Chapter Two

Framing the Context: PostBlack in Performance

This chapter is a theoretical attempt to locate and relocate, define and redefine two major concepts used in examining Anna Deavere Smith’s artistic project—‘Performance’ and ‘PostBlack’. This endeavour relies in a special way on both contemporary theory and the recent theorisations of the expressive culture of African-Americans. ‘Performance’ and ‘Post Black’ have immense contextual significance and theoretical import vis-à-vis the cultural domain within which we analyse Smith’s performances.

Performance: The New Paradigm

The concept of ‘performance’ emerged in the wake of several theoretical ramifications and paradigm shifts in the realms of politics, theory and aesthetics in recent decades. Smith’s performance practice is located at the interface of many subgenres of ‘theatre’ such as documentary theatre, community theatre, clinical theatre, and talk show theatre. At the same time, the very intention and significance of her project lie at the intersection of social, cultural, psychological domains.
Moreover, in the context of the foretold death of the ‘theatre’, it is largely illogical to define Smith’s works in clear-cut terms like ‘theatre’ and ‘drama’ (Schechner 1992, 9). Hence the concept of ‘performance’ is brought to the focus of this study to resolve all critical complexities and nuances in her works, especially regarding their genre. This effort is made specifically in the context of the emergence of ‘Performance Studies’ as a significant academic discipline or multi-discipline among practitioners of cultural studies.

The concept of ‘Theatre’ has moved far beyond conventional division of ‘actors’ and ‘spectators’ with the evolution of a complex set of aesthetic practices ranging from ‘Live Art’ to ‘Multimedia Performance’ since nineteen seventies. Herein the hierarchical relationship between the actor and the spectator is completely dissolved and the intra-subjective relationship is subjected to profound critical scrutiny. Theatre has almost become a space of action, as Antoine Artaud prophesied, where “a direct communication will be established between spectator and spectacle, between the actor and the spectator” (Artaud 1958, 96). Therefore contemporary theoretical experimentations tend to break the fourth wall of stage which distinguished the spectacle and spectator.
'Theatre' thus becomes a part in a bigger project called 'Performance', which includes a variety of practices. Brooks McNamara observed, "[P]erformance studies came to insist that the theatre is merely one of many forms that have always made up a large phenomenon – performance" (Martin 1994, xii). The evolution of the notion of 'Performance' which signifies a set of human activities ranging from rituals to sports, greetings to ceremonies and family scenes to rites is defined in a variety of ways. As Richard Schechner observes:

Performance is an inclusive term. Theatre is only one node on a continuum that reaches from the ritualizations of animals (including humans) through performances in every day life – greetings, displays of emotion, family scenes, professional roles, and so on – through to play, sports, theatre, dance, ceremonies, rites and performances of great magnitude. (1997, xiii)

This shifted interest in performance signals a crisis in certain notions pertaining to drama. On the one hand, the emphasis on performance is emblematic of the revolt against the authorial position of the playwright in theatre in the wake of post-structuralist theorising. On the other, performance is pitted against theatre, which is charged
with the authority of the dramatist with actors disciplined to represent fictional entities.

Schechner argued that a new paradigm emerged to dismantle theatre studies (1992, 9). The notion of a ‘paradigm shift’ used by Schechner to define ‘Performance’, is adapted from Thomas Kuhn’s *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. This signifies the emergence of a new paradigm and the invalidation of the old one. According to this logic, theatre studies would not be a subject of performance studies — it would be the “repudiated paradigm,” as Philip Auslander observes (1997, 3).

