way it is, and offer suggestions about how it could be different.

Interpretive framework

I want to re-read the interview, not as a method of gathering information, but as a vehicle for producing performance texts and performance ethnographies about self and society (see Richardson, 1997: 135–6). I want to locate this reading within its historical moment. Qualitative research operates in a complex historical field which cross-cuts seven historical

periods, all seven operate in the present.² These moments are: (1) the traditional (1900–1950); (2) the modernist, or golden age (1950–70); (3) blurred genres (1970–86); (4) the crisis of representation (1986–90); (5) the postmodern, or experimental (1990–6); (6) the post-experimental (1996–present); and (7) the future, the seventh moment.

The present moment is defined by a performative sensibility, by a willingness to experiment with different ways of presenting an interview text. The performative sensibility turns interviews into performance texts, into poetic monologues. It turns interviewees into performers, into persons whose words and narratives are then performed by others. As Richardson (1997: 121) argues, in the post-experimental period no discourse has a privileged place, no method or theory has a universal and general claim to authoritative knowledge.

THE INTERVIEW AS INTERPRETIVE PRACTICE

The interview, as an interpretive practice, has had a different set of meanings in each historical period. Its meanings, forms and uses change from moment to moment, moving from the structured, semi-structured and open-ended objective format of the traditional and modernist periods, to the feminist criticisms of these formats in the third and fourth moments (see Oakley, 1981; Reinharz, 1992), to auto-ethnographic uses of the method in the fifth and sixth moments (DeVault, 1999), as well as the more recent post-experimental performative turn, which is the approach taken here (see also Smith, 1993). The present moment is further defined by increased resistance from minority groups to the interviews done by white university and governmental officials. The modernist interview no longer functions as an automatic extension of the state, as an interpretive practice that persons willingly submit to.

The interview is a way of writing the world, a way of bringing the world into play. The interview is not a mirror of the so-called external world, nor is it a window into the inner life of the person (see Dillard, 1982: 47, 155). The interview is a simulacrum, a perfectly miniature and coherent world in its own right (see Dillard, 1982: 152). Seen in this way, the interview functions as a narrative device which allows persons who are so inclined to tell stories about themselves. In the moment of story-telling, teller and listener, performer and audience, share the goal of participating in a experience which reveals their shared same-ness (Porter, 2000).

The interview's meanings are contextual, improvised and performative (Dillard, 1982: 32). The interview is an active text, a site where meaning is created and performed. When performed, the interview text creates the world, giving the world its situated meaningfulness. From this perspective, the interview is a fabrication, a construction, a fiction, an 'ordering or rearrangement of selected materials from the actual world' (p. 148). But every interview text selectively and unsystematically reconstructs that

world, tells and performs a story accordingly to its own version of narrative logic.

We inhabit a performance-based, dramaturgical culture. The dividing line between performer and audience blurs, and culture itself becomes a dramatic performance. This is a gendered culture with nearly invisible boundaries separating everyday, theatrical performances from formal theatre, dance, music, MTV, video and film (Butler, 1990: 2, 1997: 159, 1999: 19). But the matter goes even deeper than blurred boundaries. The performance has become reality. On this, speaking of gender and personal identity, Butler (1990) is certain. Gender is performative, gender is always doing,

. . . though not a doing by a subject who might be said to preexist the deed . . . there is no being behind doing . . . the deed is everything . . . there is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender . . . identity is performatively constituted by the very 'expressions' that are said to be its results (p. 25).

Further, the linguistic act is performative, and words can hurt (Butler, 1997: 4).

Performance interviews are situated in complex systems of discourse, where traditional, everyday and avant-garde meanings of theatre, film, video, ethnography, cinema, performance, text and audience come together and inform one another. The meanings of lived experience are inscribed and made visible in these performances.

ETHNODRAMAS

Mienczakowski (1995, 2000) locates the performance interview within the framework of ethnodrama. Ethnodrama is a form of ethnographic theatre involving 'participant and audience empowerment through forum reconstruction and "dialogical interactions"' (1995: 361). Co-performers read performance scripts based on fieldwork and interviews conducted in the fieldsetting. Ethnodramas and ethnographic performances are 'about *the present moment* and seek to give the text back to readers and informants in the recognition that "we are all co-performers in each other's lives"' Mienczakowski (2000: 2; emphasis in original). Ethnodramas enact performance writing through a particular type of ethnographic theatre.

With Anna Deavere Smith (1992, 1993) and Mienczakowski, I want a performative social science, a social science and a public theatre that embraces racial diversity and social difference (see Denzin, 1997: 123; also Turner, 1986). This social science asks: 'Who has the right to ask whom what questions?'; 'Who has the right to answer?'; 'Who has the right to see what?'; 'Who has the right to say what?'; Who has the right to speak for whom?' (Smith, 1993: xxviii). These are the questions that 'unsettle and prohibit a democratic theatre in America' (p. xxix). Perhaps more deeply, these are the questions that unsettle the discourses of a democratic social science in the USA today.

