

[< Back](#)

# Journal of American Drama & Theatre

Volume 36 Issue 1

[Visit Journal Homepage >](#)

## Decommissioning the School-to-Prison Pipeline: Anna Deavere Smith's Notes from the Field and Dominique Morisseau's Pipeline

By Cheryl Black

Published: November 26, 2023

[Download Article as PDF ↓](#)

"I believe that art can inspire action."

—Anna Deavere Smith, *Notes from the Field*

In 2010, Civil Rights advocate and attorney Michelle Alexander's groundbreaking *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* explicitly analyzed the ways in which racism "infected" the US justice system, disproportionately devastating the lives of young people of color. More than a decade later, the continuing stream of ethnic minority victims of police brutality and the continuing evidence of gross overrepresentation of ethnic minorities in prisons keeps Alexander's findings relevant. ([2]) One of the particularly heinous aspects of the "new Jim Crow" is the "school to prison pipeline" or "nexus," a system whereby school policies (along with other racist policies and practices) are pushing students out of schools and into the criminal justice system. Because the students in the "pipeline" are disproportionately poor students of color, this practice offers a striking example of how institutional racism operates within America's educational and criminal justice systems as well as how institutional racism has perpetuated cycles of poverty. ([3])

Recently, and within a few years of each other, notable African American playwrights Anna Deavere Smith and Dominique Morisseau produced dramatic works indicting America's school-to-prison pipeline. Both playwrights are recipients of MacArthur ("genius grant") Fellowships; both are noted for integrating art and activism in works that address social issues of race, class, and gender; and both have dramatized historical events involving racial violence and discrimination. Their dramaturgical styles, however, are distinct. Borrowing from documentary, historiographic, ethnographic, and journalistic methods, Smith creates scripts consisting of verbatim quotations from interviews. ([4]) Morisseau employs a dramatic structure that might be described as "selective Realism." ([5]) Given the different approaches each playwright employs to address the same subject, looking at them in relation to each other is a fruitful way to investigate how these artistic forms function as anti-racist activism, what solutions these playwrights put forward as ways to challenge injustices, and how their different strategies might "read" to different audiences. Alongside Alexander's groundbreaking publication and these plays, a number of recent documentary films have explored the impact of racism on America's justice system, including Maya Ben-Shahar and Cedric B. Theus's *JustUs* (2021), Tommy Oliver's *40 Years a Prisoner* (2020), Destin Cretton's *Just Mercy* (2019), and Ava Duvernay's *13* (2016). Fictional precursors that portrayed the insidious nexus of racism, gendered social roles, segregation, and poverty that has supported the new Jim Crow in all its manifestations range from John Singleton's *Boyz n the Hood* (1991) and *Higher Learning* (1995) to *Season 4* (2006) of HBO's *The Wire*.

Although it is outside the scope of this article to offer an in-depth examination of the relationship between Smith and Morisseau's dramatic works and these films, the proximity of their creation and their obviously shared motivation to raise awareness about these injustices highlights the urgency of the subject and the significant role that the arts may play in effecting social change. ([6]) Although, arguably, all art has this power, live theatrical performance, with its ability to illuminate the human condition within a specifically human and interactive context, can be particularly effective. As a theatre historian, actor, and director, I am a believer in the theatre's power not only to reflect but also to shape the world we live in. It is this conviction that has led me to the current exploration. It is an exploration that contributes to our understanding of these two artist/activists and these two works in particular.

Remarkably, neither work has received extensive attention, but interest in both is growing. Minou Arjomand's *Staged: Show Trials, Political Theater, and the Aesthetics of Judgment* (2018) includes brief observations on Anna Deavere Smith's projects, including an earlier version of *Notes from the Field* during which Smith stopped after Act 1 to facilitate small group discussions among audience members. ([7]) More recently, Amal Dahy has also focused significantly on this version, in which he identifies Smith's engagement with the audiences as Boalian "Forum Theatre" techniques. ([8]) In 2022, Deborah Geis included brief comments on Smith's *Notes* within a broader survey of plays she terms "Black Lives Matter drama . . . a significant new subgenre also characterized as a type of 'crossroad' with earlier works." ([9]) In 2023, both

- [Back to Top ●](#)
- [Untitled ○](#)
- [Article ○](#)
- [References ○](#)
- [Authors ○](#)
- [Keep Reading ○](#)

Amanda Stuart Fisher and Ryan Claycomb included a discussion of *Notes* in their wide-ranging and diverse studies of testimonial and verbatim dramaturgies. ([10]) Jonathan Taylor has recently looked at Morisseau's *Pipeline* as a model for future activist theatre, with special attention to her use of magical realism and other imaginative staging techniques that he credits with enhancing the play's political power. ([11]) With great appreciation for these insights (some of which I will revisit in my conclusion), my analysis complements without duplicating existing discussions of these works and extends them through its comparative analysis of both works.

To conduct my analysis, I rely on close readings of the texts, published interviews with the playwrights, and audience and critical response to the plays in performance. I also draw upon a range of critical race and performance theories, including Ibram X. Kendi's succinct explication of racism as the conception that regards one racial group as inferior or superior to another racial group;([12]) I further consider Kendi's thoughts about the efficacy of various anti-racist strategies alongside Kimberlé Crenshaw's concept of intersectionality as discrimination and oppression stemming from the intersections of various aspects of a person's social or political identity. ([13])

In her introduction to the published version of *Notes*, Anna Deavere Smith identifies this play as the "most recent installment" in her life's work: a series of plays that "bear witness to particular historical moments" in the hopes of "sparking a conversation, of making change possible." ([14]) She specifies that her subject is social injustice, that she intends for her artistry to lead to action, and that the first step in redressive action is listening to the voices of those who have been historically discounted. To create the script, Smith interviewed 250 individuals in four geographic areas of the US and abroad—including students, teachers, administrators, mentors, advocates, judges, inmates and former inmates, and government officials—from which she selected seventeen interviews. All spoken dialogue in the play is composed of verbatim excerpts from these interviews.

A number of scholars have explored the relationship between Smith's socially conscious aesthetic and that of Marxist playwright Bertolt Brecht. ([15]) It was Brecht's aim to reveal the social factors that influence human thought and action, to show "reality" as constructed and, therefore, changeable, and to encourage critical thinking, rather than emotional identification, in his audiences. Brechtian theatre eschews the illusionistic strategies associated with realism that attempt to convince an audience they are observing "real life" in favor of "distancing" reminders to an audience that they are watching a theatrical performance. Typical distancing techniques include narrative interruptions, direct address, use of multimedia, musical interludes, and a performance style that maintains an aesthetic distance between performer and character. Primary among the distancing strategies in *Notes* is the fact that Smith performs all seventeen roles, embodying a range of genders, races, ethnicities, and ages, a strategy that calls attention to identity as constructed and performed. Smith values this method as one by which the person she is portraying "will, despite her impression, retain his or her individual character and speech." ([16]) Her character transformations are accomplished in full view of the audience by the addition or removal of a costume piece or prop. Nonspeaking stagehands, also in full view of the audience, aid character and location changes. Smith's use of multimedia reveals the social factors behind the individual stories she performs. Preshow digital projections provide the audience with statistics regarding disenfranchisement related to felony convictions and the disproportionate school punishments, incarcerations, and deaths at the hands of police for young persons of color. Every story is introduced through projections providing the person's name, occupation, or position. Each story is also accompanied by projected news footage and cell phone videos of the events described and/or video or still images that locate the action. Examples include Freddie Gray being hauled into a police car in Baltimore; a police officer straddling a fourteen-year-old Black girl in Texas; a student being thrown across a classroom by a police officer in South Carolina. Original music is performed live onstage by jazz bassist Marcus Shelby who occasionally interacts with Smith.

