

## Synthesis: an Anglophone Journal of Comparative Literary Studies

No 9 (2016)

Living through the Interregnum



**The Politics of Violence and the Mediatization of Urban Spaces on Stage: Anna Deavere Smith's *Twilight*: Los Angeles, 1992 and José Rivera's *Marisol***

*Konstantinos Blatanis*

doi: [10.12681/syn.16227](https://doi.org/10.12681/syn.16227)

Copyright © 2016, Konstantinos Blatanis



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

**The Politics of Violence and the Mediatization of  
Urban Spaces on Stage:  
Anna Deavere Smith's *Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992*  
and José Rivera's *Marisol***

Konstantinos Blatanis

**Abstract**

Interest in this paper centres on two exemplary cases of two entirely different modes of dramatisation and theatrical practice which, nonetheless, share a common goal. The two works studied here aim at a critical reconsideration of the political issues which surround intensely violent events that have marked American mega cities over the past three decades. Furthermore, both plays aspire to articulate an original statement on the ways in which these issues routinely fall prey to the hegemony of monolithic and sterile media representations of urban spaces. Anna Deavere Smith's vigorous exploration of the reserves of documentary drama and theatre in *Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992* (1993) is read alongside and juxtaposed to José Rivera's innovative and exceptional use of magic realism for the stage in *Marisol* (1992). The question of political efficacy in both cases is thoroughly examined here in relation to how profitably these works showcase acts of interrogating mass media appropriations of identified city riots and instances of social unrest. Attention is devoted to the ways in which Smith's verbatim documentation of the city in turmoil as well as Rivera's surreal and dystopian account of liminal experiences of disenfranchised urban constituents may lead audience members to reassess their own habits of negotiating political demands and relating to moments of crisis.

In candid accounts of the global cultural revolutions that the late twentieth century inherited to its successor, specific attention is devoted to "the transformation of the visual universe of urban environments [...] by the mediated image" (Hall, "Centrality of Culture" 214). Focusing, in particular, on the ways in which dominant media representations of intensely violent city events inform the current conceptualisation of urban space, diverse theorists rarely fail to highlight the pressure of the issue. The object of study is no other than the set of routinely trusted tactics which are employed in the coverage of inherently dissimilar events that may range from terrorist attacks to any type of demonstration against identified political measures. On this plane of

inquiry, David Harvey's theoretical position proves instructive: "space is neither absolute, relative or relational *in itself* [and thus] the problem of the proper conceptualization of space is resolved through human practice with respect to it" (*Social Justice* 13). Along these lines of argumentation, it is significant to note that profit-making media appropriations of city events constitute at present a hegemonic form of human practice which is superimposed upon all other possible types of responses. In essence, media representations are carefully programmed to cancel out approaches which may prove far more loyal to the nature of the events.

In reaction to these concerns, playwrights Anna Deavere Smith and José Rivera aspire to confirm the value of the perspective that the human practice of a different order may offer in conceptualising urban space and dealing with instances of multileveled crisis. Relying on the exclusive resources thanks to which drama and theatre constantly revitalise the axes of space and time, the works discussed here attempt to reclaim urban spaces that have been seriously miscalculated and misrepresented. Although *Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992* (1993) and *Marisol* (1992) share a common goal, they aim the targeted area through two entirely different types of dramatisation. Thus, the present discussion charts a valuable itinerary of two antithetical modes, from verbatim documentary drama in the first case to what may be roughly outlined as magic realism for the stage in the second. The route studied here serves to support the argument that alternative processes of mediation are not simply possible but highly needed at present. These two distinct occasions suggest that opposition to dominant media representations of the city in turmoil can be productively outlined. As a result, the proximity of these two individual works is significant on the socio-political and historical level as well as in terms of artistic development. Specifically, the two plays respond to particular events that marked the two American megacities of Los Angeles and New York in the 1990s, while, interestingly enough, they also manifest how instructively versatile the contemporary American stage can be.

The present article argues that Smith's and Rivera's works aspire to translate dramatically and theatrically what Fredric Jameson distinguishes as Marx's most influential message, that is: "the lesson of the structural limits of the values and attitudes of particular social classes, or in other words of the constitutive relationship between the praxis of such groups and what they conceptualize as value or desire and project in the form of culture" (*Political Unconscious* 272). On a primary level, both works explore the possibilities of resistance to the hegemony of mainstream media appropriations of urban space and emerge sensitive to Stuart Hall's assessment of the hegemonic viewpoint:

The definition of a hegemonic viewpoint is, first, that it defines within its terms the mental horizon, the universe, of possible meanings, of a whole sector of relations in a

society or culture; and second, that it carries with it the stamp of legitimacy—it appears coterminous with what is ‘natural,’ ‘inevitable,’ ‘taken for granted’ about the social order. (“Encoding” 516)

The two plays invite audiences to become aware of this resilience and hard-to-fight ‘legitimacy’ of dominant media representations. Interestingly, they address the area from within, being themselves products of a moment when “the immediacy of events, the sensationalism of the spectacle (political, scientific, military, as well as those of entertainment), become the stuff of which consciousness is forged” (Harvey, *Condition of Postmodernity* 54).