The reflexive interview and the cinematic society

Our second-hand world is mediated by cinema, television and the other media apparatuses of the postmodern society. We have no direct access to this world, we only experience and study its representations – a performance-based social science studies culture and society as dramaturgical productions. In their performances, people enact cultural meanings. Interviews are performance texts. The active, reflexive and dialogical interview is a central component of this interpretive project (Denzin, 1995, 1997; Gubrium and Holstein, 1997; Holstein and Gubrium, 1995; Jackson, 1998). A performative social science uses the reflexive interview as a vehicle for producing moments of performance theatre, a theatre sensitive to the moral and ethical issues of our time (Smith, 1992: xi).

This interview form is gendered and dialogical. In this form, gendered subjects are created through their speech acts. Speech is performative. It is action. The act of speech, the act of being interviewed, becomes a performance itself (Smith, 1993: xxxi; also Butler, 1990: 25).³ The reflexive interview, as a dialogic conversation, is the site and occasion for such performances; that is, the interview is turned into a dramatic, poetic text.⁴ In turn, these texts are performed, given dramatic readings. In such events ‘performance and performativity are braided together by virtue of iteration; the copy renders performance authentic and allows the spectator to find in the performer “presence” . . . [or] authenticity’ (Phelan, 1998: 10).

Listen to Laurel Richardson’s Louisa May introduce her life story:

The most important thing
to say is that
I grew up in the South.
Being southern shapes
aspirations shapes
what you think you are . . .
I grew up poor in a rented house
in a very normal sort of way
on a very normal sort of street
with some very nice middle class friends
(Richardson, 1997: 131).

Louisa May comes alive as a person in these lines. She comes off the page, and if her words are spoken softly, with a middle-Tennessee twang you can feel her presence in the room.

The reflexive interview is simultaneously a site for conversation, a discursive method, and a communicative format that produces knowledge about the cinematic society. This interview form furnishes the materials that are fashioned into critical performance texts; critical narratives about community, race, self and identity (Smith, 1992: xxiii).

One of the young black men interviewed by Smith after the 1992 Los Angeles race riots reflects on the meanings of race, ethnicity and identity in

his life:

Twilight is the time of day between day and night
 limbo, I call it limbo,
 and sometimes when I take my ideas to my homeboys
 they say, well Twilight, that's something you can't do right
 now . . .
 I affiliate darkness with what came first,
 because it was first,
 and relative to my complexion,
 I am a dark individual
 And with me being stuck in limbo
 I see the darkness as myself
 (Smith, 1992: xxv-xxvi).

THE INTERVIEW SOCIETY

Atkinson and Silverman (1997) remind us that the postmodern is an interview society, a society of the spectacle, a society of the personal confession. According to Atkinson and Silverman (pp. 309–15) the interview society is characterized by the following features and beliefs: (1) it has turned the confessional mode of discourse into a form of entertainment; (2) the private has become a public commodity; (3) persons are assumed to have private and public and authentic selves, and the private self is the real self; (4) skilled interviewers and therapists (and sometimes the person) have access to this self; (5) certain experiences, epiphanies, are more authentic than others, they leave deep marks and scars on the person; (6) persons have access to their own experiences; (7) first-person narratives are very valuable. They are the site of personal meaning.

The reflexive interviewer deconstructs these uses and abuses of the interview (Atkinson and Silverman, 1997; Holstein and Gubrium, 2000: 227–8). Indeed, to paraphrase Dillard (1982), serious students of society take pains to distinguish their work from these interpretive practices (p. 46). In the surveillance society, journalists, social scientists, psychiatrists, physicians, social workers and the police use interviews to gather information about individuals. Interviews objectify individuals, turning lived experiences into narratives. The interview is the method by which the personal is made public. The interview turns transgressive experience into a consumable commodity. These narratives are bought and sold in the media and academic market-place. Thus does the interview society affirm the importance of the speaking subject and celebrate the biographical. Nothing is private any more.

Of course there is no essential self or private, or real self behind the public self. There are only different selves, different performances, different ways of being a gendered person in a social situation. These performances are based on different narrative and interpretive practices. These practices give the self and the person a sense of grounding, or narrative coherence (Gubrium and

Holstein, 1998). There is no inner, or deep self that is accessed by the interview or narrative method. There are only different interpretive (and performative) versions of who the person is. At this level, to borrow from Garfinkel (1996: 6), there is nothing under the skull that matters.

NARRATIVE COLLAGE AND THE POSTMODERN INTERVIEW⁵

The postmodern or contemporary modernist interview builds on narrative collage, the shattering of narrative line. Dillard (1982) compares narrative collage to Cubism:

Just as Cubism can take a roomful of furniture and iron it into nine square feet of canvas, so fiction can take fifty years of human life, chop it to bits and piece these bits together so that, within the limits of the temporal form, we can consider them all at once. This is narrative collage (p. 21).