All characters directly address the audience. The first monologue, from President and Director-Counsel of the NAACP Legal Defense Fund Sherrilyn Ifill, exhorts the audience to consider the investment our nation has made in the criminal justice system at the expense of education. Ifill later delivers a reprise in which she articulates even more explicitly the problems (the end of serious investment in our public school system and mass incarceration) and possible solutions (body-worn cameras and other reforms around policing and a massive investment in education). Ifill stresses the importance of recognizing our current moment as crucial—a moment when change can happen—and the need to confront ourselves before we can move toward that change.

Three testimonies describe active resistance to the death of twenty-five-year-old Freddie Gray under police custody in Baltimore in 2015. Kevin Moore, a young Black man wearing a "Copwatch" hoodie, filmed the arrest on his cell phone, which he then distributed widely. Eighteen-year-old Allen Bullock smashed a city police car in protest. Projected footage of Gray's actual funeral reveals a packed megachurch and cries from the congregation of "No Justice, No Peace!" Pastor Jamal Harrison Bryant delivers an impassioned call to action: "Get up! Get your Black self up and *change* this city! . . . Don't expect nobody to open the door for you! If they don't open the door, kick that sucker down and get what you need! GIT UP!!!" ([17])

Two segments come from the Yurok community. Former inmate and Yurok fisherman Taos Proctor shares his odyssey from multiple school expulsions beginning when he was eight ("they said I hit the teacher... I just pulled away from her, and it hurt her arm or something") to California Youth Authority to San Quentin. Proctor bluntly recounts the brutality he experienced in prison: "Prison don't do nothing but make you a worse person. . . . Everyone's *bad* in there . . ." ([18]) His ability to overcome his past (at the time of the interview he was married with a son and making a success of his fishing business) are a testament to his humanity and self-respect in the face of determined effort to eradicate both. In a later interview, Yurok Tribal Court Chief Judge Abby Abinanti reports having to prevent an eight-year-old child from being handcuffed. Judge Abinanti's verdict: "the country's broken." ([19])

As Ibram X. Kendi and others have observed, people of color are not immune to deeply entrenched racist ideas. Salvadoran American Steven Campos reports that he, his brother, and all his mother's brothers have served time in prison. Campos seems to believe that individuals hold full responsibility for their actions: "you dumb enough to get caught for it. You Fuck! It's yo' bad." ([20]) African American "student concerns specialist" Tony Eady, who previously worked in a prison, seems to view his students as potential criminals and his current position as "similar" to working in a maximum-security prison. His description of school policies makes the high school sound like a training ground for prison, including in-school suspension: "I call it school jail. . . . And then if you act up in here, they send you to 'Twilight.' And I call that 'penitentiary'. . . 'cause you in there all day, every day, for months." ([21]) Although Eady may aim to help these students with some kind of tough love, he puts the responsibility for avoiding the pipeline squarely on their shoulders, admonishing them to learn to deal with authority figures. He uses military imagery in his solution: "I *need* police officers in the school. . . . He's *my—our* last line of defense." Eady also highlights the struggle between teachers and students over cell phones, declaring "They would rather go to jail than give up their cell phones!" ([22]) This statement resonates with the assertion from Kevin Moore, videographer of the Freddie Gray arrest, that "the camera is the only weapon we have that can actually protect us." ([23])

The story of Shakara, a Black Columbia SC high school student who was thrown across the room by a school resource officer in 2015, is related by white journalist Amanda Ripley and Shakara's classmate Niya Kenny, who is also Black. Shakara got in trouble for not giving up her cell phone, and then refusing to leave the classroom with the assistant principal (a Black man) who brought in the (white) police officer. As Niya tells her story, her cell phone video of the event plays in the background. Kenny, who was eighteen, was arrested but released when her video made national news. Kenny had a clear message for those who told her to mind her own business: "How can you mind your business? Like, that's somethin' you

- Back to Top ●
- Untitled ○
- Article ○
- References ○
- Authors ○
- Keep Reading ○

need to *make* your business.” ([24]) A teacher from Finland provides a rare perspective on the event from a white person outside of the US. Her shock at viewing the video of Shakara’s encounter with the police or the idea that police officers would ever be needed in a classroom illuminates the contrast between American educational values and those of some other nations. As Finland is about 1/30 the size of the US and has a distinctly homogeneous population, it seems an odd comparison, but possibly Deavere included this interview to goad American audiences into imagining a culture like Finland’s in which “the teacher was always a candle in the village.” ([25])

Testimony from Denise Dodson, a woman convicted of a murder her boyfriend committed, and emotional support teacher Stephanie Williams highlighted the urgent need for overhauling the educational system. Dodson linked education to survival and regretted not getting the attention she needed from teachers: “I think if I had gotten that attention, I could have moved forward. . . . They [teachers] have to see ‘em [students] as people. They [teachers] have to see them [students] as the future.” ([26]) Williams poured out the difficulties of her job at Philadelphia’s Huey Elementary School, working with “the most needy children . . . kids that need *food. Shelter. Clothes. Love*, like . . . an *education*. They just need so much.” She admitted to feeling “hopeless” and compared her work to “running a jail without a gun.” She shared stories of student rage and violent reactions to being bullied or abused, concluding with the story of stopping a raging ten-year-old by grabbing him “in the tightest hug. . . . And I just *held* him until his body just collapsed. And he just started crying and crying and crying and crying on *me*.” ([27])

In a departure from current events, Smith performs a brief interlude from James Baldwin’s 1971 interview with Margaret Mead in which Baldwin delivers a wake-up call still resonant with twenty-first-century experiences. Baldwin ponders how, if he were fifteen, he would find any respect for human life or any sense of history or hope. He provides a possible answer to his question by bringing up a book of poetry by children, compiled by a teacher who “respected them. And he dealt with them as if they were—as in fact all children are. As a fact, all human beings are . . . some kind of miracle!” ([28])

A larger context for the school-to-prison pipeline is provided by Equal Justice activist Bryan Stevenson, who asserts that “we are a post-genocide society,” a reference to the slaughter of “Native people.” For Stevenson, the “great evil of American slavery was not involuntary servitude. . . . It was this ideology of white supremacy, this idea that Black people are not fully human.” Stevenson echoes Judge Abinanti’s use of the term “broken” to describe his legal clients, the [legal] system in which he works, and himself. Stevenson, however, finds hope in this realization:

I actually think it’s in brokenness that we understand our need for grace, our need for mercy. It’s actually brokenness that helps us appreciate justice. . . . It’s the broken among us that actually can teach us what it means to be human. Because if you don’t understand the ways in which you can be broken by poverty or neglect or abuse or violence or suffering or bigotry, then you don’t recognize the urgency in overcoming poverty and abuse and neglect and—and bigotry.