While relocating ‘theatre,’ there emerges the idea that the notion of ‘theatre’ is closely embedded in ‘power.’ Pierre Bourdieu’s remark that theatre is a space where different groups such as playwrights, actors, critics and spectators are constructed according to the hierarchical principles reinstates this fact (1984, 234). Hence ‘theatre’ is an institution that practises ideological domination over its subjects and “performances in theatre buildings are deeply embedded in theatre as a disciplinary system” (Kershaw 99, 31). The same argument holds in the case of Museums, Galleries, Art Market and Literature. All such institutions have undoubtedly embarked on creating aesthetic canons
and denote the legitimisation of hegemonic genres. As a reaction against the institutionalisation of art, there emerged an enormous variety of anti-aesthetic or para-aesthetic movements, deconstructing the modernistic concept of art and its universalised aesthetic concepts. Performance in this sense evolved as an anti-thesis to institutionalised theatrical practices. Schechner argues that theatre is an extremely limited genre and a subdivision of performance. Hence a broad spectrum of activities such as “entertainment, arts, rituals, politics, economies and person to person interactions” are gathered under the rubric of performance (1999, 87). Basically, the notion of performance signifies an activity done by an individual or a group in the presence of and for another individual or group.

In ‘theatre’, immobility is the hallmark of the spectator. But performance is the realm of the spectator and script, drama and theatre thus become various aspects of performance. ‘Script’ is used by ancient dancers and Shamans and the performers of the present. Script is, therefore, not the text or the written document, but a pre-existing pattern. For instance, in a ‘rite’, script maintains the rite intact contributing to its efficacy. Script is the ‘pattern of doing’ (Schechner 1997, 70-71). ‘Drama’ arose, long after the invention of writing, as a specialised form of scripting. Therefore, cultural manifestations, as
Schechner suggests, “previously encoded in patterns of doing were later encoded in patterns of written words” (1997, 71). Owing to the primacy of the written word, drama achieved a special privilege displacing the script in the West. ‘Theatre’ is the place where the drama is enacted. ‘Performance’ is an all inclusive term that contains the spectators, drama, script, theatre, rehearsals, criticisms, and other debates about any of the elements mentioned above. “The ‘drama’ is the domain of the author, the composer, scenarist, shaman; the script is the domain of the performers, ‘performance’ is the domain of the audience” (Schechner 1997, 70-71). In certain situations, the author of the dramatic text is both the master and the performer or the performer functions as audience too. Similarly, the line of separation between performance and everyday life is ever shifting, arbitrary and culture specific. The exponents of performance studies located ‘theatre’ within the broad region of performance practices and the central element in theatre is the script. The essence is that “the drama is what the writer writes, the script is the interior map of a particular production, the theatre is the specific set of gestures performed by the performers in any given performance, the performance is the whole event, including audience and performers” (Schechner, 1997, 85). Since drama is a specialised form of script, theatre is a special kind of performance.
In 1960s and Seventies, ‘performance’ became a term signalling an arresting range of cultural activities. Activities described as performances - popular entertainments, speech acts, folk lore, political demonstrations, conference behaviour, rituals, medical and religious healing, and aspects of everyday life - cut across and reframe aesthetically determined genres and institutionalised boundaries of gender, class, race and identity. According to Baz Kershaw, the concept of performance is associated with ‘performative societies’:

Performative societies in contemporary world are found particularly where democracy and capitalism meet . . . especially in highly mediatised societies, the performative becomes a major element in the continuous negotiations of power and authority . . . Hence, late capitalist multiparty democracies produce societies in which performance pervades cultural process: it becomes the sine qua non of human exchange in virtually all spheres of the social. (1999, 13)

Performance has become a key term in almost all fields of human activity from computers to economics, bringing into focus the concept of contemporary societies with performance as the central norm. The ‘late-capitalist’ societies prefer humans who perform well because this is a basic criterion of success. Contemporary performance practices are
an organic outcome of late-capitalist cultural and political context and they co-exist with late capitalist, postmodern tendencies in the world of art.

