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FRATERNAL GHOSTS: IDENTITY, HISTORY, AND THE BURDEN OF LEGACY IN THE PLAY TOPDOG/UNDERDOG BY SUZAN-LORI PARKS

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Abstract:

The notion of identity is crucial in thoroughly understanding African-American culture and literature. This topic's prominence is primarily attributable to the segregation and injustice inflicted upon Black people throughout history. The lack of a clearly defined identity framework results in a sense of rootlessness and alienation, reflecting the genuine fear surrounding identity and its crises. Identity distinguishes individuals from one another while signifying affiliation with a social group. This study focuses on anxiety and personal identification in Suzan-Lori Parks' *Topdog/Underdog*. The issue of identity is central to the play, particularly in relation to race, societal expectations, and individual history. Lincoln, a "whiteface" mimic of Abraham Lincoln in a funfair attraction, is compelled to confront his involvement in a broader narrative of institutional oppression. This literal performance reflects the figurative roles both brothers assume as they navigate their identities as men and siblings and survive in an adversarial environment.

Keywords: Racism, identity, anxiety, memory, alienation

Introduction:

In *Topdog/Underdog*, Suzan-Lori Parks intricately explores the nuances of Black identity through its connection to history and tradition. The drama examines historical legacies, including slavery and systemic racism, and investigates how these histories persistently influence the lives of the two protagonists, Lincoln and Booth. Parks underscores the significance of cultural memory and its influence on modern Black identity through historical allusions and the brothers' names. Lincoln, named after the president who abolished slavery, portrays Abraham Lincoln in a funfair attraction, compelling him to interact with a skewed interpretation of history. This ironic performance highlights the commercialization of Black identity within a context of historical oppression.

The tradition of storytelling and oral histories is integral to the brothers' exchanges as they narrate their shared history and their parents' desertion. Their narratives illustrate the fragmented essence of Black identity, shaped by loss, survival, and resilience. The card game Three-Card Monte, central to the narrative, symbolizes the cycles of exploitation and deception intrinsic to their existence. It signifies an affiliation with the culture of street hustling and the perils of sustaining cycles of deceit and distrust.

Parks examines the concept of masculinity within Black identity as Lincoln and Booth attempt to establish authority and affirm their self-worth. Their struggle illustrates broader societal expectations for Black men to navigate oppressive structures while seeking dignity and autonomy. *Topdog/Underdog* interweaves personal challenges with historical and cultural legacies, depicting Black identity as a complex and diverse experience shaped by history, tradition, and the continuous quest for self-definition.

Given the deep roots of African American tradition and history in shaping their prospective identity, African Americans consistently view their distinguished past as essential to understanding the present. African Americans value their cultural history highly, and a sense of community helps them develop a positive self-image and a strong sense of national identity. People of African descent are grounded in reality and proud of their history. African Americans' recollections of the brutality they suffered at the hands of white people span centuries. Black people must come to terms with the fact that their identity has been weakened by centuries of racial discrimination, oppression, and segregation.

For her 2002 play *Topdog/Underdog*, Parks won the Pulitzer Prize, becoming the first African-American woman to earn this prestigious theatrical award since its establishment in 1917. In the play, the assassination of Abraham Lincoln is reenacted. The brutal assassination of Abraham Lincoln, whom African Americans held in high esteem for freeing them from the dreadful era of slavery, is dramatized in this, Parks' second play. In *The America Play*, Lincoln makes a comeback. From this vantage point, African Americans have associated Lincoln's image with their quest for self-discovery. Lincoln and Booth, the protagonist and underdog, respectively, endure a pitiful existence in *Topdog/Underdog*. Problems, complaints, and, most significantly, the search for one's own identity are perennial topics of conversation. For the love of God, Booth begs Lincoln not to call him by name: "Don't be calling me Booth no more, K?" ("You changing yr name?") Lincoln expresses his confusion about whether Booth has actually changed his name (19). Changing names signifies a crisis in one's sense of self.

When playing a card game with his brother Lincoln, Booth frequently tries to take charge, as when he says, "My new name's 3-Card. 3-Card, understand? You

were curious about it, and now you have the answer. Try your hand at 3-Card Monte. From now on, call me 3-Card" (351). Misguidedly, he thinks he can change his identity by changing his name. According to James Utz, Booth appears to be trying to emulate Abraham Lincoln when he changes his name to 3-Card. Lincoln and Booth work hard to address their problems. Poverty, tragedy, and sensual pleasure are all parts of their everyday lives that they represent in complex ways.

In a society that restricts individual free thought and social acceptability, Lincoln and Booth consider the possibility of reconciling their identities. If Lincoln's actions demonstrate that he shares the same character as Abraham Lincoln, then he may be considered to embody that identity. To be regarded as real men, Lincoln and Booth must meet specific societal expectations related to goals, wealth, and respect. However, the siblings are unable to achieve these goals.

