

**Anna
Deavere
Smith**

**with a foreword
by Cornel West**

Fires in the Mirror

Crown Heights, Brooklyn and Other Identities



Anchor Books
A Division of Random House, Inc.
New York

The Crown Heights Conflict: Background Information

On August 19, 1991, in the Crown Heights section of Brooklyn, New York, one of the cars in a three-car procession carrying the Lubavitcher Hasidic rebbe (spiritual leader) ran a red light, hit another car, and swerved onto the sidewalk. The car struck and killed Gavin Cato, a seven-year-old Black boy from Guyana, and seriously injured his cousin Angela.

As rumors spread that a Hasidic-run ambulance service helped the driver and his passengers while the children lay bleeding, members of the district's Black community reacted with violence against the police and the Lubavitchers. That evening, a group of young Black men fatally stabbed Yankel Rosenbaum, a 29-year-old Hasidic scholar from Australia. For three days, Black people fought police, attacked Lubavitcher headquarters, and torched businesses while Hasidic patrols responded with their own violence.

The conflict reflected long-standing tensions within Crown Heights between Lubavitchers and Blacks, as well as the pain, oppression, and discrimination these groups have historically experienced outside their own communities. Members of the Crown Heights Black community, many of them Caribbean immigrants without U.S. citizenship from Jamaica, Guyana, Trinidad and Tobago, Haiti,

© 1993 WGBH Educational Foundation. Excerpted from educational materials created for AMERICAN PLAYHOUSE's public television production of "Fires in the Mirror."

and other countries, face discrimination both on the basis of their color and their national origin. And the Lubavitchers—members of an Orthodox Jewish sect that fled the Nazi genocide of Jews in Europe during World War II—are particularly vulnerable to anti-Jewish stereotyping because of their religious style of dress and insular community.

Many Blacks and others have said that White racism plays a critical role in Crown Heights. Black leaders have charged that the Lubavitchers have enjoyed “preferential treatment” in the community from police and other city agencies, including permission to close off major city streets during Jewish holidays. Blacks also report that some Lubavitchers have threatened and harassed them when buying area buildings for the expanding Lubavitcher community. Hasidic crime patrols, Blacks say, have indiscriminately targeted members of the Black community.

According to Jews and others, Black anti-Semitism has also played a significant role in the conflict. In addition to reporting that they are the frequent victims of Black street crime, Lubavitchers point to the August fighting that included calls to “Kill the Jews,” “Get the Jews out,” and chants of “Heil Hitler.” Other statements during the conflict by some Black spokespeople about Hasidic “diamond merchants” and Jews as the “devil leaders” of White people evoked old stereotypes of a sinister conspiracy by rich Jews controlling things behind the scenes.

Many young Blacks who took to the streets in August 1991 were less interested in targeting Jews than in fighting the police, whom many in New York City’s Black commu-

nity regard as an occupying army. During the conflict, police beat up Black reporters and arrested between 150 and 300 young Blacks as a “preventive measure” in what witnesses described as indiscriminate “sweeps.” Many of those arrested were held for days without any word to their families.

Like the Black community, the Lubavitchers have also felt victimized during the conflict by the legal system and view the jury acquittal of Yankel Rosenbaum’s accused murderer as the most stark example of this mistreatment.

Media coverage of the Crown Heights conflict has intensified misunderstanding and hatred. Black media reports generally presented the conflict as an anti-racist struggle and dismissed or trivialized charges of anti-Semitism. Jewish newspapers often blamed “black agitators” and spoke of “pogroms” (organized massacres of Jews). The mainstream media, criticized by both Blacks and Lubavitchers, tended to focus on Whites as victims and Blacks as victimizers. This kind of media polarization has made it extremely difficult for people to develop an understanding of the Crown Heights situation that acknowledges the experiences of all people involved.



Identity

Ntozake Shange The Desert

(This interview was done on the phone at about 4:00 P.M. Philadelphia time. The only cue Ntozake gave about her physical appearance was that she took one earring off to talk on the phone. On stage we placed her upstage center in an arm chair, smoking. Then we placed her standing, downstage.)