In the postmodern interview, storied sequences do not follow a necessary progression. Narrative collage fractures time, speakers leap forward and backward in time. Time is not linear, it is not attached to causal sequences, to 'fixed landmarks in orderly progression' (Dillard, 1982: 21). Time, space and character are flattened out. The intervals between temporal moments can be collapsed in an instant. More than one voice can speak at once, in more than one tense. The text can be a collage, a montage, with photographs, blank spaces, poems, monologues, dialogues, voice-overs, and interior streams of consciousness.

In *montage* a picture is made by superimposing several different images on one another. In a sense montage is like *pentimento* where something painted out of a picture (an image the painter 'repented', or denied) now becomes re-visible, creating something new. What is new is what had been obscured by a previous image.

Montage and *pentimento* – like jazz, which is improvisation – create the sense that images, sounds and understandings are blending together, overlapping, forming a composite, a new creation. The images seem to shape and define one another, an emotional, gestalt effect is produced. Often these images are combined in a swiftly run sequence. When done, this produces a dizzily revolving collection of several images around a central, or focused picture or sequence; *such effects signify the passage of time*.

In montage, the narrative can 'shatter time itself into smithereens' (Dillard, 1982: 22). Points of view and style collide, switch back and forth, co-mingle. Now and then the writer intrudes, speaking directly to the reader. Sentences may be reduced to numbered lines. The 'arrow of time shatters, cause and effect may vanish and reason crumble' (p. 22). No-one can say which sequence of events caused what, and the text makes no pretence about causality. Time, effect and cause operate, as Borges would say, in a 'garden of forking paths' (Dillard, 1982: 22).

Space is no longer fixed, confined to a walled-in, three-dimensional site. It

moves back and forth, sometimes randomly, between the public and private realms, which may only be temporary resting places. As space shifts, so too do forms of discourse, character, voice, tone, prose style and visual imagery (Dillard, 1982: 22–3).

In these ways, narrative collage allows the writer, interviewer and performer to create a special world, a world made meaningful through the methods of collage and montage. These uses lay bare the structural and narrative bones of the reflexive, postmodern interview. In text and in performance, this form announces its reflexivity. No longer does the writer-as-interviewer hide behind the question–answer format, the apparatuses of the interview machine.

THE INTERVIEW AND THE WORLD

The interview elicits interpretations of the world, for it is itself an object of interpretation. But the interview is not an interpretation of the world per se. Rather it stands in an interpretive relationship to the world that it creates. This created world stands alongside the so-called bigger and larger world of human affairs of which this creation is but one tiny part. The lifelike materials of the interview absorb us and seduce us. They entice us into believing that we are seeing the real world being staged. This is not so. But then there is no real world. There are no originals. There is no original reality which casts its shadows across the reproduction. There are only interpretations and their performances.

Nonetheless, the reflexive interviewer gives special attention to those performances, spaces and sites where stories criss-cross the borders and boundaries of illness, race, class, gender, religion and ethnicity are told (Gubrium and Holstein, 1998). These are the kinds of stories that concern Trinh who works back and forth between narrative collages and cinematic representations of the world (1991, 1992).

*SURNAME VIET GIVEN NAME NAM*⁶

Trinh T. Minh-ha's film *Surname Viet Given Name Nam* (1992) is about Vietnamese women whose names change and remain constant, depending on whether or not they marry a foreigner or a Vietnamese. In this film, Trinh (1992: 49) has Vietnamese women speak from five different subject positions representing lineage, gender and age status, leadership position, and historical period. This creates a complex picture of Vietnamese culture, showing women and their kin in a variety of overlapping positions of power, intimacy and submission (p. 144).

The film is multi-textual, layered, a montage with pensive images of women in various situations. Historical moments overlap with life stages (childhood, youth, adulthood, old age), ritual ceremonies (weddings, funerals, war, the market, dance) and daily household work (cooking), while interviewees talk to off-screen interviewers. There are two voice-overs in

English, a third voice sings sayings, proverbs and poetry in Vietnamese (with translations as texts on the screen). There are also interviews with Vietnamese subtitled in English, and interviews in English synchronized with the on-screen image (Trinh, 1992: 49). The interviews are re-enacted by Vietnamese women, who are then interviewed at the end of the film, asked about their experiences of being performers in the film (p. 146).

The film allows the practice of doing and performing reflexive interviews to enter into the construction of the text itself. Thus the true and the false (the actresses are not the women interviewed by Mai Thu Van) and the real and the staged intermingle. Indeed the early sections of the film unfold like a traditional, realist documentary film (Trinh, 1992: 145). The viewer does not know these are actresses re-enacting interviews. Nor does the viewer know that the interviews were conducted in the United States, not Vietnam. (This only becomes apparent near the end of the film.)