Stevenson rejects the notion that one should learn to live “silently” with one’s brokenness: “I don’t think that’s the way forward. I’m looking for ways to—to not be silent.” ([29])

Although poverty is rarely directly referenced, in virtually all the stories of abuse, arrest, and incarceration, class, as well as race, is a factor, a circumstance that supports the irrefutable fact that our criminal justice system punishes poverty in myriad ways, including disproportionate rates of incarceration. ([30]) These testimonies are also further illustration of the disproportionate rates of poverty within ethnic minority communities. According to the most recent federal data, Blacks have the highest poverty rate (19.5%), with Hispanics at 17.1%. ([31]) Lest anyone in Smith’s audience fails to recognize racism and racist institutions as the underlying cause of these conditions, Dr. Victor Carrion identifies social factors surrounding slavery and the history of slavery as an explanation for the current, disproportionate poverty rates in African American communities: “it’s a way of maintaining that enslavement. . . . through poverty.” ([32])

Some critics have deemed the play’s concluding stories, featuring activist Bree Newsome and Congressman John Lewis, as digressions from the specific topic of school-to-prison pipeline. ([33]) These stories, however, specifically address the white supremacist system, the “nexus” that fosters the “pipeline.” Newsome narrates how she scaled the South Carolina State House flagpole to remove the Confederate flag in 2015, and the late Congressman John Lewis’s story reminds us of the struggles an earlier generation endured to challenge the “old” Jim Crow. In juxtaposing news footage of Newsome’s recent climb with one of Lewis’s arrests (and Lewis’s recounting of being asked for and freely giving forgiveness to one of his abusers decades later), Smith links these acts of resistance and suggests the ongoing nature of civil rights movements. Alisa Solomon, who served as dramaturg for this play, has reported that “the more she spoke to Americans across the country, the more Smith was convinced that solutions will take a new civil rights movement, one that brings healing to struggling communities as well as equality and justice.” ([34]) If these last two incidents portrayed had not actually happened, it would seem an impossibly sentimental ending. In fact, one reviewer observed, in reference to both the Newsome and Lewis stories: “It’s only a feel-good ending if you haven’t been paying attention for the previous two hours.” ([35])

After a two-month run Off-Broadway in fall 2016, the Obie-winning *Notes* premiered on HBO in 2018, where it has presumably reached a wider and more diverse audience. The HBO performance also included one notable added episode that reinforces Smith’s belief in the significance of “healing” for “struggling communities”: footage from the 2017 trial of white nationalist Dylann Roof, who shot and killed nine African American congregants at the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, South Carolina in 2015. During the recording, voices from the Black community are heard crying out that they forgive him: “We are the family love built.” ([36])

Critics responding to *Notes* universally applaud Smith’s virtuosity as a performer and her commitment to exploring worthy and timely subjects. Perceived weaknesses in the script include a certain lack of cohesion (several episodes considered tangentially related to the central theme), a lack of differing opinions, and an ambiguity regarding the ultimate message. *The Guardian*’s Alexis Soloski reached her own ambiguous conclusion that although Smith’s “call to empathy” was too “simple a solution,” Smith’s “hortatory force” deemed it “worth a try.” ([37]) Several critics perceived a message of hope and uplift despite the grim subject matter. ([38])

In 2017, Dominique Morisseau shared that she had “learned to embrace” the “idea of being a political writer. . . . I’m not trying to push a political agenda, per se, or tell people what politics to embrace, but I am looking at how politics, in a certain light, impact people. . . . I have a very strong social justice call to my work.” ([39]) *Pipeline* demonstrates Morisseau’s signature ability to integrate the political and the personal, and to blur the distinctions between the two. The play is dedicated to her mother, who taught public school in Highland Park, Michigan (according to Morisseau, an economically stressed city) for forty years. She has also drawn from her own experience as a teacher in New York City for fifteen years and other personal connections:

Back to Top ●  
Untitled ○  
Article ○  
References ○  
Authors ○  
Keep Reading ○

I had been reading Michelle Alexander's book *The New Jim Crow*, which talks about mass incarceration and mass incarceration being the new Jim Crow. But I really believe education is also the new Jim Crow right now because there is so much segregation in education, and there's an excessive system of have and have-nots. So I was first and foremost interested in exploring the school-to-prison pipeline because of how personally it affected some people in my life. ([40])

Morisseau has reported that the character of Omari in *Pipeline* was inspired by her "surrogate nephew" who had a "bad incident at school and was criminalized online and in the press," and by the death of Michael Brown, the Black teenager shot and killed by a police officer in Ferguson Missouri in 2014. ( )

*Pipeline*, which debuted at Lincoln Center in 2017, offers a microcosmic view of the school-to-prison pipeline, zeroing in on the experience of one Black teenager named Omari. Omari is expelled and threatened with criminal charges after shoving a teacher who attempted to prevent him from leaving a classroom. The play is particularly concerned with how Omari's trouble affects those who love him: his girlfriend Jasmine, his mother Nya, and his father Xavier. Jasmine is an inner-city native who attends the same private and predominantly white school as Omari. His mother teaches English in an inner city public high school and is described by Morisseau as a "struggling parent doing her damndest." ([41]) His father Xavier, Nya's ex-husband, is a marketing executive. Context is provided by the two remaining characters, both Nya's colleagues: Laurie is a tough, white middle-aged teacher who gets into trouble for using physical force to break up a fight in her classroom; and Dun is a Black security guard who is overworked but forbearing. As *New York Times* critic Ben Brantley noted, they both "seem to regard their jobs as mostly a matter of keeping a tenuous peace in a combat zone." ([42]) Although fictional, Nya, Laurie, and Dun call to mind actual individuals portrayed in *Notes from the Field*, like Stephanie Williams and Tony Eady, who compared working in US schools to working in prisons. Although realistically drawn, these six characters (only three are given a last name) may be seen as symbols with specifically meaningful names. In naming Omari, Morisseau honors his African heritage: "Omari" in Swahili means "flourishing." "Nya" is of Swahili and Gaelic origin and means "purpose." It also intriguingly evokes Niya Kenny, the student activist featured in *Notes from the Field*. "Xavier" has Spanish, Basque, and Arabic origins, meaning "new house" (perhaps a nod to his departure from the inner city). And lastly, "Jasmine" is of Persian origin, meaning "gift of God." Although Morisseau tells an individual story, she situates it within a larger social context. At the opening of *Pipeline*, as Nya leaves a voicemail for Xavier about Omari's trouble, smartphone camera footage of school fights gradually morphs into shadows behind her. The smartphone footage reminds us of its deployment by young Black activists, and its transformation into shadows provides an expressionistic image of Nya's mental state. A voice from her school's PA system establishes an authoritarian and antagonistic environment, commanding students to take off their hats, hand over their smartphones, and to face automatic suspension if caught with any non-approved electronic device. "We have the city government behind us. You cannot win. I repeat YOU CANNOT WIN!" ([43])