On a second level, the discussion revolves around the ways in which these two types of experimentation reflect the question that Herbert Blau succinctly captures in this phrase, “the degree to which performance is political is itself an ideological question” (27). In other words, what attracts attention is how these two plays can be situated within the theoretical terrain that Baz Kershaw defines as “the *ideological relativity* of performance” (33). It is important to underline that the political reserves of the contemporary American theatre are rarely assessed without reference to the fact that “since the 1930s [it] has been positioned as a relatively oppositional cultural formation” (Savran 584), “a marginalized and endangered [one]” (Savran 589). Following closely this observation, it is argued here that Smith’s and Rivera’s plays strive to imagine and pre-configure an aesthetics of resistance. This is the type of reaction which in Jameson’s terms: “will not seek to ‘correct’ bourgeois aesthetics or to resolve its antinomies and dilemmas: it will rather search out that other social position from which those dilemmas do not emerge in the first place” (“Foreword” xiv). Equally important in the two playwrights’ distinct efforts is their awareness of the overarching parameter Theodor Adorno identified in his seminal work on aesthetics and politics: “the imagination of the artist is not a creation *ex nihilo* [...] there is no material content, no formal category of an artistic creation [...] which did not originate in the empirical reality from which it breaks free” (9). Thus, the questions arising here include the following: how do these playwrights reconfigure the empirical reality that has prompted their works? How politically efficient do these plays prove in reclaiming urban space and re-examining violent, critical moments? How do they lead audiences to rethink their habits of negotiating political demands and responding to moments of crisis? How do they become aware of their own shortcomings as they attempt “to ward off reification” (Jameson, *Brecht* 12) and reconsider the theatre’s own role and position *vis-à-vis* dominant representations of urban space?

In her effort to identify both the causes and the consequences of the 1992 Los Angeles riots, Anna Deavere Smith undertakes a careful study of the body of the city. The playwright’s first step is to listen attentively and record the voices of the urban setting.<sup>1</sup> In the 1996 production of the play at Berkeley Repertory Theatre, Smith

played all thirty-four ‘characters’ across a wide spectrum of ages, ethnic, racial, and social backgrounds as she presented segments of the interviews she conducted in the Los Angeles metro area in relation to the violent events that followed the acquittal of the four policemen who had brutally attacked the African-American motorist, Rodney King. Her one-woman-show allowed her to explore the dynamics of a long and varied series of monologues; what scholar Michael Peterson accurately terms the “monopolylogue” (14). *Twilight* is part of a project specifically attuned to what the playwright herself outlines as the effort to “walk in the speech of another [...] find the individuality of the other and experience that individuality viscerally” (Smith, *Fires* xxvi-xvii). This political gesture allows the African-American female performer to approach her own body as a surface where differences meet and intersect. Productively enough, she manages also to provoke further realisations. In her guidelines for subsequent productions, Smith recommends a “cross-gender, cross-racial, cross-age casting” (Smith, *Twilight* 8), in the context of which actors and actresses are invited to engage as “cultural workers” (6) and ascribe novel dimensions to the original material.

*Twilight*, as an ongoing, flexible experiment and a distinctive occasion of verbatim documentary theatre, capitalises on processes of change and modification and succeeds thus in highlighting the urgent pertinence of the right to the city for the present moment. To a remarkable extent, the play echoes Harvey’s observation that “the right to the city is [in essence] the right to change ourselves by changing the city” (*Social Justice* 315). Pursuing precisely this goal, the piece exploits the assets of the stage as an area where time and space are always more limited and precise, and yet inexhaustibly more expansive and malleable than in any other medium. In terms of content matter, the cultural workers of this project do not discard media footage but rather make use of it assuming a Brechtian distance as they strive to capture the full dimensions of the multileveled sensibility crisis that surrounded the 1992 Los Angeles city riots. What is thus aimed is a course beyond the hegemonic “aural-visual forms of televisual discourse” (Hall, “Encoding” 508). The play identifies as one of the central features of this crisis the fact that the television flow magnifies and simultaneously betrays the “rawness” of the events. These hegemonic “aural-visual forms” guarantee that phenomena of racial antagonism and hatred are never adequately addressed. Yet, this exact area of social conflict is tapped as a source for spectacular images at a time when, as Smith notes, the problem of tribalism “prevails all over the world” (7). In order to counterattack this dire ellipsis of adequate address, her own work focuses intently on issues of socio-cultural and racial misunderstanding and collective frustration. In *Twilight*, time and space is amply offered to segments such as the one of the African-American opera singer who argues on the value of singing to her neighbour; that of the Latino metro officer confessing his shame as well as the one in which Rodney King’s aunt offers glimpses of the victim’s childhood.