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 where I put
myself

that I am not necessarily

what's around me.

I am part of my surroundings

and I become separate from them

and it's being able to make those differentiations clearly

that lets us have an identity

and what's inside our identity

is everything that's ever happened to us.

Everything that's ever happened

to us as well as our responses to it

'cause we might be alone in a trance state,

someplace like the desert

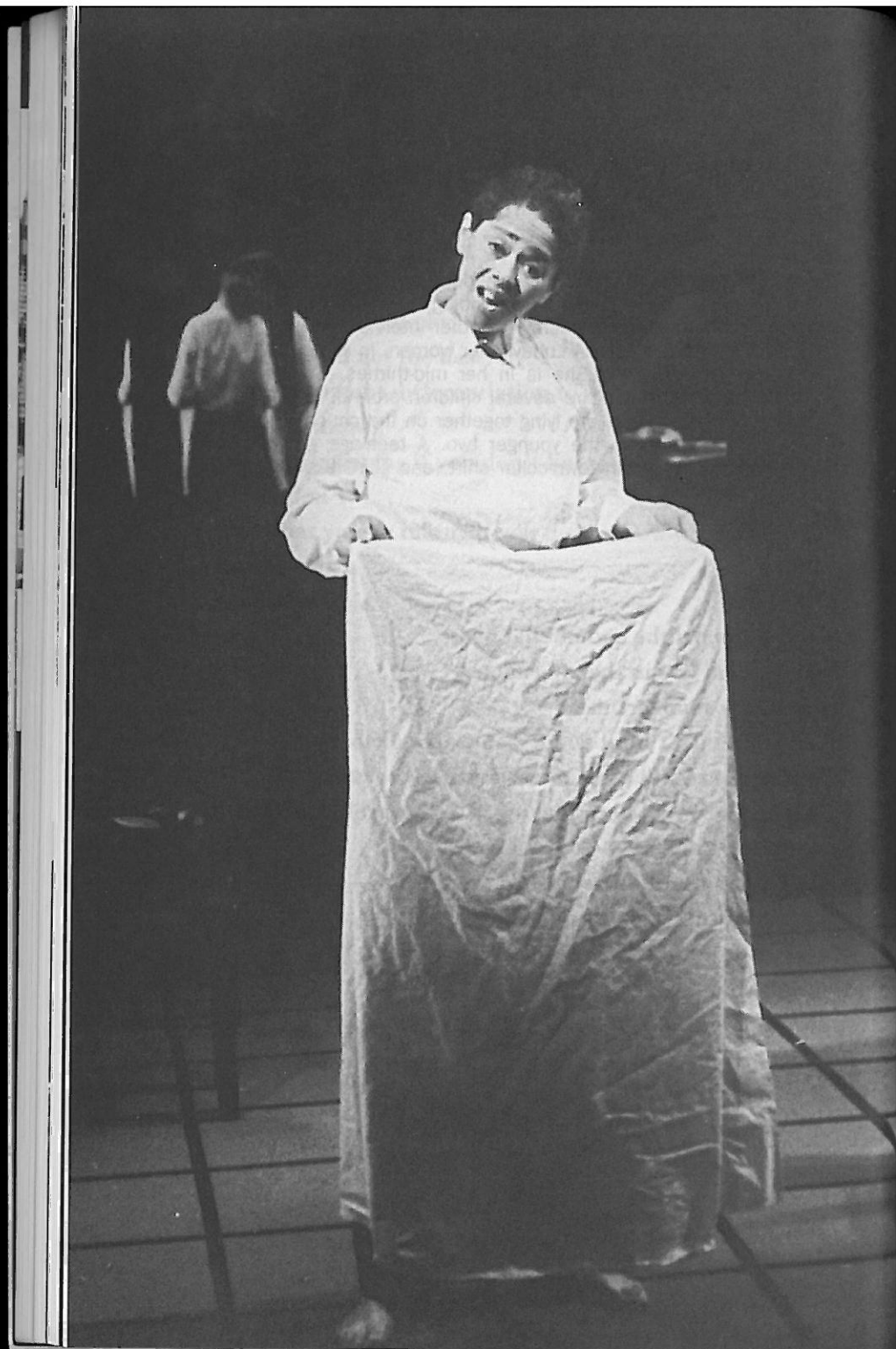
and we begin to feel as though

we are part of the desert—
which we are right at that minute—
but we are not the desert,
uh...
we are part of the desert,
and when we go home
we take with us that part of the desert that the desert gave us,
but we're still not the desert.
It's an important differentiation to make because you
don't know
what you're giving if you don't know what you have and
you don't
know what you're taking if you don't know what's yours
and what's
somebody else's.