In major performance theories as well as post structuralist theories of the last few decades, performance is defined in opposition to mainstream theatrical conventions and systems. In theatre, actors are disciplined, controlled and contained to the extent that the world of dramatic action provides them a sense of total identification with the fictional characters. ‘Performance’ primarily challenges the authority of the dramatic text, actorly identification and the role of the spectator. The concept of the ‘canonical actor’ is deconstructed in the specific contexts thus paving the way for the rise of performance, which centres on the polymorphous body of the performer. Eventually the focus in performance today has shifted from authority to effect, from text to body and to the spectatorial freedom to remake and transform meaning.

The impact of post-structuralist and postmodernist theorising as well as the emergence of a number of performance groups such as Joseph Chaikin’s ‘The Open Theatre’, Richard Schechner’s the ‘Performance Garage’, Richard Forman’s ‘Ontological-Hysteric Theatre’ and ‘National Black Theatre’, contributed much to the new
performance idiom in the sixties. *TDR: The Drama Review* and the *Performing Arts Journal* played a seminal role in bringing up provocative debates about the new genre.

Basically ‘performance’ was a reaction to ‘theatre’, which was the locus of the authority of the dramatic text and disciplining of the spectator. *Performance* practices attempt at dismantling the textual authority and the actors’ canonically authorial and interpretative position. The theatrical conventions of ‘role playing’ are rejected in favour of *presenting* the polymorphously permeable and tactile body of the ‘performer.’ With clear postmodern emphasis, the focus of contemporary performance practices is encrusted with multiple meanings and simultaneously existing multiplicity of realities denying a single, authentic meaning and a universal ‘reality.’

The formation of an enbroadened genre that eclipses many conventional aesthetic categories and measures can be traced back to the aesthetic/political polemic constituted by the ‘Body Art’ and ‘Live Art’ in the sixties and seventies. One of the major objectives of Body Art was the end of aesthetic distancing signalled by a total collapse of the distances between the Artist, the spectator and the artwork. At the same time, the performing body in those movements challenged the canonical
criteria of modernistic art history and criticism. The performing body which is coloured, queer, female or hyper masculine in Body Art was posited antithetical to the ideology of the modernistic aesthetics that brought home the culturally hegemonic idea of the performer’s body as white male. The performance projects of Carolee Shneeman, Yayoi Kusama, Hans Namuth, Shigeko Kubota and Vito Acconcy represent a subversion of conventional aesthetic canons as well as subject positions of modernity.

These projects insistently pose the subject as inter subjective rather than complete within itself (the Cartesian subject, which is centred, and fully self-knowing in its cognition). These projects make clear that the Cartesian “I think therefore I am” logic powering modernist art theory and practice wherein the body (privileged as male) is transcended through pure thought or creation is no longer viable in the decentering region of ‘post modernism.’

(Jones, A 1998, 10)

The ‘body’ in the ‘Body Art’ is viewed precisely as a locus of disintegrated self. This view challenges the illusion of the substantial unity of the body projected in the critical quarters of modernity.
Therefore many performers in 60’s and 70’s preferred ‘Body Art’ to ‘Performance Art’.

The post modernist re-invention of marginalised voices with its sharp antithesis to modernist institutions resulted in an amazing array of performance strategies. Women’s performance art, African American performances and performance from the third world are specific instances of performances from the margins. Jeanie Forte in her attempt to locate women’s Performance Art in postmodern context argued that performance art attacks the very structured institutions of modernism by throwing into doubt the accepted practices of knowledge acquisition and accumulation (1989, 251). The performative disruptions of a number of performers such as Caren Finley, Angelica Festa, Adrian Piper, Carolee Shneemann and Rachel Rosenthal problematised the relationship between art and life, Cartesian self and postmodern subject.

With a strong reference to the deconstructive strategy, women’s performance practices put into question the notion of ‘female essence.’ As Derrida pointed out, there is “no such thing as the essence of woman . . . she engulfs and distorts all vestiges of essentiality of identity of property” (1978, 51). This sort of a de-essentializing move is most evident in contemporary women’s performance practices, which
challenge patriarchal systems of representation constituting ‘woman’ as objectified other. The disruptive rigour of women’s performance art lies in the positioning of woman as a speaking subject in a process of destabilising the notion of a single, unified subject.