In using these interpretive strategies, Trinh creates the space for the critical appraisal of the politics of representation that structure the use of interviews in the documentary film. In un-doing the interview as a method for gathering information about society, Trinh takes up the question of truth (1992: 145). Whose truth is she presenting, that of the original interviewer (Mai, 1983), that given in the on-screen interview situation, or that of the women-as-actresses who are interviewed at the end of the film?

In the world that Trinh creates, culture comes alive as a dramatic performance. Each actress is a performer, performing an interview text. The performer comes alive in the words of this text. Indeed, the truth of this text is assured by the performance. The viewer is drawn ever deeper into this world. Space and time, and point of view move around. Trinh crosses genres and discourse systems. The film becomes the object of our attention, demanding interpretation. The truth of its multiple realities is never doubted until the final scene.

But then, at this point, we do not ask if the representation is true. We ask instead, is it probable, workable, fruitful, does it allow us to see things differently, and to think differently (see Dillard, 1982: 134)? And the answer is yes, it does. In this way, the performance text works its subtle pedagogy. It elicits an interpretation of the world by being 'itself a worldlike object for interpretation' (p. 155).

Cinema meets ethnography

Trinh is a filmmaker first and foremost. She understands that truth is a social construction. She begins by deconstructing the use of the interview by documentary filmmakers. (Her deconstruction extends and complements the arguments of Atkinson and Silverman.) In their use of the traditional, non-dialogical interview, documentary filmmakers start with the real world and the subject's place in that world. They use an aesthetic of objectivity and a

technological apparatus which produce truthful statements (images) about the world (Trinh, 1991: 33). Trinh contends that the following elements are central to this apparatus (pp. 33–6):

- the relentless pursuit of naturalism which requires a connection between the moving image and the spoken word;
- lip-synchronous sound;
- the use of real people in real situations;
- real time is more truthful than film-interview time;
- few close-ups, emphasis on wide-angle shots;
- use of the hand-held, unobtrusive camera to 'provoke people into uttering the 'truth' that they would not otherwise unveil in ordinary situations (p. 34);
- the filmmaker interviewer is an observer, not a person who creates what is seen, heard and read;
- only events, unaffected by the recording eye, should be captured;
- the film-interview captures objective reality;
- truth must be dramatized;
- actual facts should be presented in a credible way, with people telling them;
- the film-interview text must convince the spectator that they should have confidence in the truth of what they see and hear;
- the presence of the filmmaker-interviewer is masked, hidden;
- the use of various persuasive techniques, including personal testimony, and the talk of plain folks;
- the film-interview is made for the common, silent people; they are the interview-film's referent (p. 39).

These aesthetic strategies define the documentary, interview style, allowing the filmmaker-as-interviewer to create a text which gives the viewer the illusion of having 'unmediated access to reality' (Trinh, 1991: 40). Thus naturalized, the documentary interview style has become part of the larger cinematic apparatus in American culture, including its pervasive presence in TV commercials and news (p. 40).

Trinh (1991) brings a reflexive reading to these features of the documentary film, citing her own texts as examples of documentaries that are sensitive to the flow of fact and fiction, to meanings as political constructions (p. 41). Such texts take for granted that objective reality can never be captured. Documentary interviewing thus becomes a method for 'framing' reality.

A responsible, reflexive, dialogical interview text embodies the following characteristics (Trinh, 1991):

- it announces its own politics and evidences a political consciousness;
- it interrogates the realities it represents;
- it invokes the teller's story in the history that is told;
- it makes the audience responsible for interpretation;
- it resists the temptation to become an object of consumption;
- it resists all dichotomies (male/female, etc.);
- it foregrounds difference, not conflict;

- it uses multiple voices, emphasizing language as silence, the grain of the voice, tone, inflection, pauses, silences, repetitions;
- silence is presented as a form of resistance. (p. 188)

The dialogic interview exposes its own means of production. In contrast, the documentary interview, hides behind the apparatuses of production, thereby creating the illusion that the viewer and reader have direct access to reality.

Trinh's reflexive interviews, as performance texts, seek the truth of life's fictions, the spirit of truth that resides in life experiences, in fables, proverbs, where nothing is explained, but everything is evoked (1991: 162).

Learning from Trinh, I want to cultivate a method of patient listening, a method of looking cinematically. This will be a way of hearing and writing that allows one to address the kinds of issues Gloria Naylor (1998) discusses in the following passage:

Someone who didn't know how to ask wouldn't know how to listen. And he coulda listened to them the way you been listening to us right now. Think about it: ain't nobody really talking to you . . . Really listen this time; the only voice is your own. But you done just heard about the legend of Saphira Wade . . . You done heard it in the way we know it, sitting on our porches and shelling June peas . . . taking apart the engine of a car – you done heard it without a single living soul really saying a word' (p. 1842).