The precise nature of this alternative mode of mediating the particular city crisis is fully exposed to the audience. Throughout these fragments of testimonies, the performer captures responses that cohere in a totally unorthodox mode, being by rule totally incongruous in tone and content, as the following examples testify:

STANLEY K. SHEINBAUM (Former President, Los Angeles Police Commission): The city has abused the cops. (28)

RUDY SALAS, SR. (Sculptor and Painter): But I have white friends though! I don't see them as whites! (32)

ELAINE YOUNG (Real Estate Agent):  
Oh  
the day of the riot,  
we were sitting here safe and sound in Beverly Hills. (38)

For all the plethora of voices and stances, the materiality of the performer's own body is never downplayed in this experimental work. Jonathan Kalb correctly notes that "the reality of the performer-researcher [is] an active part of the art" (16). The play invests in the critical distance between the performer and the interviewee to highlight what it is and how it is that Los Angeles urban space became seriously compromised in the crisis of 1992. Smith's own words are illuminating on this point: "I don't believe that when I play someone in my work, that I 'am' the character. I want the audience to experience the gap, because I know if they experience the gap, they will appreciate my reach for the other. This reach is what moves them" (qtd. in Kondo 96). Indeed, Kalb is precise when he explains that the whole venture is not dependent upon impressions which would be rendered "entirely convincing by the standards of fourth-wall realism" (18). Audience members are thus offered a vanguard position from which they may also function as cultural workers being faced with the task of rediscovering theoretically as well as experientially this highly disfigured urban space. Similar to what Basil Chiasson notes in relation to Harold Pinter's political work and its interaction with the audience, Smith's researchers may be led "to think this specific political reality without abstracting it and therefore, without obfuscating its violence and material consequences" (85).

In *Twilight*, the audience is confronted with the pressing issue of assessing the current, hegemonic modes of mediation which succeed in "obfuscating" the violence of social and political reality. Over the course of the past three decades, theorists exemplified by Jean Baudrillard and David Harvey have carefully dissected the workings of these dominant modes of absolute, schizophrenic proximity, effected through the senseless and *ad-infinitum* repetition of violent events. For her part, Smith introduces this versatile mode of mediation and is thus able to focus on interrelated instances of social and political violence. Thus, she also examines the

cases of Latasha Harlins, the African-American girl who was shot by a Korean shop owner, and Reginald Denny, the white truck driver who was attacked by a gang of revenge-seeking African Americans. As the performer traverses this wide range of voices, gestures, postures, positions, and visions, she manages to interrogate the critical moment when due to the hegemonic viewpoint of the media the enemy is cast as simultaneously omnipresent and unidentifiable. It is important to underline that, in a carefully orchestrated way, the Los Angeles riots were bereft of any trace of a political thrust on the television flow. Heeding closely to Jameson's remark that the enemy can never be simply "universal" (*Political Unconscious* 280-81), *Twilight* exposes the political impasse of this violent urban fabric that literally cracked open in 1992. In an almost metadramatic tone, the comment of Keith Watson (co-assailant of Denny) is pointedly mediated by the performer onstage: "Southern California was rocked [...] the whole infrastructure / the foundation was cracked [...] see we showed the insides / The core" (66). Unlike dominant media representations which constitute part and parcel of the domain which, as Slavoj Žižek accurately explains, is constructed to safeguard that "although actual 'frictions' continue, they become invisible, repressed into the netherworld outside our 'postmodern' post-industrial universe" (278), the play recasts the rioting in an effort to address—even if elementally—pressing socio-cultural and political issues which lie hidden below this glossy surface of supposedly 'frictionless' growth.