Anonymous Lubavitcher Woman Static

(This interview was actually done on the phone. Based on what she told me she was doing, and on the three visits I had made to her home for other interviews, I devised this physical scene. A Lubavitcher woman, in a wig, and loose-fitting clothes. She is in her mid-thirties. She is folding clothes. There are several children around. Three boys of different ages are lying together on the couch. The oldest is reading to the younger two. A teen-age girl with long hair, a button-down-collar shirt, and skirt is sweeping the floor.)

Well,
it was um,
getting toward the end of Shabbas,
like around five in the afternoon,
and it was summertime
and sunset isn't until about eight, nine o'clock,
so there were still quite a few hours left to go
and my baby had been playing with the knobs on the
stereo system
then all of a sudden he pushed the button—
the *on* button—
and all of a sudden came blaring out,
at full volume,
sort of like a half station
of polka music.
But just like with the static,
it was blaring, blaring



and we can't turn off,
we can't turn off electrical,
you know electricity, on Shabbas.
So um,
uh...
there was—
we just were trying to ignore it,
but a young boy that was visiting us,
he was going nuts already, he said
it was giving him such a headache could we do something
about it,
couldn't we get a baby
to turn it off;
we can't make the baby turn it off but if the baby,
but if a child under three
turns something on or turns something off it's not
considered against the Torah,
so we put the baby by it and tried to get the baby to turn it off,
he just probably made it worse,
so the guest was so uncomfortable that I said I would go
outside
and see if I can find someone who's not Jewish and see if
they would
like to—
see if they could turn it off,
so you can have somebody who's not Jewish do a simple
act like
turning on the light or turning off the light,
and I hope I have the law correct,
but you can't ask them to do it directly.
If they wanna do it of their own free will—