Booth expresses feelings of doubt and hopelessness as he thinks about the world he imagines. His imagination is far-reaching. He lives in "a seedily furnished rooming house room" (343) with his brother Lincoln. He is a man in his forties, African American, and cannot adopt an African name to avoid being racially profiled. In the first scene, he imagines himself playing cards with a group of police officers, taking charge and winning the game against them. He continues playing the game, overcoming the imaginary police and becoming self-aware. Booth desires to live a life of generosity and grandeur, yet he maintains a simplistic and arrogant attitude.
Booth returns from his job as a shoplifter in the second scene. He relinquishes the belongings he has obtained illegally. At the beginning of the scene, Parks describes him as follows: He pulls a fresh shoe from one of his long coat sleeves, pulls out another, and then pulls out two more shoes from a separate sleeve. After that, he takes a belt out of each sleeve. He discards his coat. He is wearing a new, expertly tailored suit underneath. He removes his jacket and trousers, revealing completely different clothing underneath. The outfits still have their original price tags. He pulls two neckties out of his pockets and two folded shirts from the back of his pants. He takes a magazine out of the front of his trousers. He has had a busy day filled with thievery. Booth is frustrated by his increasing anxiety about his poor fashion sense. He has difficulty choosing clothes that fit his persona and says, "[T]hey say the clothes make the man. All day long, I wear that getup. However, that does not define my identity" (356). The two brothers firmly believe in the importance of clothing. They think changing one's identity is as simple as taking off old clothes or putting on new ones, similar to how an actor dons a costume to play a character in a performance and then removes it to return to everyday life.

In this play, Parks explores the role of Black men in the masculine rivalry inherent in capitalist society. Susan Faludi explains why men have low self-esteem, claiming that society values appearance, youth, attractiveness, wealth, and violence as defining qualities of masculinity. Booth rejects what society offers him. Saint-

Aubin claims that in this society, there is a strict relationship between gender (masculinity) and sexuality: masculinity is dependent on sexuality. Booth brags about his male skills and adventures with Grace, whom he loves. Like him, she is trying to figure out who she is. The primary linear storyline is interrupted by three unique performance scenarios that are repeated and altered at various points in the play. The first element is the structure of the Three-Card Monte game, which promotes an idealized depiction of Black manhood that the brothers aspire to represent.

The second scenario involves the stories the brothers tell about their childhood memories, enhancing their understanding of ideal family and gender roles and the concept of home. The third is Lincoln's depiction of the assassination of Abraham Lincoln, which suggests that the final act of murder was inevitable. It relates to capitalism and patriarchy, showing that African-American men can be found in both "legitimate" and "illegitimate" ways of living and working.

The final scene of *Topdog/Underdog* reveals that Lincoln's customer has a deep understanding of him. The client might not just be a "brother" but could also be Lincoln's biological sibling. These assumptions amplify the irony of Lincoln's question to Booth at the play's finale: "I know we brothers, but are we brothers, you know, blood brothers or not, you and me" (399). Lincoln's question reflects his concern that a person's true identity is hidden beneath layers of ambition. As a result, his anxiety about his identity extends to his interactions with family members. Booth and he may act like siblings, but they may only be pretending. Lincoln had already asked Booth if they were actually related as siblings. Booth recounts his mother's infidelities, which led her to offer him compensation: "She must have known I was going to walk in on her this time because she had my payoff—my inheritance—she had it all ready for me. 500 bucks in a nylon stocking. 'Huh'" (398). Afterward, Booth places the nylon stocking—his gift or bribe—on the card table. This is the bet that ultimately makes the game real. However, neither the brothers nor the bystanders know whether there is money in the stocking. Booth has never broken the connection that protects his inheritance, which ties him to his mother.

In *Topdog/Underdog*, the money in the stocking represents either the possibility of confirming the protagonists' beliefs and actions or the threat of undermining them. The play's meta-theatrical framework puts its naturalistic, economic, and ethical ideas at risk. The brothers' differences are highlighted in their conflict with each other. The sixth scene clarifies the family struggle more than previous scenes, emphasizing issues related to identity and survival. Lincoln loses his position as a historical mimic and reverts to his old ways as a con artist and card shark. This causes conflict with Booth over the same object of desire. This conflict of interest reaches its peak when Lincoln suggests that Booth use the card game to trick his parents into giving him the inheritance they supposedly left him. The audience, as representatives of society, can attain salvation through transformation.

Their collective engagement is crucial in the medium of theatre. Parks argues that her plays demonstrate a need for salvation, a specific atonement found only in theatre or other art forms. Parks appears to exaggerate the problems and complexities within the Black community while demonstrating how identity is formed in interracial relationships, suggesting that these difficulties must be taken seriously. There are several signs of identity issues within the Black family. Instead of depicting the private affairs of a single person, she seeks to dramatize the anxiety that Black people experience when it comes to being identified.

Suzan-Lori Parks skillfully explores the complex layers of personal identity in *Topdog/Underdog*, showing how it is shaped by history, family, societal expectations, and individual decisions. Parks uses Lincoln and Booth to demonstrate the difficulty of defining oneself when faced with systemic oppression, fractured family relationships, and internalized fears. The brothers' journey is about their rivalry and their struggle to regain a sense of self-worth and agency in a world that has pushed them to the margins.

The conflict between performance and authenticity highlights the fragility of personal identity. Lincoln's role as an imitation of Abraham Lincoln emphasizes the burden of history and the commodification of identity. Meanwhile, Booth's obsession with mastering Three-Card Monte represents the illusion of control over one's fate. Both characters are trapped in cycles of reenactment, unable to break free from the shadows of their past or the cultural forces that shape their present.

In the end, the play's tragic denouement underscores the harmful effects of unresolved identity issues, particularly in the context of systemic racism and generational trauma. Parks suggests that human identity is never formed in isolation; it is profoundly linked to history, tradition, and the roles we are forced to perform. *Topdog/Underdog* provides a powerful and poignant commentary on the human condition by exploring the complexity of identity. It mirrors how individuals navigate the precarious balance between self-determination and the forces that define them.

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