The performer mediates disparate city voices and thus there is time and space onstage to address phenomena such as disenfranchisement and marginalisation of specific ethnic groups, socio-economic suspension and lack of prospects for entire social classes, cynicism, indifference, frustration, and enmity prevailing among citizens who occupy the exact same urban space. The play offers its own original insight into the geography of Los Angeles which, as Chris Westgate adequately argues has "driven [inhabitants] apart—experientially as much as spatially" (148). Yet, it must be noted that the performer's study of the cityscape is by no means a definitive and thoroughly penetrating one. What is inventively and pointedly explained about this urban crisis is the dire ellipsis of common ground on which city dwellers would meet one another across economic and political barriers. Dominant media appropriations of the city in turmoil allowed no room where such distances would be bridged and such gaps would be obliterated. This particular aspect of the sensibility crisis that defined Los Angeles in 1992 is examined through numerous excerpts of interviews, such as the one that captures the words of Federico Sandoval (Octavio's brother): "I'm pretty sure most of the Hispanics didn't even know why. / 'Cause basically the Rodney King basically came out, / on channel two, four, five, seven, nine, eleven, and thirteen" (72). Furthermore, in a simple but similarly disarming quotation of still another witness, the performer draws attention to the value of acknowledging the presence of the other

and thus suggests actions that urban constituents would need to undertake in order to reclaim their own “right to the city.” Interviewee Katie Miller (Bookkeeper and Accountant) directly states that “it was due to lack of lack of / gettin’ to know / the people that come to your store (67).

In its own distinctive mode, *Twilight* argues that what the 1992 Los Angeles riots intensified were the very implications of the city’s own darkness. The play strives to shed light on how this urban space lay seriously compromised in multiple ways well before the riots and as a result became easily prey to a series of severe misappropriations. The problems and antagonisms, the frustrations and dead-ends, the sterility and lack of vision of the city came to the fore as its space ‘cracked’ open. However, no remedies and no answers were even vaguely suggested. The performer records that what was first and foremost compromised was the possibility to re-imagine and ideally re-design the socio-cultural and political geography of this “war zone” (86). In particular, she works with the hope that audience members will be able to understand what Talent Agent (Anonymous Hollywood Agency) finds totally absurd about “people reduced to *burning down their own neighborhoods*” (93). To this end, she quotes the lines Cornel West (Scholar) lends her about places “very circumscribed, and / in the end still [...] haunted, / by the ghosts of white supremacy” (106).

The audience is thus confronted with the paradoxical rigidity of this urban space which opened up but failed to accommodate any change. The power of “human bodies [to] convert public space into a political commons” (Harvey, “Party of Wall Street”) was only slightly suggested as the Los Angeles setting “showed its insides” (66); however, it never acquired substantial dimensions. Faced with this type of multileveled poverty and disenfranchisement, *Twilight* responds by placing emphasis on the need for common understanding among contrasting voices that it hosts. Interestingly enough, this gesture is conceived not as a definitive answer to the politics of violence but only as a starting point. Throughout this endless shifting and sifting of faces and voices, the piece grapples with these intensely complicated issues, and yet in its own unconventional tone persists in investing in meaningful interaction. In her insightful review of the monopolylogue, Jill Dolan observes that the form establishes “a position of embodied imagination [which] allows us to hear the cacophonous discourse of American culture as harmonious, rather than as unintelligible” (515). However, the above discussed segments highlight the fact that harmony is a questionable quality in *Twilight*. What the piece places clear emphasis on is meaning; intelligibility emerges indeed as its primary goal.

The overall effort is to foreground the fact that marginalised inhabitants of Los Angeles were never truly allowed to claim their right to the city during the violent outburst of 1992. What went consequentially astray was the chance for these social groups to redefine their relation to the city, to realize what vital possibilities urban



space may attain, and to prove in practice that this ground can be reinvented in order to harbor all presences and expressions, all needs and desires. Carefully enough, Smith ends the play by highlighting this arduous task and great challenge of reclaiming the right to change and thus concludes her long series of embodiments by reporting the words of Twilight Bey, a young African-American activist: "I can't forever dwell in darkness [...] just identifying with people like me, and understanding me and mine" (171). Evidently, the political efficacy of the piece rests primarily on this effort to materialise and act out the desire to see the other across ethnic, racial, and social barriers. The performer's interrogation of how urban space can be productively reclaimed draws also attention to the ways in which theatre itself as communal space has to be continuously revitalised. The playwright is aware that in both cases this is a fight that does not instantly expand outside and beyond the confines of the work. Purposely, she argues, both structurally and thematically, that this is not a complete but an ongoing struggle, not definitive as a political vehicle but valuable for being limited and suggestive. The materiality of the performer's own presence is calculatedly emphasised precisely because she is conscious of the danger that politics can easily be compromised as nothing more than a performing stance; what Jill Dolan accurately terms "the devolution of politics into style" (501-502). In particular, Smith works in the area of verbatim documentary theatre careful of the ever-lurking risk the form runs of "invit[ing] the audience to view as voyeurs rather than as witnesses" (Wake 105).