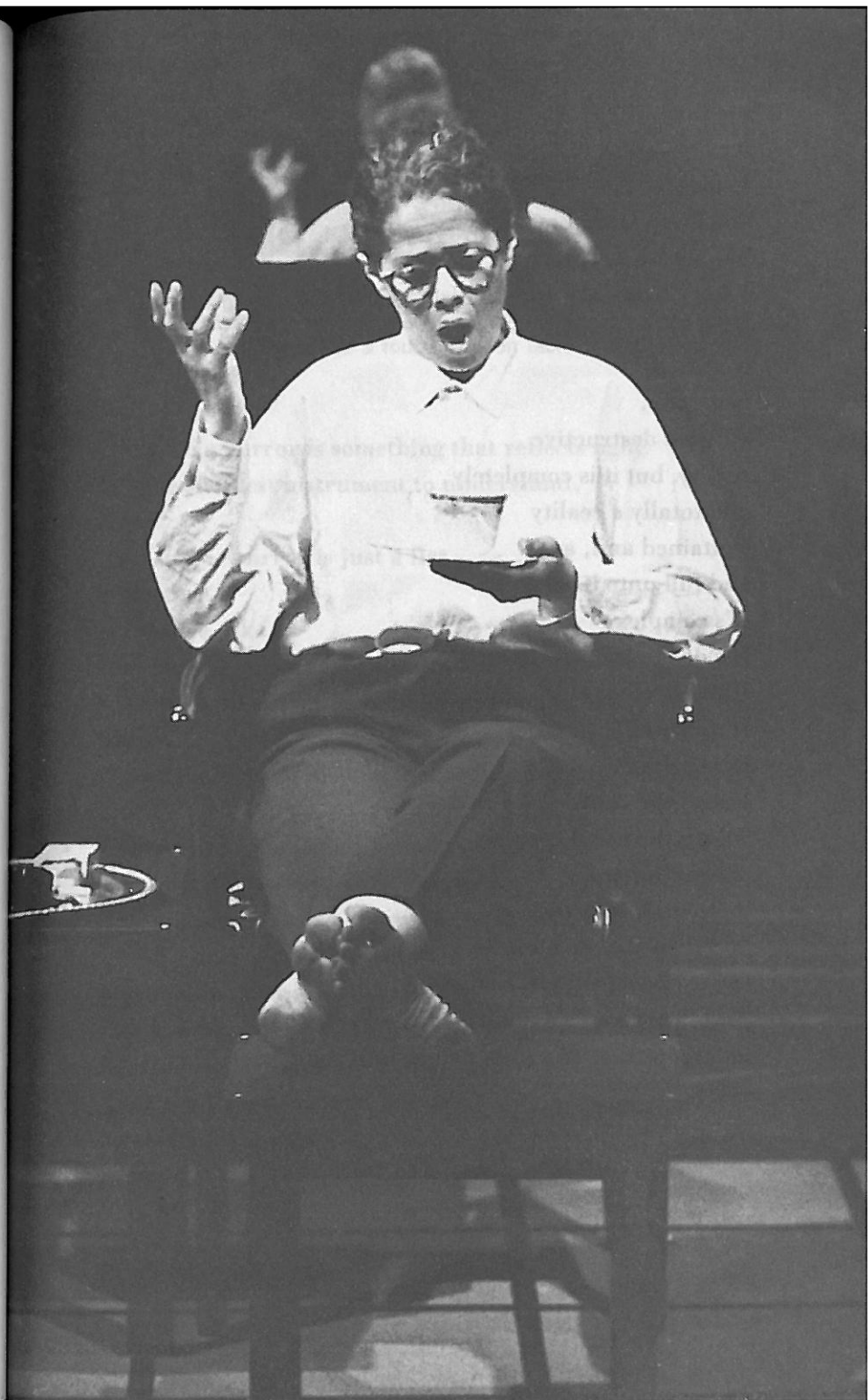
and hopefully they would get some benefit from it too,
so I went outside
and I saw
a little
boy in the neighborhood
who I didn't know and didn't know me—
not Jewish, he was black and he wasn't wearing a
yarmulke because you can't—
so I went up to him and I said to him
that my radio is on really loud and I can't turn it off,
could he help me,
so he looked at me a little crazy like,
Well?
And I said I don't know what to do,
so he said okay,
so he followed me into the house
and he hears this music on so loud
and so unpleasant
and so
he goes over to the
stereo
and he says, "You see this little button here
that says on and off?
Push that in
and that turns it off."
And I just sort of stood there looking kind of dumb
and then he went and pushed it,
and we laughed that he probably thought:
And people say Jewish people are really smart and they
don't know
how to turn off their radios.

George C. Wolfe 101 Dalmations

(The Mondrian Hotel in Los Angeles. Morning, Sunny. A very nice room. George is wearing denim jeans, a light blue denim shirt, and white leather tennis shoes. His hair is in a ponytail. He wears tortoise/wire spectacles. He is drinking tea with milk. The tea is served on a tray, the cups and teapot are delicate porcelain. George is sitting on a sofa, with his feet up on the coffee table.)

I mean I grew up on a black—
a one-block street—
that was black.
My grandmother lived on that street
my cousins lived around the corner.
I went to this
Black— Black—
private Black grade school
where
I was extraordinary.
Everybody there was extraordinary.
You were told you were extraordinary.
It was very clear
that I could not go to see *101 Dalmations* at the Capital
Theatre
because it was segregated.
And at the same time
I was treated like I was the most extraordinary creature
that had
been born.
So I'm on my street in my house,