A similar tendency of deconstructing the essentially Black subjectivity constituted by white hegemonic narratives is visible in contemporary African American performance art. This subversive performance practice is examined on the grounds of African-Americanist reading of poststructuralist and postmodern theories with a special reference to the performatives of slavery.

**PostBlack: Interrogating Blackness**

The term ‘Post Black’ denotes a set of cultural practices belonging to the African-Americans in postidentity social, political and aesthetic contexts. The word ‘postidentity’ signals an era after the regime of identity politics and subsequent artistic and intellectual practices predominant in the third quarter of the last century focusing on the ‘essential Blackness.’ This concept of Post Black dismantles the essentialist tradition of black identity politics and the artistic practices attached to it. Simultaneously, the term signifies the formation of black subjectivity pitted against the unified, universalistic and single
The postmodern theoretical practices have most ostensibly given voices to the cultures and communities from the margins of the first world such as the oppressed of the third world, women, blacks, homosexuals and victims of AIDS by deconstructing the metanarratives of Eurocentric view of the world. As Peter Brooker suggests “The decentring process of postmodernism has questioned ethnocentric, epistemological and cultural models, foregrounding subordinated or marginalised discourses and traditions” (1992, 213). The postmodern context gave vent to voices, which were marginalised and oppressed by hegemonic cultures.

African-American intellectuals, Cornel West and bell hooks have conducted extensive studies on the impact of postmodernism on multiple levels of black existence as well as on its contribution to the formation of radical black subjectivity. The emergence of ‘post-black’ aesthetics coexists with the decentering process of postmodernism. Cornel West, as an exponent of African-American postmodern theoretical practices emphasises three crucial things in his approach to the problematic of modernity/postmodernity and
modernism/postmodernism. They are historical periodization, demarcation of cultural practices and politics/ideology (West 1992, 213). The philosophy known as ‘modern’ begins with the turn towards the subject and the new authority, institutionalisation and scientifisation. West established subtle differences between postmodernism in Europe and in America. In Europe, specifically in France, postmodernism emerged as a response to modernism, which has a crucial role in defining contemporary Europe or France. For instance, cultural postmodernism in France was pitted against the modernism, which was a centring phenomenon in which Mallarme, Artaud and Bataille play crucial roles. But in America postmodern art is the avant-garde, reacting against academic/aesthetic and cultural establishments and institutions.

West’s analysis of the impact of poststructuralist, postmodern philosophy on African-American life and cultural practices brings out a shifted interest and orientation. For instance, the much celebrated debate between Lyotard and Jurgen Habermas is criticised as a ‘family affair’ because Habermas stands for the grand tradition of enlightenment where, Lyotard’s attack in postmodern condition comes out of valorisation of the transgression of modernism. Europe furnishes the locus and context of such theorisations. But West finds Gilles Deleuze
as a seminal figure in contemporary postmodern thought due to his resurrections of Nietzschean mode of nihilism as against the historical dialectics of Hegel and its valorisations by Lukacs and Sartre due to his resurrection of Nietzsche against Hegel. Michel Foucault’s declaration that the present age is ‘Deleuzian’, signalling thereby his presence as crucial in postmodern discourse, is a matter of great interest for West. The Deleuzian reinvention of Nietzsche in opposition to Hegel has a major role in the present day thought because the characteristic features of poststructuralist, postmodern thought — the trashing of totality, valorisation of difference outside subject-object position and the decentring of the subject — emanate from him.