José Rivera's own eagerness to establish precisely a ground of candid witnessing for his audience directs his efforts in *Marisol*. Similar to what holds true for *Twilight*, this is an occasion that primarily tests the possibility of counteracting the hegemonic viewpoint of dominant representations of the city in turmoil. Furthermore, the work strives to redefine urban space in versatile and generative ways. In a loyally trusted mode of his that owes a great lot to his apprenticeship with Gabriel Garcia Marquez, the playwright invests in the confluence of the "real" or "ordinary" and the "imaginary" or "magical," as he sets out to examine the implications of violence as an endemic feature of Western societies in general and of the metropolis in particular.<sup>2</sup> Like Smith, Rivera aspires to turn the unintelligible experience of disenfranchised urban figures into an understandable and communicable onstage actuality. To this end, the title character is allowed to interact with her guardian angel within the confines of proper action time, precisely because the antithesis between the mundane and the celestial is dramatically and theatrically reclaimed and the two spheres are reconfigured as areas that inform each other directly. Thus, the Angel's early account of the condition in the celestial realm constitutes a direct comment on the violence to which New York City's dispossessed inhabitants are exposed as globalized, late capitalism evolves: "The universal body is sick, Marisol. Constellations are wasting away, the nauseous stars are

full of blisters and sores, the infected earth is running a temperature, and everywhere the universal mind is wracked with amnesia, boredom and neurotic obsessions” (15) .

Within this fluid setting and by means of an equally malleable structure, Rivera outlines a particular city itinerary for the young Nuyorican female character. Marisol, who originally trusts her Manhattan job and upward mobility as integral parts of a precious survival kit, is gradually led to realize that it is necessary for her to become familiar with the urban setting in all its deformity. Similar to what is argued here in relation to *Twilight*, in this work the audience is introduced to a series of instances during which the urban space opens up in multiple and consequential ways. In *Marisol*, the fabric of New York City ‘cracks’ as familiar landmarks are messed up, north becomes south, east and west swap positions, and the moon goes missing for nine months. All these materialise as eloquent and palpable stage tokens of the hostility of the urban setting primarily towards those living on the streets. In particular, the play argues inventively that Mayor Ed Koch’s decision to criminalise homelessness and pass corresponding municipal legislation in the late 1980s compromised seriously the very gravity of this urban setting.<sup>3</sup> The work examines the Mayor’s reaction to the problems of the homeless as an act that introduces New York to a type of violence which eventually deforms the socio-cultural and political geography of the city. Furthermore, it is contended here that this type of violence is deliberately downplayed and in essence remains unaddressed in dominant representations of this urban setting. Similar to what holds true for the violent moments interrogated in *Twilight*, *Marisol* advocates reactions to dominant media appropriations of New York City in crisis that magnified and at the same time intentionally betrayed the ‘rawness’ of multileveled violence.

The play examines this hegemonic viewpoint of urban space by elaborating both structurally and thematically on the confusion that follows the attack the title character receives while commuting on the underground the same night another Nuyorican young woman of the exact same name is murdered. Marisol’s own miraculous release triggers the entire line of action in the play and is deliberately cast as an exception that proves the rule of widespread disorientation that permeates the city setting. Pointedly enough, Marisol’s colleague and friend, June comments on the ways in which media accounts of urban trouble establish a field of extreme deformation: “Goddam vultures are having a field day with this, vast close-ups of Marisol Perez’s pummeled face on TV, I mean what’s the *point*?” (20). These processes of mediation contribute decisively to the establishment of what June simply yet disarmingly outlines as “paranoia [that] has clouded our view” (21). Marisol’s difficult task of escaping this ‘clouded’ state and her course towards the moment she realises her mission as a fighter reflects the play’s own direction towards a terrain where the incommunicability of experience can be confronted.

*Marisol* dissects all different aspects of a widely dystopic setting and seeks to establish for its audience a viewpoint that allows them to attain an understanding of the predicament of underprivileged urban constituents; in particular, of the homeless, of victims of racial hatred, and of recipients of sexual and gender discrimination. Asked to comment on the socio-cultural and political specifics of New York City in the late 1980s and early 1990s, Rivera drew attention to the pressure of “the enormous violence we live through [as] the basic rules of civilization have been suppressed” (qtd. in Jacobson 58). Focusing on the problem of the homeless, the playwright insists that the collective response can only be immediate and undeviating: “There are walking nightmares out there that have to be dealt with—people who need help” (qtd. in Jacobson 54). The difficulty the addresser experiences as s/he attempts to grow familiar with the urban experience of the underprivileged is captured in the words Lenny —June’s brother and Marisol’s fellow traveller in Act Two— delivers early on in the development of the plot:

No spoken language works there. There are no verbs to describe the cold air as it sucks on your hands. And if there *were* words to describe it, Marisol, you wouldn’t believe it anyway, because, in fact, it’s literally unbelievable, it’s another reality, and it’s actually happening *right now*. And *that* fact—the fact that it’s happening *right now*—compounds the unbelievable nature of the street, Marisol, adds to its lunacy, its permanent deniability. (33)

In an effort to combat this challenge, the work invests in moments during which the grotesque springs out of the commonplace and vice versa: the series of transformations of inanimate objects into animate beings, the pregnant male figure who gives birth to yet another stillborn baby of the Hispanic community, the Neo-Nazi who sets homeless people on fire after she receives a blow on the head right at the familial hearth are all instances attuned to the effort to turn the nightmarish into an experience that is first visible for the audience and in the process, worthy of attention and intelligible. The very issue of mediating this violent cosmos is thus inventively examined and audience members are led to question what Stuart Hall terms the “*determinate* moments” of “encoding” and “decoding” (“Encoding” 508) messages in this predominantly visual culture.

The overall aim is to make audiences turn critically towards their own firmly-established habits of viewing and interrogate the power of these modes. To this end, the play offers its own startling visuals that develop around issues such as the one highlighted when Scar Tissue, a homeless, ex air-traffic controller, recounts the moment of his brutal attack:

just to be near some shriveled trees and alone and away from the massive noise, just for a little nap...my eyes closed...I vaguely remember the sound of goose-stepping teenagers from Staten Island with a can of gasoline, shouting in German [...] A flash of light. I exploded outward. My bubbling skin divorced my suffering nerves and ran away.” (51-2)

The viewpoint thus offered is indeed a versatile one thanks to which all different facets of urban violence are adequately exposed. Audience members are invited to consider in novel modes the serious dimensions violence acquires precisely because identified urban constituents are thoroughly denied access to “the social, economic, technological and institutional possibilities that govern the disposition of the surplus value concentrated” (Harvey, *Social Justice* 232-33) in the city.

All in all, *Marisol* experiments with processes of viewing in an effort to argue that the right to the city is indeed intricately, widely and perennially pertinent. In this play, the socio-cultural and political geography of New York City emerges appallingly deformed, for what has been, first and foremost, cancelled is the very possibility for change. This impasse of the city is directly reflected on the face of the main character. Initially, Marisol appears certain that she may still find refuge in her precise and secluded area of activity and thus exclaims: “I don’t belong out here; I have a job in publishing; I’m middle-class—” (44). Similarly, she almost instinctively shares the stance of complacency when she first meets the Woman with Furs, whose words peculiarly echo her own thoughts: “I thought I’d be immune. I thought I’d be safe” (45). However, as the plot develops what is traced is an agon of pain as the main character is forced to familiarise herself with the contours of this totally disoriented and disorienting *topos* which is defined by its endemic violence. Marisol is on her way towards the exact opposite position from the one she occupies in the opening scenes when she experiences viscerally the very urgency of resistance: “We have to reach up, beyond the debris, past the future, spit in the eye of the sun, make a fist, and say *no*, and say *no*, and say *no*” (55). In an almost metadramatic fashion, this pressing question constitutes an imperative not only for the character but also for the play in its entirety. It is contended here that similar to *Twilight*, *Marisol* explores and stages—to a considerable extent—its own fight with the question of political efficacy. Like Smith, Rivera is well aware of the fact that the dynamics of the stage can be easily betrayed if not entirely wasted whenever it undertakes the task of accommodating the political. Inventively enough, the playwright inscribes this on-going struggle within the work from the opening moment to the very final stage image.

In the concluding scene, Marisol emerges a New York City martyr in literal as well as metaphorical terms. Her sacrifice illuminates both the highly compromised, absurdly violent urban setting and the persistent challenge of adequately mediating the plethora of qualities and issues that define this space. The moment the Woman with Furs shoots Marisol, the audience is offered an insight into the hegemony of “frictionless capitalism” and its favoured modes of mediation which impose a monolithic understanding of urban space and cancel the right to the city for entire social groups: “Sorry, Marisol. We don’t need revolution here. We can’t have upheaval

at the drop of a hat. No demonstrations here! No putting up pamphlets! No shoving daisies into the rifles of militiamen! No stopping tanks by standing in their way!” (66). By means of this concrete stage image, Rivera manages to draw attention to the peculiarities of the present moment. He pointedly argues that the major decrees of current economic development in the Western world prescribe and dictate that “the basic rules of civilization [remain] suppressed” (qtd. in Jacobson 58). Thanks to the final image of Marisol —both a victim and a witness of this lethal cosmos— the work manages to focus on the significant association between the right to the city and civility. *Marisol* shows in practice that a candid and original interrogation of the politics of violence will prompt audience members to consider on what grounds and for what profit this vital link is intentionally broken at present.