at my school—
and I was very spoiled too—
so I was treated like I was this special special creature.
And then I would go beyond a certain point
I was treated like I was insignificant.
Nobody was
hosing me down or calling me nigger.
It was just that I was insignificant.
(Slight pause)
You know what I mean so it was very clear of
(Teacup on saucer strike twice on “very clear”)
where my extraordinariness lived.
You know what I mean.
That I was extraordinary as long as I was Black.
But I am—not—going—to place myself
(Pause)
in relationship to your whiteness.
I will talk about your whiteness if we want to talk about that.
But I,
but what,
that which,
what I—
what am I saying?
My blackness does not resis— ex— re—
exist in relationship to your whiteness.
(Pause)
You know
(Not really a question, more like a hum)
(Slight pause)
it does not exist in relationship to—



it exists
it exists.
I come—
you know what I mean—
like I said, I, I, I,
I come from—
it's a very complex,
confused,
neu-rotic,
at times destructive
reality, but it is completely
and totally a reality
contained and, and,
and full unto itself.
It's complex.
It's demonic.
It's ridiculous.
It's absurd.
It's evolved.
It's all the stuff.
That's the way I grew up.
(Slight pause)
So that *therefore*—
and then you're White—
(Quick beat)
And then there's a point when,
and then these two things come into contact.

Mirrors Aaron M. Bernstein Mirrors and Distortions

(Evening, Cambridge, Massachusetts. Fall. He is a man in his fifties, wearing a sweater and a shirt with a pen guard. He is seated at a round wooden table with a low-hanging lamp.)

Okay, so a mirror is something that reflects light.
It's the simplest instrument to understand,
okay?
So a simple mirror is just a flat
reflecting
substance, like,
for example,
it's a piece of glass which is silvered on the back,
okay?
Now the notion of distortion also goes back into literature,
okay?
I'm trying to remember from art—
You probably know better than I.
You know you have a pretty young woman and she looks
 in a mirror
and she's a witch
(He laughs)
because she's evil on the inside.
That's not a real mirror,
as everyone knows—
where

you see the inner thing.
Now that really goes back in literature.
So everyone understood that mirrors don't distort,
so that was a play
not on words
but a concept.
But physicists do
talk about distortion.
It's a big
subject, distortions.
I'll give you an example—
if you wanna see the
stars
you make a big
reflecting mirror—
that's one of the ways—
you make a big telescope
so you can gather in a lot of light
and then it focuses at a point
and then there's always something called the circle of
confusion.
So if ya don't make the thing perfectly spherical or
perfectly
parabolic
then,
then, uh, if there are errors in the construction
which you can see, it's easy, if it's huge,
then you're gonna have a circle of confusion,
you see?
So that's the reason for making the

telescope as large as you can,
because you want that circle
to seem smaller,
and you want to easily see errors in the construction.
So, you see, in physics it's very practical—
if you wanna look up in the heavens
and see the stars as well as you can
without distortion.
If you're counting stars, for example,
and two look like one,
you've blown it.

Anonymous Girl Look in the Mirror

(Morning, Spring. A teen-age Black girl of Haitian descent. She has hair which is straightened, and is wearing a navy blue jumper and a white shirt. She is seated in a stairwell at her junior high school in Brooklyn.)

When I look in the mirror . . .
 I don't know.
 How did I find out I was Black . . .
 (*Tongue sound*)
 When I grew up and I look in the mirror and saw I was
 Black.
 When I look at my parents,
 That's how I knew I was Black.
 Look at my skin.
 You Black?
 Black is beautiful.
 I don't know.
 That's what I always say.
 I think White is beautiful too.
 But I think Black is beautiful too.
 In my class nobody is White, everybody's Black,
 and some of them is Hispanic.
 In my class
 you can't call any of them Puerto Ricans.
 They despise Puerto Ricans, I don't know why.
 They think that Puerto Ricans are stuck up and
 everything.

They say, Oh my Gosh my nail broke, look at that cute
 guy and everything.
 But they act like that themselves.
 They act just like White girls.
 Black girls is not like that.
 Please, you should be in my class.
 Like they say that Puerto Ricans act like that
 and they don't see that they act like that themselves.
 Black girls, they do bite off the Spanish girls,
 they bite off of your clothes.
 You don't know what that means? biting off?
 Like biting off somebody's clothes
 Like cop, following,
 and last year they used to have a lot of girls like that.
 They come to school with a style, right?
 And if they see another girl with that style?
 Oh my gosh look at her.
 What she think she is,
 she tryin' to bite off of me in some way
 no don't be bitin' off of my sneakers
 or like that.
 Or doin' a hairstyle
 I mean Black people are into hairstyles.
 So they come to school, see somebody with a certain style,
 they say uh-huh I'm gonna get me one just like that uh-huh,
 that's the way Black people are
 Yea-ah!
 They don't like people doing that to them
 and they do that to other people,
 so the Black girls will follow the Spanish girls.