A scene between Omari and Jasmine in her dorm room follows. Although she believes the smartphone video of his school fight will make him a "celebrity," Omari fears he'll be seen as "a monster" and plans to run away. The next scene in the teachers' lounge reinforces the image of this school as a dangerous environment. When Dun enters, he reports that "they" have been "jackin' cars" despite the addition of extra security cameras. Laurie deepens the image by referring to her students as "hooligans" and the teachers' lounge as her "den." ([44])

In another departure from realism, Omari appears in "undefined space" as Nya discusses with her students Gwendolyn Brooks' poem "We Real Cool." He repeats and embodies the words of the poem, expressionistically communicating Nya's psychic state of fear that her son will "die soon." Published in 1959, "We Real Cool" does not specifically speak to a school-to-prison pipeline; it does, however, speak to a "nexus" of limited opportunities and foreshortened lives of young Black men. The class discussion about the Broadside printing of the poem highlights the poet's rejection of Eurocentric aesthetic standards in favor of what Nya describes as graffiti, or street writing—writing that "reps the hood" and anticipates the aesthetic adopted decades later by playwrights Ntozake Shange, Suzan-Lori Parks, and Marc Bamuthi Joseph, among others. ([45])

Morisseau critiques private as well as public school education, challenging the assumption that private, predominantly white schools, are "better" than public schools with more diverse student populations. In the play, during a phone call to an unnamed friend, Jasmine explains her parents' choice to send her to this PWI "cuz they're so damn spooked I'll get pregnant or shot or some shit." Jasmine is profoundly unhappy in this environment as she is experiencing class and race-based bias from students: "Stuck up girls in my dorm acting like I'm gonna steal their fabric softener or grab their granny panties out of the laundry cuz I don't have my own or whatever." She rejects the "false god of this freakin' Fernbrook Academy that somehow it produces better people," asserting someone like me would actually survive better in an environment in which I am COMFORTABLE instead of being the token poor girl of color that everyone thinks is trying to sleep with their pussy-ass boyfriend or take their goddamn cocaine or crystal meth or whatever . . . ([46])

Speaking with Nya about Omari's incident, Jasmine explains how racist assumptions may motivate violent responses: "Sometimes people push you too far. Make you feel like an animal from another jungle. Like you don't belong even when you're here. Cuz they got expectations that you of the wild. So you become the expectation." ([47]) In turn, Nya pours out her fears as the mother of a Black son:

You have no idea if one day someone will try to expire them because they are too young. Or too Black. Or too threatening. Or too loud. Or too uninformed. Or too angry. Or too quiet. Or too everyday. Or too cool. Or too uncomposed. Or too mysterious. Or just too TOO. ([48])

The experiences of Jasmine and Omari mirror findings from a 2012 study of the experiences of Black students in predominantly white institutions. "Most students felt that they were stereotyped as the 'angry black' person and felt intimidated when in the racial, social class, and gender minority." Black students also reported feeling "strong emotion" when teachers used material depicting Black people as criminal or violent. ([49]) Omari shares that he "went blind for a second" during a class discussion of Richard Wright's *Native Son* in which the teacher expected Omari to respond to his questions about what motivated Bigger Thomas to kill a woman. "Like I'm Bigger Thomas. Like I'm predisposed or some shit to knowing what it's like to be an animal." ([50]) During this scene, Nya herself succumbs to racist language, an inadvertent slip that her son quickly picks up on:

Nya: You don't just walk out in the middle of a lesson as if you are some sort of king or god that no one can tame.

Omari: Tame?

Nya: Damnit, Omari.

Omari: Tame.

Nya: Do not do that. Do not twist and remodel this convo and change the meaning.

Omari: I'm not changing anything. I'm repeating. Verbatim. ([51])

Although Omari is possibly headed for some form of incarceration, it is his mother whose physical and psychological deterioration is most vividly portrayed for the audience. Nya stands in for all the mothers of Black sons who have borne the loss of a son to racist violence. At the play's opening, she is described as "holding together by a thread" and throughout the play we witness that thread's unraveling. ([52]) Morisseau evokes one of the most familiar Black Lives Matter mantras in her call for breathlessness as an indication of Nya's increasing distress, including stage directions repeatedly calling for Nya to take "strange," "revealing," "deep" inhalations or "gasps." ([53]) Ultimately, Nya physically collapses and is rushed to the hospital after uttering "I can't—breathe—." ([54]) For audiences in 2017, the moment almost certainly evoked the final words of Eric Garner, who uttered them moments before his death during his arrest in 2014; for present-day audiences, they would also the death of George Floyd under police custody in 2020. ([55])

Morisseau critiques constructed masculinity as well as capitalism in her creation of Xavier, described as “financially stable” and “emotionally impoverished.” ([56]) Although it is revealed that Nya had an affair with Dun, which presumably ended her marriage, Omari places the blame squarely on his father's shoulders: “. . . you were mean. Cold. Making her feel like shit every day. You was never happy living over here.” ([57]) “Over here” seems to suggest an urban, possibly lower-income neighborhood which Xavier has abandoned for a bougier lifestyle. Xavier relates fatherhood primarily to financial provision: “I took good care of you. Never missed a payment. Never missed a birthday or first day of school. You never went hungry. Always had a shirt on your back. Money in your pocket. Didn't I do that?” ([58]) Xavier is also paying for Omari's private school education, but Omari does not equate financial support with love, informing Xavier that they are “miles apart” and implicating Xavier in his emotional outburst at school: “It was my teacher. But I wished it was you. . . . And I don't know if that is hate or love or somethin' else I was feelin'. But I know why Bigger Thomas did what he did and I hate that I know. But you I hate more. You I hate most of all.” ([59]) After this revelation, Xavier also finds himself unable to breathe. Utterly defeated as a father, he is not without sympathy as he walks away “dumbfounded.” ([60]) In a discussion about the play, Morisseau declared, “Hypermasculinity is just as problematic to me [as is racial stereotyping] . . . It doesn't give men the space to be emotional, to acknowledge their own pain or that they seek love. It's like it's too socially expensive to be fragile.” ([61])

In her final scene, Jasmine leaves a long phone message for Omari, assuring him that despite her love for him, she is glad that he is leaving this school, “[b]ecause this place can't hold you. This place can't hold none of us.” This dialogue is followed by video images of school fights, kids going through metal detectors, police handcuffing teenage boys. ([62]) The PA system comes on again, but this time it is a student's voice reading “We Real Cool” intercut with Nya addressing the private school board to prevent their pressing charges against her son.