Cornel West illustrated a shift in sensibility and in political consciousness in the last few years of the twentieth century. This is specifically because of a new cultural worker in the making associated with a new ‘cultural politics of difference’. The cultural politics of difference brings forth a challenge to what is monolithic and homogeneous as well as abstract, general and universal. Diversity, multiplicity and heterogeneity with a profound obsession with concrete, specific and particular are brought to the focus of this concept “to historicize, contextualise and pluralize by highlighting the contingent, provisional, variable, tentative, shifting and changing” (West 1999,
It is evident that the emerging cultural politics of difference is intertwined with poststructuralist, postmodern theories. Hence it seems to evince a paradigm shift by highlighting an uncanny rigour in redefining all systems of representations as well as issues like race, class, gender, empire, sexuality, nation, art and politics.

Cornel West located four major historic fronts of theoretical activity, which provide resources to analyse the representational practices of the Black subject. They are Heideggerian destruction of Western metaphysical tradition, Derridean deconstruction of the Western metaphysical tradition, Richard Rorty's demythologization of Western intellectual tradition and the demystification of Western culture and art by Marxists, feminists and Foucauldians (West 1999, 131). All the above mentioned approaches mark the decline of European modernity and the emergence of a context that signifies a deepening concern about the deterioration of the project of modernity. A severe crisis in the authority of science, deterioration of modernist paganism and the philosophical attack on the primacy of the subject are the major characteristics of this context.

He defines a significant difference between the appropriation of cultural postmodernism (the European version of postmodernism) and
postmodern politics (The American postmodernism with a strong emphasis on the political dimension): “These American attacks on universality in the name of these ‘postmodern’ issues of Otherness (Afro-Americans, native Americans, women, gays) are in fact an implicit critique of certain French postmodern discourses about Otherness that really serve to hide and conceal the power of the voices and movements of Others” (West 1992, 215). Hence postmodernism in African-American context has become a very powerful critical tool in the hands of intellectuals to reinvestigate the political process of constitution of black subjectivity.

Postmodernist theoretical practice with its fundamental opposition to the modernist discourse and the essentialist identity politics provided the purview of such an interrogation. As a result, the notion of ‘identity’, central to the Black liberatory struggle was subjected to a destabilising critique. The notion of a unified and universalised Black identity existed as a purveyor of white hegemony in the context of metanarratives of modernity. Postmodernist theoretical enterprise argued that the modernistic metanarratives prevented the formation of a radical black subjectivity as well as a post identity exploration of Black presence. As bell
hooks observed, “The critique of essentialism encouraged by postmodernist thought is useful for African-Americans concerned with reformulating outdated notions of identity. We have too long had imposed upon us from both the outside and inside a narrow, constricting notion of blackness” (hooks 1990, 30).

The Black rage against the misrepresentation and production of stereotypes more or less stemmed from the notion of an essential Black identity, which would make them visible. The contemporary re-mapping of the ideology of modernism revealed that the perpetuation of the notion of an authentic Black identity by employing the modernist critical tools itself was central to the colonial and imperialist practices. As a result of this process, the universalised, single dimensional Black identity served as the ‘other’ in legitimising the white supremacist discourse.

The Black liberatory movement can more or less be easily identified with the modernist identity politics. The notion of a monolithic and universal Black identity emerged out of the modernist agenda of universalism, which included a modernist notion of liberatory
politics. As a result, the activities of Black liberatory movement were most systematically silenced by the repressive state apparatus.

At the same time, African-American artistic practices served a locus of resistance seeking the expression of oppressed slaves. Such practices emerged as an exact anti-thesis to the aesthetic standards and norms perpetuated by the white supremacist culture. This is most evident in the rejection of the canonical 'high art' by the Black art movements. 'High art,' being a notion which evolved from modernistic aesthetics as well as hegemonic choices excluded community, social life, popular art and politics from the realm of art.

The diasporic experience and the nightmares of slavery invested a sense of beauty in African-American life. The sense of beauty created in a collective context has become integral to everyday life “enhancing the survival and development of community” (hooks 1990,105). Hence the artistic expression as the cultural production of the African-Americans has an intrinsic social and political function. One major instance of this merging up of the aesthetic with the social and cultural spheres can be seen in the deliberate articulation of the black self as it happened in the sixties and seventies in theatre, popular music and poetry. The emphasis on the black self as a progenitor as well as
medium of expressive cultures intensified the intimacy between cultural production and revolutionary politics. Ultimately these practices resulted in the absorption of art into politics.