Anna Deavere Smith's project

Anna Deavere Smith knows how to listen. She says of her project, 'My goal has been to find American character in the ways that people speak. When I started this project, in the early 1980s, my simple introduction to anyone I interviewed was, 'If you give me an hour of your time, I'll invite you to see yourself performed' (1993: xxiii). Smith soon transformed her project into the production of a series of one-woman performance pieces about race in the USA (1992: xvii).

Over the last ten years Smith has created performances based on actual events in a series she has titled *On the Road: A Search for American Character*. Each of these performances 'evolves from interviews I conduct with individuals directly or indirectly . . . Basing my scripts entirely on this interview material, I perform the interviewees on stage using their own words' (1992: xvii). In May 1992 she was commissioned to create a performance piece about the civil disturbances in Los Angeles in April 1992. *Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992*, is the result of her search 'for the character of Los Angeles in the wake of the initial Rodney King verdict' (p. xvii).⁷

Smith's *Fires in the Mirror* (1993) extends the Los Angeles project. In this play she offers a series of performance pieces based on interviews with people involved in a racial conflict in Crown Heights Brooklyn on 19 August 1991.

In this conflict, a young black Guyanese boy was accidentally killed by an auto in a police-escorted entourage carrying Lubavitcher Grand Rebbe Menachem Schneerson. Later that day a group of black men fatally stabbed a 29-year-old Hasidic scholar. This killing was followed by a racial conflict lasting three days involving many members of the community. Smith's play has speaking parts for gang members, the police, anonymous young girls and boys, mothers, fathers, rabbis, Reverend Al Sharpton, playwright Ntozake Shange, and African-American cultural critic Angela Davis.

The theatre that Smith creates mirrors and criticizes society, hers is a project that is 'sensitive to the events of my own time' (1992: xxii). In fashioning her performance texts she uses *dramaturges*, 'persons who assist in the preparation of the text of a play and offer an outside perspective to those who are more active in the process of staging the play' (p. xxii).⁸

Smith turns interview texts into scripts. She fashions an interview text 'that works as a *physical, audible, performable* vehicle' (1992: xxiii, emphasis in original). Words become a means, or method for evoking the character of the person. Smith learned how to listen carefully. She learned how to inhabit the words of the other, to use their manner of speech as a mark of individuality, to see that a person can be completely present in their speech, and this is a gift (1993: xxvii, xxxi).

Here is how Smith (1993) rendered her interview with Reverend Al Sharpton:

James Brown raised me
 Uh . . .
 I never had a father.
 My father left when I was ten.
 James Brown took me to the beauty parlor one day
 And made my hair like this.
 And made me promise
 to wear it like that
 'til I die.
 It's a personal family thing
 between me and James Brown.
 I always wanted a father
 And he filled that void (p. 19).

Smith's goal is to create 'an atmosphere in which the interviewee would experience his/her own authorship' (1993: xxxi). If this space is created, 'everyone . . . will say something that is like poetry. The process of getting to that poetic moment is where "character" lives' (p. xxxi).

Playwright, poet, novelist Ntozake Shange reveals her character to Smith (1993) like this:

Hummmm.
 Identity —
 it, is, uh . . . in a way it's, um. . . it's sort of, it's uh . . .

it's a psychic sense of place
 it's a way of knowing I'm not a rock or that tree?
 I'm this other living creature over here?
 And it's a way of knowing that no matter when I put
 Myself
 that I am not necessarily
 what's around me (p. 3).

An unavoidable and painful tension exists in the USA today, a tension that has been taken up by women and people of color, the tension that surrounds race, identity and gender, it 'is the tension of identity in motion' (Smith, 1993: xxxiv). This tension turns, in part, on 'Who can speak for whom?'; 'Who can ask questions, who can listen?' A profound danger exists 'If only a man can speak for a man, a woman for a woman, a Black person for all Black people' (p. xxix). If this is so, then a bridge connecting diverse racial and gendered identities to discourse in the public arena cannot be constructed. Democratic discourse is threatened.

However, as argued above, there are no privileged identities, no deep or essential selves connected to inner structures of meaning (Gubrium and Holstein, 1997: 74). There are only different performances, different ways of being in the world. And so, in her performances, Smith performs and presents the poetic texts of men and women of color.

Smith's two plays document what she has learned and heard in these two sites of racial disturbance. The performance reiterates what has been learned. It is a drama about the process that creates the problem in the first place, the drama surrounding racial identity (1992: xxiv).

Cornel West (1993: xix) observes that *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' (p. xix). Thus blacks, gang members, the police and the Jewish community all come together and talk in this play. The drama crosses racial boundaries. Smith's texts show that 'American character lives not in one place or the other, but in the gaps between places, and in our struggle to be together in our differences' (p. xii).

An Anonymous Young Man # 1 Wa Wa Wa, a Caribbean American with deadlocks, describes the auto accident:

What I saw was
 she was pushin'
 her brother on the bike like
 this,
 right?
 She was pushin'
 him
 and he keep dippin' around
 like he didn't know how
 to ride the bike . . .
 So she was already runnin'

when the car was comin' . . .
 we was watchin' the car
 weavin',
 and we was goin'
 'Oh, yo
 it's a Jew man.