Omari's actions aren't his bag alone. They're mine. All of ours. We didn't carve out enough space. He doesn't belong anywhere. . . . No land he can travel without being under suspicion and doubt. No emotion he can carry without being silenced or disciplined. . . . I want my son to have another chance. Be born again with a slate clean of the baggage. Our baggage. MY baggage. . . . He's not an animal. Nor more than the rest of us are. And if so, we built the jungle. . . . This rage is not his sin. It was never his sin. . . . It is his inheritance. ([63])

We do not learn of the board's decision, but Omari has the last word, fulfilling Nya's request for “instructions” about how to “save him.” ([64]) Along with Nya's recognition of “all of our” complicity in the struggles faced by young people of color in America today, Omari's “instructions” seem to be Morisseau's recommendation for positive action to begin to address the problem: “Hear me out. Let me chill sometimes. Know when to back off. Know when to keep pushing. Let me have some space. Don't assume me for the worst. Show up. In person. Be fair. Forgive that I'm not perfect.” ([65]) The final image of the play is an embrace between Nya and Omari.

The focus on familial relationships and the awareness that Omari's “instructions” might be those of any adolescent to a parent could distract from the intersecting conditions of race and poverty that are crucial to addressing the school-to-prison pipeline. Some reviewers perceived a lack of social context. Bill Marx, for example, objected that Morisseau “does not look outside ‘broken family dynamics’ or the ‘comfortable confines of realism’ that would seem to be required for serious social critique.” ([66]) Then again, strategies like projecting smartphone footage and allusions to Black artist/activists of an earlier generation (like Brooks and Wright) render Omari's race and race-based discrimination specific. Although, as the child of well-educated professionals Omari is relatively privileged, it is part of Morisseau's message that other forms of cultural capital are poor defenses against the juggernaut of racism in America. Although he found the play “frustratingly unresolved,” Ben Brantley nevertheless affirmed, “the concerns of its heroine, Nya, about her teenage son, Omari, have everything to do with his being a Black youth in the United States in the 21st century.” Brantley also directly compared *Pipeline* to *Notes* without expressing a clear preference for either *Notes*' “cleareyed overview” or *Pipeline*'s “more emotionally immersive approach.” ([67]) As with Smith, Morisseau's virtuosity was widely recognized, with critics lauding her dramaturgical power and eloquence. She was awarded the 2018 OBIE for writing *Pipeline*, and it was one of the top ten most produced plays in the 2019/20 season.

It seems evident that these playwrights are politically motivated to write these plays, and that their aims are to raise awareness about a particular form of social injustice that is manifestly rooted in racism and to offer possible solutions. Art, and especially live theatrical performance, is never just a purveyor of facts. Live theatre presents facts in a particularly *human* context. Despite Brecht's best efforts, even the most “distanced” performance style, as exemplified by Anna Deavere Smith's approach, evokes emotional and empathic identification, an identification underscored in Morisseau's “more emotionally immersive approach.” ([68]) Morisseau has repeatedly expressed her desire to create community through interaction and engagement from audiences: “I feel like if I ask the important questions that I have around it [social injustice], maybe, collectively, as a society, we will start to have the kind of conversation that can find a solution.” ([69]) Throughout *Pipeline*'s run, the theatre held several talkbacks and panels with experts and activists. Morisseau also spearheaded a fundraising effort at Lincoln Center that raised approximately \$10,000 to fund free tickets to groups of students. ([70])

The value of “raising awareness”—of providing Americans with facts about racism—has been challenged by Ibram X. Kendi, who has argued that political and economic self-interest, rather than any moral or intellectual awakening, have led to anti-racist policies. “They [those with power to make policy changes] have also conceded to Antiracist change as a better alternative than the disruptive, disordered, politically harmful, and/or unprofitable conditions that anti-racist protestors created.” ([71]) The shortcomings of empathy as a change agent have also been explored by scholar Sadiya Hartman, ([72]) and Georgetown law professor Paul Butler has been even more explicit in his critique: “The problem is, love and forgiveness are not productive in American politics. That's not how social change is achieved.” ([73]) Among theatre scholars, there is disagreement over the efficacy of theatrical performance for social change. In 2023, Ryan Claycomb, partially prompted by the writings of Lauren Berlant and Jodi Dean, described his former optimism in the power of verbatim theatre—and more broadly, democratic deliberation—as “cruel, prompting us to hope for something that binds us,” and “often a passive replacement for radical egalitarian action.” ([74])

Although Kendi, Hartman, Butler, Claycomb, and others make compelling arguments, given America's history, centuries of theatrical activism provide a counterargument. Years of experience in creating theatre that addresses urgent political issues have led Smith to her conviction that “art inspires action” and Morisseau to her belief that “asking the important questions” is the first step toward finding solutions to social problems. In her recent study, Amanda Stuart Fisher argues that “testimonial theatre, which aims to expose and interrogate the kinds of truths that are being re-authored or erased by today's politicians, can play a central role [in challenging political domination].” ([75]) The activist Bree Newsome, whose removal of the Confederate flag from the South Carolina State house is portrayed in *Notes*, has affirmed that “artists telling the truth about the world is itself a form of activism.” ([76]) Both plays advocate a prerequisite mindset of optimism and hope—the belief that political action is not likely to happen without a certain degree of faith that change is possible. This is a belief shared by one of America's most notable anti-racist activists, Angela Davis: “No change is possible without hope.” ([77]) Recently, Michelle Alexander expressed her belief in the necessity of a “moral and spiritual revolution” dependent upon treating “all people of all colors with dignity, humanity, compassion, and concern. . . . True progress depends on us caring and demonstrating care, compassion, and concern for poor people, and people of color, and being willing to invest in their well-being and their health and their education and their thriving rather than simply in their punishment and in their control. . . .” ([78])

The point that awareness, hope, and empathy *alone* are insufficient to effect social change is, however, well-taken. In the oil and gas industry, decommissioning (safely removing) a pipeline requires “a series of properly planned and executed actions.” ([79]) These plays offer both/and strategies, building empathy and community as well as engaging in radical, direct action. Both these plays demonstrate (or perhaps advocate for) a range of resistant actions, most of which involve disorderly or illegal conduct. Militant language abounds in both plays, leaving audiences with a sense of America as a war zone, and neither leaves any doubt about which is the right side. Both plays highlight the deployment of smartphone cameras, which have become pivotal weapons in the Black Lives Matter movement. ([80]) In his comments on a production of Morisseau's *Pipeline* that he witnessed in March 2020, Harvey Young reminded readers that the play featured images of Civil Rights era activism “possibly to inspire audiences to speak out and to take to the streets.” Young concludes: “I remember leaving the theatre less feeling anxious about a looming pandemic, than grateful for the ways theatre can be a catalyst for change.” ([81])

- Back to Top ●
- Untitled ○
- Article ○
- References ○
- Authors ○
- Keep Reading ○

Smith's inclusion of "off-topic" episodes in *Notes* is strategic and in keeping with the school to prison "nexus" concept. At Freddie Gray's funeral, Pastor Jamal Harrison Bryant's oration is an exhortation to action. Bree Newsome defied the law and risked her life to remove a symbol of injustice, an action that ultimately effected its permanent removal. Congressman Lewis's story reminds us of the achievements wrought during the 1960s through strategic anti-racist activism and also provides an example of a moral awakening by one who formerly engaged in racist violence. In *Pipeline*, Omari's refusal to accept the role of racial spokesperson, his refusal to be constrained by the white "authority figure" in his classroom, provides another example of anti-racist resistance.