Jameson’s point that drama and theatre are a lot better equipped than most other cultural forms in undertaking “the ‘experimental’ attempt to ward off reification” (*Brecht* 12) as well as Adorno’s observation that politically effective works of art rarely if ever “need a surplus of meaning beyond their being” (7) are here reconfirmed, as the two playwrights envision acts of resistance through an ongoing experimentation. At the same moment, they both translate productively their own consciousness of the limitations and possible dangers their works face. This particular concern shapes both plays structurally, aesthetically, and thematically to a great extent. On the one hand, Smith and Rivera strongly suggest in practice that audience members have to conduct seriously their own fights beyond the walls and comfort of the playhouse. Furthermore, they attempt an answer to this challenging issue that they share with such outstanding counterparts of theirs in Europe as Caryl Churchill who in the later phase of her career, has repeatedly addressed both creatively and through public speech her concern over what scholar Elaine Aston aptly terms “a failed performative politics” (151). In all these disparate cases, what remains indeed fervent is the desire to interrogate the potential for “a politically effective afterlife” (Aston 157).

*Twilight* and *Marisol* offer distinctive interrogations of urban space and valuable insights into the politics of violence by responding to identified city crises of the early 1990s. It is important to underline that two decades later, these inquiries remain highly pertinent at a time when, as Harvey explains, the hegemony of ‘the Party of Wall Street’ and its neoliberal politics are stronger than ever before, not only nationally but on a global scale. In the critic’s own words:

the one thing that can never be openly debated and discussed, is the true nature of the class war they have been so ceaselessly and ruthlessly waging [as they] enjoy the freedom to exploit the labor of others, to dispossess the assets of the common people at will and the freedom to pillage the environment for individual or class benefit. (Harvey, “Party of Wall Street”)

Furthermore, it must be noted that the two plays discussed above capture and translate dramatically and theatrically “the collective power of bodies in public space [as] the most effective instrument of opposition” (Harvey, “Party of Wall Street”). More importantly, through their own on-going struggle and experimentation in form and content, they highlight the fact that the fight against the agents and modes that define the contours of public urban space can only be a fierce one. Intriguingly enough, these two plays may also serve to illuminate the demanding agon of urban constituents who courageously fight for the right to the city in people’s movements throughout the world in the present, second decade of the twenty-first century. The original enthusiasm and optimism about these movements —exemplified on American ground by Occupy Wall Street— revolved primarily around the fact that they “revived the classical image of the nation as *res-publica*, the nation as a public thing” (Brown). Yet, within a span of only a couple of years what these uprisings made clear throughout the world is the fact that the right to the city constitutes indeed an ideal and aspiration a lot more complicated than what it appears to be on a primary, surface level. Ascribing meaning anew to a highly compromised space can only be rendered a valid collective act as long as it rests upon a sharp, precise and fully-developed political agenda. *Twilight* and *Marisol* eloquently argue that clarity of vision and loyalty to the nature of the events are essential prerequisites whenever one grapples with the politics of urban space in particular and the larger political challenges and dilemmas of the enveloping moment in general. All in all, these two plays may prove particularly valuable as means of inspection more than twenty years after their original productions, for they inventively emphasize the value of constantly redefining anew this fight no matter how compromised the surrounding space might be and how daunting the effort to envision the future might prove.

---

<sup>1</sup> In a career that spans more than three decades, Anna Deavere Smith has used inventively interviews and impersonations of multiple voices as the main research tools for her own version of documentary drama and theatre. As a playwright and a performer, Smith had already spent a number of years developing this technique of documentation with her project *On the Road: A Search for American Character*, before she presented her first major work *Fires in the Mirror* in 1992. The play, which addressed the urban unrest that followed the accidental killing of Gavin Cato, an African-American seven-year-old boy, by Menachem Schneerson, a Rabbi, in Crown Heights, Brooklyn in 1991, attracted critical acclaim as well as wide public attention, and is regarded the natural forerunner to *Twilight*. In later years, Smith resorted to the same technique of verbatim dramatisation to handle diverse areas such as current politics in *House Arrest* (2000), health matters in *Let Me Down Easy* (2008) and inequality in education in *Never Givin’ Up* (2015).