In the fifties and sixties, Black political movements as well as black art movements – the demarcation was almost inconceivable – as bell hooks suggested, prevented the community from experiencing the complex state of existence and the multiplicity of realities which permeated the American society in the wake of the late capitalist, post industrial context. Hence, the paradigms for artistic creation offered by the Black art movement were most often restrictive and disempowering. On the other hand, the essentialist reading of African-American cultural politics unambiguously defined black subjectivity exactly in the same manner as the white supremacist ideology located the ‘Black’ as the ‘Other.’

African-American intelligentsia achieved significant advancement in critiquing the essentialist cultural politics as well as modernist motions of aesthetics by critically positioning themselves in post-modern intellectual contexts. For instance, bell hooks and Cornel West have conducted remarkable research in finding a paradigm that subverts the modernistic aesthetic discourse and cultural polities by
acknowledging “that we are constantly changing positions, locations, that our needs and concerns vary, that these diverse directions correspond with the shifts in critical thinking” (hooks 1990, 111). Postmodernist critique of essentialism and convictions about post-identity scenario opened up the possibilities of a postmodern political approach in the wake of continued displacement, profound alienation and despair as contemporary black realities. As a result, the notion of radical aesthetics emerged within the context of postmodernist reformulation of artistic praxis and cultural production.

The critique of ‘authentic black identity’ within postmodern critical context is capable of enabling the black subject to affirm multiple identities, which destabilise representations of black life restricted as stereotypes. Simultaneously the critique of essentialism hinders the metanarratives of modernity, which permitted only a few privileged voices to speak from their legitimised critical locations. In such theoretical contexts, ‘Difference’ and ‘Otherness,’ being seminal notions of a postmodernist political approach, have become the major critical concepts in encountering race and racism. Hence bell hooks recalled the emergence of postmodern political practice in the graveyard of Black identity politics: “Radical postmodernist practice most powerfully conceptualised as a ‘politics of difference’ should
incorporate the voices of the displaced, marginalised, exploited and oppressed black people” (1990, 25). Similarly, this critical context provided a space for the collective voice of all marginalised categories including minorities, gays, lesbians, natives, HIV positives and people of colour.

In the post slavery period, expressive black culture emphasised the growth of performance practices due to a desire to inscribe their bodies as liberated spaces, which in times of slavery, were marked by bondage, captivity and domination. For instance, black children in the post slavery period were taught to appreciate and participate in ‘live arts’ including dramatic reading of poetry monologues or plays. This is often viewed as a political challenge to the racist assumption about the creative draught of the black folks who are “... In imagination ... dull, tasteless and anomalous” according to Thomas Jefferson’s Notes On the State of Virginia (Smith 2000, 132). This particular aspect of post-slavery black community is emphasised by bell hooks. “In our all black schools and churches, performance was a place of celebration, a ritual play wherein one announced liberatory subjectivity” (1995, 211).

Similarly, African-American history has a long tradition of transforming the spoken word into a performance act. Human voice
always was treated as a performance instrument precisely because of its availability without material resources. Using voice and body as vital medium, Black folks performed everywhere outside the institutionalised art and academia. Hence it is evident that the major source of origin of Black performative practices was the special stress and import given to oration and the recitation of poetry. Voicing out the myriad experiences of Black life and its grim realities has eventually become an activity of political significance. The process of speaking out the African-American spectrum of experiences is a process of creating a world of emancipatory struggles. This performative process of speaking out happens in two dimensions: one by voicing one's own voice and the other by capturing others voice almost as a process of mimicking. Both are capable of transgressing the bounds of accepted notions of speech, and in a wider realm, accepted notions of language by which a process of decolonisation of self takes place: "... the performing arts have been crucial to the process by which we, as African-Americans, decolonise our minds and imagination" (hooks 1995, 213). Performance has become a crucial category in redefining African-American self because performances problematise their voices and bodies. In a list of prismatic African-American performers, bell hooks included Martin Luther King and Malcom X as practitioners of performance strategy with Ritchie
Havens, Haki Madubuli, Amiri Baraka and Nikki Giovanni. The reason for this inclusion that their speeches moved the Black masses due to their excellence in using human speech as ‘live art’ (1995, 215) is most striking.