He broke the stop light, they never get arrested' (Smith, 1993: 79–80).

In presenting this young man's words, Smith's text becomes performative; that is the young Caribbean American narrates a street performance. The text works like a piece of montage, many different things are going on at once. There are multiple points of view. Time moves back and forth, past to present, present to past. More than one notion of causality (and blame) operates. In it Jews come up against blacks, young against old, as a small child's bike weaves its way down the sidewalk, in front of an on-coming car.

PERFORMANCE WRITING

Smith engages in a form of performance writing (see Pollock, 1998; also Phelan, 1998: 12–14). Using the methods of narrative collage, performance writing shows, rather than tells. It is writing that speaks performatively, enacting what it describes. It is writing that does what it says it is doing, by doing it. Performative writing 'is an inquiry into the limits and possibilities of the intersections between speech and writing . . . [it] evokes what it names' (Phelan, 1998: 13). Performative writing is not a matter of formal style, per se, nor is it writing that is avant-garde, or clever (Pollock, 1998: 75). Pollock suggests that performative writing is evocative, reflexive, multi-voiced, criss-crosses genres, is always partial and incomplete (pp. 80–95). But in performative writing things happen, it is writing that is consequential, and it is about a world that is already being performed.

To say that Smith writes performatively is to say that her scripts (like Trinh's) allow persons to experience their own subjectivity in the moment of performance. Performance writing is poetic and dramatic. It transforms literal (and transcribed) speech into speech that is first-person, active, in motion, processual. In such texts, performance and performativity are intertwined, each defines the other. The performer's performance creates a space the other enters.

Now a performance text of my own.

Performing racial memories

On 28 July 1966, Edge City desegregated its 10 elementary schools. The local newspaper said that Edge City was the first town in Illinois to do this. In 1965–6 there were 456 African-American elementary school children in the district; 95 percent of these children attended the virtually all-black Martin school in the north end of town. To accomplish desegregation the district

bused all but 100 of the African-American students from Martin school to its nine other, all-white schools. It then sent 189 international children to Martin school. The international children lived with their parents in a university housing complex. The board called this cross-busing. The newspaper said that no white children were bused, just the kids from university housing (see Denzin, Fields et al., 1997).

Mrs Anderson was the only woman on the all-white school board which made the decision to desegregate. I had read stories about her in the paper, seen her picture. I knew that she had been a secretary at one of the grade schools and that she had worked at the Citizens Building Association. I did not know that she was a single parent when she served on the board, nor did I know that her daughter would marry a black man, and that she would be the grandmother for her daughter's bi-racial family. I learned these things later. The newspaper said she died in her home at 6:35 pm on 10 November 1996. She was 81 years old, a victim of old age and emphysema. A long clear-plastic airhose connected her to an oxygen machine. She breathed with great effort and had brief spells of intense coughing. She had the look of a patrician, a commanding presence, tall and graceful, but slow in her movements, held back by the hose. She had crystal clear blue eyes. She was elegant in her velvet floor-length blue robe. Her chair faced the picture window. She looked out into her small, well cared for, fenced-in back yard, a garden with roses, bird feeders, evergreens and a dying river birch.

A jar of jellybeans was on the coffee table next to the sofa where I sat. I put the tape recorder next to Mrs Anderson's chair, and pinned the microphone to the collar of her robe, careful not to disturb the oxygen tube.⁹ She began to speak, to tell her story about how desegregation happened in Edge City. Her story moves from the mid-1960s to the present. The point of view in her story changes, as she takes on different voices.

It started with two people,
James and Marilyn Daniels.
They led a group of their neighbors
in the black neighborhood.
They said:
'Look, you're moving all those kids
from university housing by bus to school.
Why don't you take Martin School
and bring them up here and take
King school kids out to the various neighborhoods?'
[Pause]
And thirty years later
I look back and wonder
at what kind of courage it took
for those people to say that.
And so after some talking about it back and forth . . .
we had a six to one vote . . .

But they came to us.
I don't think we were actually
aware of the fact that
there was a segregated school over there . . .
I think probably at heart
we didn't know how racist
we were behaving by allowing
the school to stay there.

She coughs. She gets up and goes to the kitchen and gets a glass of water. She comes back and looks out the window. The phone rings. She ignores it. She returns to her thoughts:

I remember the night
we voted on it. I remember—
It's stupid,
you remember what you thought,
not what you said.
I said,
'We'll we're only twelve years late.
Let's go.'
And I said
something
stupid and female,
like
'I'd be honored.'
I sat there and said to
myself,
'This is historic.
We are doing something historic.'

Of course this did not happen all at once.
There were community meetings
before the board voted,
one meeting involved the parents from university housing.
We met with people at Martin school.
That was ghastly.
We sat up front.
The board and the people
asked us questions and then they
got a little nasty.