<sup>2</sup> José Rivera’s prolific career as both a playwright and a screenwriter began in the early 1980s and ever since, the term “magic realism” has been widely associated with his work. However, the writer carefully notes that the craft of “a true magic realist” originates from “a real rural, Latin

American life experience" (qtd. in Jacobson 53), which he himself as Puerto Rican and North American does not share. Yet, Rivera has received such a strong influence from authors like Marquez that, as director Tina Landau accurately explains, he was led to develop "his own personal rendition" ("Foreword" x) of magic realism.

<sup>3</sup> The play's sonorous say on compromised urban spaces and its versatile approach were immediately appreciated by early critics. It is important to note that originally critics approached the play even as a comment on the Los Angeles city riots of 1992. Thus, for example, in his review of the 1993 original New York production, Frank Rich noted: "what is his war-torn New York if not the future he has already seen in his hometown of L.A.?" However, there is strong evidence both in the work itself and the playwright's public expression to support the argument best phrased by Chris Westgate that what inspired the work and emerged as its primary target was "Mayor Ed Koch's response to [the] growing crisis of homelessness" (19) in the late 1980s.

### Works Cited

- Adorno, Theodor. "Commitment." *Aesthetics and Politics*. Trans. Francis McDonagh. London: Verso, 1980. 177-95.
- Aston, Elaine. "Caryl Churchill's Political Shape-Shifting at the Turn of the Millennium." *Modern Drama* 56.2 (2013): 145-64.
- Blau, Herbert. *To All Appearances: Ideology and Performance*. London: Routledge, 1992.
- Brown, Wendy. "Occupy Wall Street: Return of a Repressed *Res-Publica*." *Theory and Event* 14.4 (2011). Supplement.
- Chiasson, Basil. "Harold Pinter's 'More Precisely Political' Dramas, or a Post-1983 Economy of Affect." *Modern Drama* 56.1 (2013): 80-101.
- Dolan, Jill. "'Finding Our Feet in the Shoes of (One An) Other': Multiple Character Solo Performers and Utopian Performatives." *Modern Drama* 45.4 (2002): 495-518.
- Hall Stuart. "The Centrality of Culture: Notes on the Cultural Revolutions of Our Time." *Media and Cultural Regulation*. Ed. Kenneth Thompson. London: Sage Publications, 1997. 208-38.
- . "Encoding, Decoding." *The Cultural Studies Reader*. Ed. Simon During. London: Routledge, 1993. 509-17.
- Harvey, David. *The Condition of Postmodernity*. Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1990.
- . "The Party of Wall Street Meets Its Nemesis." *Socialist Worker*. 29 Oct. 2011.
- . *Social Justice and the City*. Athens, GA: The U of Georgia P, 2009.

- Jacobson, Lynn. "An Interview with José Rivera." *Studies in American Drama, 1945-Present* 6 (1991): 49-69.
- Jameson, Fredric. *Brecht and Method*. London: Verso, 1998.
- . "Foreword: A Monument to Radical Instants." *The Aesthetics of Resistance*. Peter Weiss. Durham: Duke UP, 2005. vii-xiviii.
- . *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1981.
- Kalb, Jonathan. "Documentary Solo Performance: The Politics of the Mirrored Self." *Theater* 31.3 (2001): 13-29.
- Kershaw, Baz. *The Politics of Performance: Radical Theatre as Cultural Intervention*. London: Routledge, 1992.
- Kondo, Dorine. "(Re)Visions of Race: Contemporary Race Theory and the Cultural Politics of Racial Crossover in Documentary Theatre." *Theatre Journal* 52 (2000): 81-107.
- Landau, Tina. "Foreword." *Marisol and Other Plays*. New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1997. ix-xiii.
- Peterson, Michael. *Straight White Male: Performance Art Monologues*. Jackson, MS: U of Mississippi P, 1997.
- Rich, Frank. "The Angel of No Hope Visits New York." *New York Times*. 21 May 1993.
- Rivera, José. *Marisol. Marisol and Other Plays*. 1-68.
- Savran, David. "The Haunted Houses of Modernity." *Modern Drama* 43.4 (2000): 583-94.
- Smith, Anna Deavere. *Fires in the Mirror*. New York: Random House, 1993.
- . *Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992*. New York: Dramatists Play Service, 2003.
- Wake, Caroline. "To Witness Mimesis: The Politics, Ethics and Aesthetics of Testimonial Theatre in *Through the Wire*." *Modern Drama* 56.1 (2013): 102-25.
- Westgate, Chris J. *Urban Drama: The Metropolis in Contemporary North American Plays*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011.
- Žižek, Slavoj. *Revolution at the Gates: Žižek on Lenin: The 1917 Writings*. London: Verso, 2004.