Kendi has also deemed as a "false construction" the idea that "ignorance and hate" lead to racist ideas and racist policies. ([82]) Although apparently in agreement that hatred is a manifestation, rather than a cause, of racism, Smith and Morisseau advance the notion that its eradication is prerequisite for meaningful social change and, moreover, that its eradication is possible. An oft-quoted musical theatre lyric from *South Pacific* avers that hate must be "carefully taught." Therefore, it seems reasonable to assume that love also can and must be taught. Granted, "love" is a variously defined term, but in this context, perhaps best understood as encompassing *agape* (selfless, universal love for humankind) and *phlautia* (self-love). Smith's inclusion of a story about redemption and forgiveness between a former white supremacist and a Black civil rights activist, and Morisseau's request, on the behalf of Omari, for understanding and forgiveness, are vital to this message. Smith has given serious consideration to the cultivation of the capacity to love, sharing with Richard Schechner in 2018 that "the revolution can begin with love, hospitality, and grace," an assertion she expanded on in an article about the pipeline project:

Could you ever imagine The Graduate School of Empathy and Love? I know that sounds ridiculous. But I also know that some individuals have a special aptitude for these core elements of our humanity. Those gifts should be honed, nourished, refined, and celebrated in the same way we cultivate athletic prowess, intellectual productivity, and business acumen. We need a generation of leaders who are as loving as they are strategic. We need such leaders to help us find ways to imagine ourselves as beings who could extend our concern beyond the boundaries of our front doors, our fences, our perceived self-interests, our skins. ([83])

Both *Notes From the Field* and *Pipeline* appeal to the hearts as well as the minds of their audiences; both portray personal stories within specific political contexts; both celebrate acts of civil disobedience; both valorize compassion, empathy, and love; and both feature embraces between human beings as personal actions with profound political implications. Although the ultimate goal or the desired effect of this raised awareness, heightened empathy, and commitment to active resistances to decommission—to safely remove from activity—the school-to-prison pipeline, the implications for more wide-ranging anti-racist activism, are profound.

## References

1. I would like to express my appreciation to JADT's editors and anonymous readers for their support and valuable feedback.
2. African Americans make up 13.6% of the total US population and 38.5% of the prison population; Latinos or Hispanic, 18.9% of the general population and 30.2% of the prison population; Native Americans, 1.3% of the general population and 2.6% of the prison population. (2021 statistics). See <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/US/PST045221>; [https://www.bop.gov/about/statistics/statistics\\_inmate\\_race.jsp](https://www.bop.gov/about/statistics/statistics_inmate_race.jsp); [https://www.bop.gov/about/statistics/statistics\\_inmate\\_ethnicity.jsp](https://www.bop.gov/about/statistics/statistics_inmate_ethnicity.jsp), accessed 1 March 2023.
3. See Lauren Camera, "Study Confirms School to Prison Pipeline," *US News and World Report*, July 27, 2021, <https://www.usnews.com/news/education-news/articles/2021-07-27/study-confirms-school-to-prison-pipeline>. Recently scholars have begun to favor the term "nexus" as a way to highlight the complex connections between educational, justice, and other social systems "which condition us to see people of color as inherently dangerous and in need of constant monitoring." See <https://westwinded.com/blog/understanding-the-school-to-prison-nexus/>, 19 October 2019, accessed 1 March 2023. Although I believe both terms, and concepts, are relevant to the works analyzed in this article, I see the term "pipeline" as a useful metaphor and in keeping with the terminology within the plays and author interviews.
4. Smith's works are frequently described as "documentary theatre" or "verbatim theatre."
5. For an interesting discussion of ways in which Morisseau veers from realism in this play, see Jonathon W. Taylor, "Revolutionary Spaces: Julia Kristeva Gwendolyn Brooks, and a Post-Pandemic Path Ahead in Dominique Morisseau's *Pipeline*," *Theatre Symposium* 30 (2023), 40-54.
6. A student at Brock University has produced an interesting study comparing the representation of black youth (and especially the trope of the absent father) in Singleton's *Boyz N the Hood* and Morisseau's *Pipeline*. See Linda Eronmhonsele, "Representation of Black Youth in John Singleton's *Boyz N the Hood* and Dominique Morisseau's *Pipeline*," Sept. 9, 2022, <https://dr.library.brocku.ca/handle/10464/16619?show=full>, accessed 18 August 2023. Interestingly, Morisseau includes an allusion to Season 4 of *The Wire* in *Pipeline* (p. 20).
7. Minou Arjomand, *Staged: Show Trials, Political Theater, and the Aesthetics of Judgment*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2018.
8. Dahy, Amal Saad Abu El-Leil. "Notes from the Field: Challenging the American Justice System and the School-to-Prison Pipeline in Anna Deavere Smith's Verbatim Theater," *fjhj.journals.ekb.eg*, no. 2 (2022): 1-23, Accessed 5 September 2023. Smith discusses the earlier version of this performance in an interview with Richard Schechner. After the first act, she stopped the show, divided the audience into groups of 20, and asked them to talk about the problem and to make commitments about solutions. See Richard Schechner, "There's a Lot of Work to Do to Turn this Thing Around," interview with Anna Deavere Smith, *TDR/The Drama Review* (2018) 62 (3 (239)): 35-50.
9. Geis, D. R., (2022) "Say Their Names: Drama of the Black Lives Matter Era", the *Black Theatre Review* 1(1), 71-80. doi: <https://doi.org/10.2458/tbtr.4824>, 1.
10. Amanda Stuart Fisher Performing the Testimonial: Rethinking Verbatim Dramaturgies, <https://www.manchesterhive.com/display/9781526145758/9781526145758.00011.xml>, 2020, accessed 3 September 2023. See also Ryan Claycomb, *In the Lurch: Verbatim Theater and the Crisis of Democratic Deliberation* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2023).
11. See Taylor.
12. Ibram X. Kendi, *Stamped from the Beginning: the Definitive History of Racist Ideas in America* (New York: Nation Books, 2016), 5.
13. Kimberlé Crenshaw, "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: a Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist theory, and Antiracist Politics," *University of Chicago Legal Forum* 1989 (1): 139.
14. Anna Deavere Smith, *Notes from the Field* (New York: Anchor Books, 2019, xv-xx).
15. See, for example, Carola Hilfrich, "Aesthetics of Unease: a Brechtian Study of Anna Deavere Smith's Eyewitness Performance in *Fires in the Mirror*," *Partial Answers: Journal of Literature and the History of Ideas* (June 2009): 299-318; Charles R. Lyons and James C. Lyons, "Anna Deavere Smith: Perspectives on Her Performance Within the Context of Critical Theory," *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism* (Fall 1994): 43-66.
16. Quoted in Alison Stolpa, "Anna Devere Smith: Voices from the Gaps," Retrieved from University of Minnesota Digital Conservancy, 2005, 2, <https://conservancy.umn.edu/bitstream/handle/11299/166329/Smith,%20Anna%20Deavere.pdf;sequence=>, accessed 30 May 2022.
17. *Ibid.*, 27.
18. *Ibid.*, 42, 44.
19. *Ibid.*, 52.
20. *Ibid.*, 105.
21. *Ibid.*, 60-61.
22. *Ibid.*, 62-63.
23. *Ibid.*, 13.
24. *Ibid.*, 76.