I was not frightened,
but I was so unhappy.

A graduate student
stood up
and said,
'Those people
those African-
Americans

don't want to leave their homes
and
their schools . . . '

'Those people'
has haunted me for thirty years.

[Pause]

We only had one outspoken
racist

on the board

at that time

he is

dead now

and

we can speak ill of the dead.

He happened to be a national

guard,

that was his

bread and butter.

The night we voted,

he had just come

back

from Chicago

where the Guard had been sent

to hold down some of

the riots.

And he turned to me

and said,

'You haven't been in Chicago and

listened to those black bastards

calling you names.'

No was his vote.

I had a different upbringing than many folks

I guess.

For years

I can remember my mother saying,

The happiest years of my life

were the ten years we lived next door

to a Negro family down in Joliet.

And I don't know if that impressed me

that Negroes were people

or what,

but I remembered it and felt it

and

I have some black

friends today.

See the picture on the VCR?

I crossed the room, and removed the large family photo from the top of the VCR and handed it to Mrs Anderson who handed it to me. It was one of those close-up color photos, a blow-up, four people, mother and father in the back, two children, two little girls in the front. The father was black, the children mulatto, the mother white.

Mrs Anderson explained,

That is my older daughter
and her
husband
and
my two beautiful grandchildren.

Aren't they pretty?
I swear
they had the best of both worlds!

The young man
graduated from Columbia
and
played basketball for four years.

Now he's taking his MBA at UCLA.

The young lady, my daughter
graduated from Wesleyan.
She's now at Indiana University
in the school of law.

ANOTHER SET OF MEMORIES

As we prepared to leave Mrs Anderson's house, one more question came to mind. It concerned the school-board elections in 1968. I asked her about a black woman named Mrs Caroline Adams Smith, who was part of an all-white coalition that ran against Mrs Anderson and her fellow board members. The paper had said that Mrs Smith's group felt that the incumbents on the board did business behind closed doors, that the busing situation had not been done in public. There were other complaints. In the summer of 1968, the Martin parents walked out of a school-board meeting because the board did not consider their complaints. Mr Daniels's group wanted more representation of African-American teachers, they wanted an African-American principle at Martin, more after-school programs for their children. In 1972, there was a report about desegregation and according to Mr Daniels, the report ignored the efforts of the Martin parents in the desegregation project. The president of the board apologized to Mr Daniels. I reminded Mrs Anderson that the newspapers called the summer of 1968 'Edge City's Summer of Discontent'.

She was quick to respond.

They must have taken the Summer of Discontent
from the John Steinbeck novel.
They had to have taken it from
someone.
They were not that clever.

Were you reading last night's paper?
I said that
the wrong way.
Still the same old things,
thirty years later.
But I just flat out don't remember those complaints.

Caroline Adams Smith.
She never did like us very much.
I'm having a problem
bringing up the story though.
Probably
it was not nice and
I turned it off and
didn't want to remember it.

I have one habit
that is really very well
ingrained,
and that is if it was distasteful,
I put it away and don't remember it.

My mind is horrible. I don't remember this.
I'm remembering the report now.
But I pitched it.

ANOTHER MEMORY

Six days after the interview, Mrs Anderson called me at home. It was early evening.

Hello, Dr Denzin,
this is Alice Anderson.
After you left last week
I remembered
I kept a scrapbook of the years
I was on the school board.
I think you should have it.
I want someone
to tell my story,
now that I am getting so old.
You are welcome to it,
if you want it.

When I arrived at her home, she directed me to her kitchen table, there lay a large scrapbook, 12 × 14 inches, and two folders, as well as a large manila envelope with press clippings inside. The scrapbook carried the notation, 'School board, 6/66–4/67' (the first year of her first term on the board). Two collie puppies were pictured on the scrapbook, one sitting in a red wheelbarrow. Out of the folders fluttered clippings, pictures, stories and congratulation notes concerning her victorious 1968 re-election to the board.

Mrs Anderson remembered what she had forgotten. She hadn't pitched her files. She had kept all of them. Her scrapbook was a record of the past. But not everything was there. She indeed forgot to clip those stories about the Summer of Discontent, and she had no record of the 1972 desegregation report that ignored Mr Daniels and his group. These were painful experiences and Mrs Anderson had the habit of not remembering distasteful things. Thirty years ago a lot of distasteful things surrounded desegregation in Edge City.

READING MRS ANDERSON'S PERFORMANCE

I have attempted to turn Mrs Anderson's interview into a dramatic, poetic text; Smith says that such texts should evoke the character of the speaker. They should allow the speaker to be fully present in their speech.