To trace the historical formation of performance art and its significance as the expressive culture of the oppressed in the performance tradition of black culture in America, bell hooks emphasised a major trait by taking into account, the poor homeless black people engaged in ritualistic performances as possessed spirits in the cities on a variety of issues. These practices embodied “an amalgamation of ancient traditions where one performed especially during rites of possession, for ritual purposes, or to use the notion of manipulative performance for survival” (hooks 1995, 210). This amalgamation brings in a complex state of withered self which articulates facets of African-American postmodern subjectivity, constructed through absence of community, alienation from everyday reality, oppressive political situation and absence of tangible and organised resistance.

For contemporary African-Americanist cultural production, performance art provided immense possibilities of problematising their
subject positions, especially their relationship to the white hegemony as well as community. The subversion of tradition and denial of convention inherent in the concept of performance art enabled the practitioners to do things in a multiplicity of ways. Renowned performer Cocofusco once pointed out:

Our presence (the presence of performers from marginalized communities) has been heard as a sign of the milieus new cultural diversity, but our entry and post modernist debates that encircle us have also been associated with the dismantling of hierarchical categories that set “high art” performances apart from the performance practices of vernacular cultures, which – for some – signals the end of performance art form.” (1995, 158)

This argument is further fuelled in the case of African-American performers by shifting the meanings of race and identity in performance. Disruption of mainstream sensibility, which is predominantly white, was the hallmark of the performers from the margins such as Anna Deavere Smith, Adrian Piper and Cocofusco. Simultaneously ‘performance practices’ provoked powerful challenges to the dominant narratives of capitalism and mediatisation as well. This phenomenon, for many of the
contemporary African-American and intellectuals takes place in all disciplines, institutions, systems, of thought and sensibility. Cornel West’s attempt to define such cultural praxis in the wake of late capitalist media culture and commodification brings in the notion of the ‘cultural politics of difference’ to specify the over shifting positions in the postmodern context:

I would go so far as to claim that a new kind of cultural worker is in the making, associated with a new politics of difference. These new forms of intellectual consciousness advance reconceptions of the vocation of critic and artist, attempting to undermine the prevailing disciplinary division of labour in the academy museum, mass media and gallery networks, while preserving modes of critique within the ubiquitous commodification of culture in the global village. (West, Cornel. 1999, 119)

Rigorous efforts have been made by intellectuals, performers and theorists of culture to name and define the newly emerged cultural context with convincing references to the process of giving voices to the subjects from the margins. Thelma Golden, curator of the studio museum in Harlem, described an exhibition of the works of twenty-eight
contemporary African-American artists titled ‘Free style’ as ‘Post-Black.’ It is “the shorthand for a discourse that could fill volumes” (Golden 2001, 14). The show was extensively energetic because of the versatility of a number of young artists working in so many media. It is observed that “urgency, emergency and bitterness have been replaced by something that could be called radical intelligence” (Saltz 2001, 51). The title, ‘Free Style’ is drawn from the parlance of popular music “which refers to the space where the musician or the dancer finds the groove and goes all out in a relentless and unbridled expression of the self” (Golden 2001, 14-17). The show was stylistically free, as the title suggests. Figurative and formalist paintings share the walls of the museum with video projection, photography and sculpture. Golden defined the show as “post-multicultural, post identity, post conceptual and post black” (Salt 2001, 52).