The Spanish girls don't bite off of us.
Some of the Black girls follow them.
But they don't mind
They don't care.
They follow each other.
Like there's three girls in my class,
they from the Dominican Republic.
They all stick together like glue.
They all three best friends.
They don't follow nobody,
like there's none of them lead or anything.
They don't hang around us either.
They're
by themselves.

The Reverend Al Sharpton Me and James's Thing

(Early afternoon. Fall. A small room that is a part of a suite of offices in a building on West Fifty-seventh Street and Seventh Avenue in New York. A very large man Black man with straightened hair. Reverend Sharpton's hair is in the style of James Brown's hair. He is wearing a suit, colorful tie, and a gold medallion that was given to him by Martin Luther King, Jr. Reverend Sharpton has a pinky ring, a very resonant voice even in this small room. There is a very built, very tall man who sits behind me during the interview. Reverend Sharpton's face is much younger, and more innocent than it appears to be in the media. His humor is in his face. He is very direct. The interview only lasts fifteen minutes because he had been called out of a meeting in progress to do the interview.)

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 his.

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.

And the strength that he's demonstrated—



I don't know anybody that reached his heights,
and then had to go as low as he did and come back.
And I think that if anybody I met in life deserved that type of
tribute from
somebody
that he wanted a kid
to look like him
and be like his son...
I just came home from spending a weekend with him now,
uh, uh,
I think James deserved that.
And just like
he was the father I never had,
his kids never even visited him when he went to jail.
So I was like the kid he never had.
And if I had to choose between arguing with people about my
hairstyle
or giving him that one tribute
he axed,
I'd rather give him that tribute
because he filled a void for me.
And I really don't give a damn
who doesn't understand it.
Oh, I know not you, not you.
The press and everybody do
their thing on that.
It's a personal thing between me and James Brown.
And just like
in other communities
people do their cultural thing

with who they wanna look like,
uh,
there's nothing wrong with me doing
that with James.

It's, it's, *us*.

I mean in the fifties it was a slick.

It was acting like White folks.

But today

people don't wear their hair like that.

James and I the only ones out there doing that.

So it's certainlih not

a reaction to Whites.

It's me and James's thing.

Rivkah Siegal Wigs

(Early afternoon. Spring. The kitchen of an apartment in Crown Heights. A very pretty Lubavitcher woman, with clear eyes and a direct gaze, wearing a wig and a knit sweater, that looks as though it might be hand knit. A round wooden table. Coffee mug. Sounds of children playing in the street are outside. A neighbor, a Lubavitcher woman with light blond hair who no longer wears the wig, observes the interview at the table.)

Your hair—

It only has to be—

there's different,

u h m,

customs in different

Hasidic groups.

Lubavitch

the system is

it should be two inches

long.

It's—

some groups

have

the custom

to shave their

heads.

There's—

the reason is,

when you go to the mikvah [bath]

you may, maybe,

it's better if it's short
because of what you—
the preparation
that's involved
and that
you have to go under the water.
The hair has a tendency to float
and you have to be completely submerged
including your hair.

So...

And I got married
when I was a little older,
and I really wanted to be married
and I really wanted to, um . . .

In some ways I was eager to cover my head.
Now if I had grown up in a Lubavitch household



and then had to cut it,
I don't know what that would be like.
I really don't.
But now that I'm wearing the wig,
you see,
with my hair I can keep it very simple
and I can change it all the time.
So with a wig you have to have like five wigs if you want to
do that.