Mrs Anderson uses irony to convey her views of the world, a racist world she disdains. With her words she creates a narrative montage. Inside this world of jumbled images and memories she looks back, locating herself in the summer of 1966. Thirty years after the fact, she sees courage in the eyes and words of James and Marilyn Daniels. She sees that she and her colleagues allowed themselves to not see the segregated school 'over there'. And she applies the term 'racist' to this gaze. But when she voted, she voted as a woman, and said something 'stupid and female', as if a woman could not have a voice on race matters in 1966.

She recalls the graduate student who spoke harshly of 'those people'. She willingly speaks harshly herself of the one outspoken racist on the board. The 1966 Chicago race riots are evoked by the images behind her words, 'You haven't been to Chicago and listened to those black bastards calling you names.' So for one man, Edge City's desegregation vote was a vote to give a voice to these black bastards.

In her montage, Mrs Anderson separates herself from other white people. Her family lived next to a Negro family in Joliet and she came to see that Negroes were people too. She passed this understanding along to her daughter as the color photo dramatically demonstrates.

All did not go well in Edge City's desegregation experiment. There was a Summer of Discontent. The white school board did ignore the black parents. Mrs Anderson's scrapbook, with its pictures and clippings, tells part of this story, but the most painful part she did not keep. And in her obituary, there

was no mention of her part in this history. The paper did not even record the fact that she served on the school board.

In conclusion

Anna Deavere Smith contends that Americans have difficulty 'talking about race and talking about [racial] differences. This difficulty goes across race, class and political lines' (1993: xii). There is, she says, 'a lack of words . . . we do not have a language that serves us as a group' (p. xii). Smith's plays are attempts to find that language. Her performance texts allow us to see more clearly the limits of the language we now use.

Performances like Mrs Anderson's create spaces for the operation of racial memories. They create occasions for rethinking the politics of race and racism in the 1990s. Mrs Anderson's text shows that a wide gulf existed in the 1960s between whites and blacks in Edge City. White male voices reproduced racial stereotypes. When a white woman spoke out, she felt uncomfortable, like a woman. But a white woman did speak out in 1966 and she crossed racial boundaries. Listening to Mrs Anderson's story today reminds us that we still need performers (and performances) like her, if the promises of a racial democracy are ever to be achieved in America.

I seek an interpretive social science that is simultaneously auto-ethnographic, vulnerable, performative and critical. This is a social science that refuses abstractions and high theory. It is a way of being in the world, a way of writing, hearing and listening. Viewing culture as a complex performative process, it seeks to understand how people enact and construct meaning in their daily lives. This is a return to narrative as a political act; a social science that has learned how to critically use the reflexive, dialogical interview. This social science inserts itself in the world in an empowering way. It uses narrated words and stories to fashion performance texts that imagine new worlds, worlds where humans can become who they wish to be, free of prejudice, repression and discrimination.

This is the promise of a performative social science in a cinematic society. This social science refuses to treat research as a commodity that can be bought and sold. As researchers, we belong to a moral community. The reflexive interview helps us create dialogic relationships with that community. These relationships, in turn, allow us to enact an ethic of care and empowerment. This is the kind of ethic Mrs Anderson sought to create in Edge City in the summer of 1966. In performing her interview, we learn a little more about how we can do the same in our own communities.

NOTES

1. At one level the reflexive interview implements Gubrium and Holstein's (1998: 165) concept of analytic bracketing. Analytic bracketing is the attempt to deal with the multiple levels of meaning in the interview context, including how a

story is told, the context of the story, its audience, and so on. Heyl (2000) notes that reflexive interviewing allows individuals to connect in mutually empowering ways.

2. These moments are developed in greater detail in Denzin and Lincoln (2000). Some define postmodern as 'contemporary modernist' (Dillard, 1982: 20).
3. I want to avoid the debate about whether it is 'really possible, even in theory, to divide utterances between the performative and the constative' (Sedgwick, 1998: 106–107); to distinguish utterances that merely say, versus those that do. Words have material effects on people. Subjects, as gendered selves, are constituted in and through their performative acts, that is acts which both do and say something, i.e. 'With these words I thee wed' (Sedgwick, 1998: 107; also Butler, 1993: 24, 1997: 97, 1999: 11). There is 'no abiding, gendered subject' (Butler, 1990: 140) who precedes a performance (Butler, 1990: 25, 141).
4. A performance is an interpretive event. A performance, such as an interview, is a bounded, theatrical social act, a dialogical production (see also Kuhn, 1962: 196–7, on the interview as a social act).
5. I steal this term from Fontana and Frey (1994: 368, 2000).
6. The following section draws from Denzin (1997: 74–9).
7. Released as a film (filmed performance) in September 2000 with this title, directed by Marc Levin, with Smith playing an assortment of characters from the 1992 text.
8. The dramaturges for *Twilight* were: Dorrine Kondo, a Japanese-American anthropologist; Hector Tobar, a Guatemalan-American journalist who had covered the riots for the *L.A. Times*; and Elizabeth Alexander, an African-American poet.
9. This interview was conducted with my colleagues Belden Fields, Walter Feinberg and Nicole Roberts.

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