25. Ibid., 84.
26. Ibid., 91-92.
27. Ibid., 108-9, 112.
28. Ibid., 116-17.
29. Ibid., 125, 127, 128-29.
30. See Jeffrey Reiman and Paul Leighton, *The Rich Get Richer and the Poor Get Prison: Ideology, Class, and Criminal Justice* (London: Pearson 2012); Randall G. Sheldon and Pavel V. Vasiliev, *Controlling the Dangerous Classes: A History of Criminal Justice in America*, 3rd ed. (Long Grove IL: Waveland Press, 2017); Maggie Germano, "How the US has Criminalized Poverty and How to Change That Now," *Forbes*, August 4, 2020, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/maggiegermano/2020/08/04/how-the-united-states-has-criminalized-poverty-and-how-to-change-that-now/?sh=55a21d913281>, accessed July 1 2023.
31. U.S. Poverty Statistics, U.S. Census Bureau, released September 13, 2022, <https://federalsafetynet.com/poverty-statistics/#:~:text=Blacks%20have%20the%20highest%20poverty,have%20the%20lowest%20at%208.1%25>, accessed July 6, 2023.
32. Ibid., 99.
33. See, for example, Ben Brantley, "Anna Deavere Smith's 'Notes From the Field' Delivers Voices of Despair and Hope," *New York Times*, 2 Nov. 2016, [www.proquest.com/usnews/docview/1835203616/fulltext/8433760FB1C44EBFPQ/8?accountid=14576](http://www.proquest.com/usnews/docview/1835203616/fulltext/8433760FB1C44EBFPQ/8?accountid=14576), accessed 15 May 2022.
34. Alisa Solomon, "Digging Up the Pipeline," <https://www.annadeaveresmith.org/digging-up-the-pipeline-by-alisa-solomon-2/>, accessed 15 May 2022.
35. Zachary Stewart, "Notes From the Field," *theatermania*, November 02, 2016, [https://www.theatermania.com/off-broadway/reviews/notes-from-the-field\\_78996.html](https://www.theatermania.com/off-broadway/reviews/notes-from-the-field_78996.html), accessed 15 May 2022.
36. *Notes From the Field*, HBO-TV movie, directed by Kristi Zea. 2018. Now streaming on HULU, [www.hulu.com/movie/notes-from-the-field-dfb792f7-37f2-4b8e-8bc7-51576f0ad71d](http://www.hulu.com/movie/notes-from-the-field-dfb792f7-37f2-4b8e-8bc7-51576f0ad71d)
37. Alexis Soloski, "Notes from the Field Review—a One-Woman Study of Incarceration," *The Guardian*, 2 November 2016, [www.theguardian.com/stage/2016/nov/02/notes-from-the-field-anna-deavere-smith](http://www.theguardian.com/stage/2016/nov/02/notes-from-the-field-anna-deavere-smith), accessed 16 May 2022.
38. Ben Brantley, "Voices of Despair and Hope"; Helen Shaw, "Many Voices Unite in Anna Deavere Smith's New Documentary Play," *Village Voice*, 8 Nov. 2016, [www.villagevoice.com/2016/11/08/many-voices-unite-in-anna-deavere-smiths-new-documentary-play/](http://www.villagevoice.com/2016/11/08/many-voices-unite-in-anna-deavere-smiths-new-documentary-play/); Zachary Stewart, "Notes From the Field," accessed 15 May 2022.
39. Victoria Myers, "An Interview with Dominique Morisseau," *The Interval*, 25 July 2017, [www.theintervalny.com/interviews/2017/07/an-interview-with-dominique-morisseau/](http://www.theintervalny.com/interviews/2017/07/an-interview-with-dominique-morisseau/), accessed 12 May 2022.
40. Ibid.
41. Dominique Morisseau, *Pipeline* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 2018), 5.
42. Ben Brantley, "Review: A Mother Fervently Tries to Protect Her Son in Pipeline," *New York Times*, 10 July 2017, [www.nytimes.com/2017/07/10/theater/pipeline-review.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2017/07/10/theater/pipeline-review.html), accessed 18 May 2022.
43. Morisseau, *Pipeline*, 11.
44. Ibid., 24.
45. Ibid., 28-9.
46. Ibid., 35-6.
47. Ibid., 38.
48. Ibid., 41.
49. Mahajoy A. Laufer, "Black Students' Silence in Predominantly White Institutions of Higher Learning," (*Smith Scholar Works* 2012), 2, 16, [scholarworks.smith.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1716&context=theses](http://scholarworks.smith.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1716&context=theses), accessed 15 May 2022.
50. Morisseau, *Pipeline*, 49.
51. Ibid., 52.
52. Ibid., 5.
53. Ibid., 24, 26, 32, 39, 43, 52, 58, 64, 65, 73, 74.
54. Ibid., 74.
55. The phrase "I Can't Breathe" is now widely used to protest police brutality and racial inequality. According to the *New York Times*, the phrase has been used by over 70 people who died in police custody. Mike Baker et al, "Three Words: 70 Cases. The Tragic History of 'I Can't Breathe,'" *New York Times* 29 June 2020, [www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/06/28/us/i-cant-breathe-police-arrest.html](http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/06/28/us/i-cant-breathe-police-arrest.html), accessed 16 May 2022.
56. Morisseau, *Pipeline*, 5.
57. Ibid., 79.
58. Ibid., 79.
59. Ibid., 82.
60. Ibid., 83.
61. Rohan Preston, "'Being Human is Not Conditional': Playwright Dominique Morisseau Seeks to Expand Ideas around Black Kids in Pipeline," *Minneapolis Star Tribune*, 29 Sept. 2019: E.5. |
62. Morisseau, *Pipeline*, 86.
63. Ibid., 89.
64. Ibid., 55.
65. Ibid., 90.
66. Bill Marx, "Pipeline a Didactic Excursion," *Artsfuse*, 11 May 2020, [artsfuse.org/tag/nora-theatre-company/](http://artsfuse.org/tag/nora-theatre-company/), accessed 19 May 2022.
67. Ben Brantley, "Race, Schooling and Inequality: Let's Watch 'Pipeline,'" *New York Times*, 20 May 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/20/theater/pipeline-play-stream.html>, accessed 18 May 2022.
68. Recent sociological research has affirmed these beliefs. See, for example, Steve Rathje, Leor Hackett and Jamil Zaki, "Attending live theatre improves empathy, changes attitudes, and leads to pro-social behavior," *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, Vol. 95 July 2021, 104138, ScienceDirect.com.
69. Dominique Morisseau, "Rules of Engagement," [www.centalsquaretheater.org/2019-20-season/articles/from-the-playwright-dominique-morisseaus-rules-of-engagement/](http://www.centalsquaretheater.org/2019-20-season/articles/from-the-playwright-dominique-morisseaus-rules-of-engagement/), accessed 11 May 2022.
70. Myers Interview.
71. Kendi, *Stamped*, 506-09.
72. Sadiya V. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-making in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 20-21.
73. Paul Butler, interview on "All In with Chris Hayes," MSNBC, 25 June 2015, [www.msnbc.com/all-in/watch/i-have-no-respect-for-your-ancestors-471529027890](http://www.msnbc.com/all-in/watch/i-have-no-respect-for-your-ancestors-471529027890), accessed 18 May 2022.
74. Claycomb, 123.
75. Fisher, 179.
76. Biography.com Editors, "Biography of Bree Newsome," A&E Television Networks, 26 January 2021, [www.biography.com/activist/bree-newsome](http://www.biography.com/activist/bree-newsome), accessed 20 June 2022. Newsome herself integrates art and activism in her work as a musician/songwriter.
77. Angela Davis Interview, *CBS Sunday Morning*, 29 May 2022. See also John Belluso, [inspire.redlands.edu/work/sc/c831d110-5886-42a1-857c-ca69cd7e8738](http://inspire.redlands.edu/work/sc/c831d110-5886-42a1-857c-ca69cd7e8738); Guillermo del Toro, [time.com/5520554/guillermo-del-toro-](http://time.com/5520554/guillermo-del-toro-)