But I, uh,
I feel somehow like it's fake,
I feel like it's not me.
I try to be as much myself as I can,
and it just
bothers me
that I'm kind of fooling the world.
I used to go to work.
People . . .
and I would wear a different wig,
and they'd say I like your new haircut
and I'd say it's not mine!
You know,
and it was very hard for me to say it
and
it became very difficult.
I mean, I've gone through a lot with wearing wigs and not
wearing
wigs.
It's been a big issue for me.

**Angela Davis
Rope**

(Morning. Spring. Oakland, California. In reality this interview was done on the phone, with myself and Thulani Davis. Thulani and I were calling from an office at the Public Theatre. We do not know exactly what Angela was doing or wearing. I believe, from things she said, that she was sitting on her deck in her home, which overlooks a beautiful panorama of trees.)

Of course
for many years in African American history
“race” was synonymous with community.
As a matter of fact,
many of our predecessors considered themselves
“race women” and “race men.”
Billie Holiday for example
called herself a “race woman,”
indicating that she was opposed to racism and
supported the Black community.
As a child growing up in the South
my own assumption was
that if anybody in the community
came under attack
then it was my responsibility to be there
to support that person,
to support the “race.”
I was saying to my students just the other day
that if in 1970,
when I was
in jail,



someone had told me
that in 1991,
a Black man—a Black man
who said that
(Increased volume, speed, and energy)
one of his heroes
was Malcolm X—
would be nominated to the Supreme Court,
I would have celebrated.
I don't think it would have been possible at that time
to convince me
that I would
be absolutely opposed
to a Black candidate.
(A new attack, more energy)
And if someone had told me that
a woman would
finally be elected to the Supreme Court,
it would have been very difficult—
as critical as I am with respect to feminism—
to imagine opposing her.
I don't think
it would have been possible to convince me that things
would have so absolutely
shifted that
someone could have evoked
the specter of lynching
on national television
in a way that would violate our history.
Yet I feel that

we have to point out the racism involved
in the staging of the sexual harassment story
with a Black woman and a Black man as the actors.
I mean [Ted] Kennedy was sitting right there
and it never occurred to anyone to bring him up
on charges for his past indiscretions . . .
Actually, we,
in our various oppressed and
marginalized communities,
have been able to turn
terrible acts of racism directed against us
into victories.
And I think
Anita Hill achieved a victory by showing the courage
to expose the sexual harassment issue on a national level.
This is a very complicated situation,
but I have no problems aligning myself politically
against Clarence Thomas. I am very passionate about
that.
But at the same time, we have to think about the racism
that made
the Thomas-Hill hearings possible.
So I think we need to develop
new ways of looking at community.
Race in the old sense has become
an increasingly obsolete way
of constructing community
because it is based on
immutable biological
facts

in a pseudo-scientific way.
Now this does not mean that we ignore
racism.
Racism is at the origins of this concept of race.
It's not the other way around;
there were not racists,
this one race,
who suddenly came to dominate
the others.
As a matter of fact
in order for European colonialists
to attempt
to conquer the world,
to colonize the world,
they had to construct this notion
of
the populations of the earth being divided into certain
firm biological
communities,
and that's what I think we have to go back and consider.
So when I use the word "race" now I put it in quotations.
Because if we don't transform
this intransigent
rigid
notion of race,
we will be caught up in this cycle
of genocidal
violence
that
is at the origins of our history.

So I think—
I'm convinced,
and this is what I'm working on in my political practice
right now—
that we have to find different ways of coming together,
not the old notion of coalition in which we anchor
ourselves very solidly
in our
specific racialized communities,
and simply voice
our
solidarity with other people.
I'm not suggesting that we do not anchor ourselves in our
communities;
I feel very anchored in
my various communities.
But I think that,
to use a metaphor, the rope
attached to that anchor should be long enough to allow us
to move
into other communities,
to understand and learn.
I've been thinking a lot about the need to make more
intimate
these connections and associations and to really take on
the responsibility
of learning.
So we need to find ways of working with
and understanding
the vastness

of our many cultural heritages,
ways of coming together without
rendering invisible all of our heterogeneity.
I don't have all of the answers.
What I'm interested in is communities
that are not static,
that
can change, that can respond to new historical needs.
It's a very exciting moment.