Golden was very particular in defining contemporary African-American aesthetic practices as a negation of the ideological and political undercurrents of the nationalistic aesthetic dogmas of the 1970’s Black art movement. “I was intellectually formed for the artist Raymond Saunder’s polemic; ‘Black is a colour’. It (contemporary African-American art) was characterised by artists who were adamant about not being labelled as ‘Black artists’ though their work was
steeped, in fact deeply interested in redefining complex notations of Blackness. Post black was the new Black” (2001, 14). The notion of new Black interrogates Blackness as essence.

The notion of ‘post-black’ is introduced in this study with a specific purpose and emphasis to signify the aesthetic practices of African-Americans at a particular moment described as “the context of no context” (Salt 2001, 52). This is cited as a vantage point from which the complex discussion of critical contexts, theoretical purview and cultural politics of postmodern African-American aesthetic practices is to be launched.

In the contours of post-black performances, the emphatic presence and exceptional contributions of women performers are undeniable. These performers have altered theatrical conventions as well as aesthetic canons by problematising the very act of performance. ‘Speaking the unspeakable’ is the term that most lucidity describes the visionary depth of such performance practices. Robbie McCauley, Adrian Piper and Anna Deavere Smith are the avant-garde practitioners of post-black performance art.

Robbie McCauley brought in the dialogics of history to the sharp focus of her performances. Rituals intervene in disguise throughout her
works with a powerful undercurrent of intra-community communication. Her work Sally’s Rape, employs direct address to the audience to import rape and slavery in history to the present with an emphasis on the present trauma of the people of colour. During the performance, the audience is invited to join the work by giving them clear-cut instructions. In order to recreate an episode from slave trade, McCauley stands naked on the auction block by designating the audience as buyers. There is a genuine effort to establish a blood relation to the country. “McCauley’s notion of ‘participatory listening’ offers a way to rethink the relationship between feminist performance and community as well as larger, audiences” (Dolan 1996, 13). Personal members merge with and often undercut through the collective political history of African-Americans in McCauley’s performances.

Adrian Piper made extensive use of photography in her performances and her early piece Food for the Spirit (1971) was publicised through a series of photographs of the original performance which was a private loft performance in which she photographed her physical and metaphysical changes during a long fasting and reading of Kant’s Critique of Pure Reason. (Jones, A 1998, 162). In one of her photographs of performance, she holds a camera just under her breasts and looks in a mirror naked. She appears both as an embodied woman –
as object of the camera’s gaze and the photographer of the image.

Piper’s performances are revolutionary in the sense that they challenge the dominance of visibility by which identity is manifested in modern western culture. Piper, black but able to pass for white, a philosopher by learning and profession but without the look of one, attempted to dismantle the hegemony of the visual. Hence her performances have become an aggressive effort to harm the very logic of the privilege given to vision as a site of knowledge in post enlightenment western culture.

In the same manner Piper rigorously demonstrated through her performances that race itself is an imagined reality in her performance piece, *Cornered* (1988). Such performances deconstructed the male gaze as the origin in the making of meaning and exposed the failure of the gaze to constitute a structure of identity.

These performative practices attempt to destabilise the spectatorial gaze, which is pre-eminently white and masculine.

According to Amelia Jones, “through the double alterity of her not-male, not (white)-white body, Piper de-com-poses the pose throwing into question its implicit assumption of vision as providing knowledge of the body in representation” (1998, 164). Smith and McCauley through their performances subvert the role of the white, male gaze as originary in the production of meaning.
Smith, apart from the micro narratives of race and gender performed by McCauley and Piper, embraced the documentary performance technique to explicate multiple dimensions of racial, ethnic, sexual, economic and religious intricacies within a community. Her performances are triggered by a radical instinct to perform the social. Smith's performance practice has become a critical and social tool when the communities are struggling to infiltrate a voice of themselves into the chaos of contemporary social interaction.