radicaloptimism/#:~:text=No%20hope%20is%20ever%20too,rebllious%20and%20daring%20and%20vital; Junot Díaz, www.columbiatribune.com/story/news/education/2018/01/22/junot-diaz-preaches-optimism-during/16028788007/; and Ava Duvernay, time.com/optimists-2019/, accessed 30 May 2022.

78. David Remnick, "Ten Years After the New Jim Crow," an interview with Michelle Alexander, *New Yorker*, January 17 2020, <https://www.newyorker.com/news/the-new-yorker-interview/ten-years-after-the-new-jim-crow>, accessed 8 March 2023.

[1] NiGen, "Pipeline Decommissioning Process in Oil and Gas," 29 January 2021, [nigen.com/pipeline-decommissioning-process-in-oil-and-gas/](http://nigen.com/pipeline-decommissioning-process-in-oil-and-gas/), accessed 15 June 2022.

80. Ed Siegel, "Pipeline Tries To Find Space For The Anger Of Young Black Men At Central Square Theater," *WBUR News*, [www.wbur.org/news/2020/03/11/pipeline-nora-central-square-theater-review](http://www.wbur.org/news/2020/03/11/pipeline-nora-central-square-theater-review) 11 March 2020, accessed 14 May 2022.

81. Harvey Young, "Pipeline: Central Square Theater," *Performing Arts Journal* 129 (2021):44.

82. Kendi, *Stamped*, 506.

83. Anna Deavere Smith, "Toward Empathetic Imagination and Action," [www.annadeaveresmith.org/toward-empathetic-imagination-and-action-2/](http://www.annadeaveresmith.org/toward-empathetic-imagination-and-action-2/), accessed 1 June 2022. See also Schechner, 44. Smith's ideas regarding the transformative power of love resonate with those of the late, celebrated feminist author/activist bell hooks; see especially hooks's *Love Song to the Nation* trilogy: *All About Love: New Visions* (William Morrow Paperbacks, 2018); *Salvation: Black People and Love* (William Morrow Paperbacks, 2001); *Communion: the Female Search for Love* (William Morrow Paperbacks, 2002)

## About The Authors

**Cheryl Black** is a Curators Distinguished Professor Emerita from the University of Missouri, a Fellow in the College of Fellows of the American Theatre, a Fellow of the Mid-America Theatre Conference, a former president of ATDS, and the author/editor of four books and numerous book chapters and articles. She is also an actor/director/playwright whose current project is directing her *Patriot Acts: A Suffrage Pageant for Our Times* at Union College, where she holds a visiting position for AY 2023-24.

# Journal of American Drama & Theatre

JADT publishes thoughtful and innovative work by leading scholars on theatre, drama, and performance in the Americas – past and present. Provocative articles provide valuable insight and information on the heritage of American theatre, as well as its continuing contribution to world literature and the performing arts. Founded in 1989 and previously edited by Professors Vera Mowry Roberts, Jane Bowers, and David Savran, this widely acclaimed peer reviewed journal is now edited by Dr. Benjamin Gillespie and Dr. Bess Rowen.

Journal of American Drama and Theatre is a publication of the [Martin E. Segal Theatre Center](#).



[Visit Journal Homepage](#)

### Table of Contents

Community Circles and Love Triangles: Gun Violence and Belonging in Oklahoma! and West Side Story

More than a Props List: Redefining Material Culture as Survival and Pleasure in Lynn Nottage's *Ruined*

Decommissioning the School-to-Prison Pipeline: Anna Deavere Smith's Notes from the Field and Dominique Morisseau's *Pipeline*

The Politics of Trance: Victoria Woodhull and the Radical Reform of Platform Mediumship

PERFORMANCE IN THE ZÓCALO: CONSTRUCTING HISTORY, RACE, AND INDENTITY IN MEXICO'S CENTRAL SQUARE FROM THE COLONIAL ER...

MADE UP ASIANS: YELLOWFACE DURING THE EXCLUSION ERA. Esther Kim Lee. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2022; Pp. 268.

BEYOND TEXT: THEATER AND PERFORMANCE IN PRINT AFTER 1900. Jennifer Buckley. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2019; Pp. 278.

EMILY MANN: REBEL ARTIST OF THE AMERICAN THEATRE. Alexis Greene. Guilford, CT: Applause Theatre & Cinema Books, 2023; Pp. 391

[Previous](#)

[Next](#)

### Attribution

© 2023

Martin E. Segal Theatre Center, The CUNY Graduate Center

365 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10016-4309 | ph: 212-817-1860 | [mestc@gc.cuny.edu](mailto:mestc@gc.cuny.edu)



- [Back to Top](#) ●
- [Untitled](#) ○
- [Article](#) ○
- [References](#) ○
- [Authors](#) ○
- [Keep Reading](#) ○