

Subversion and Fratricide: The Problematic Power of Disguise in Suzan-Lori Parks' *Topdog/Underdog*

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Abstract

This article explores the description of deception in African American female playwright Suzan-Lori Parks' *Topdog/Underdog*. The deception of a white boy connotes subversion of white supremacy. In this scene, the disguise of President Lincoln can be interpreted as mimicry, as theorized by Homi K. Bhabha. Meanwhile, the game which causes a fratricide in the ending proposes the deception strategy as a problem among the African American community. An African American Booth's murder to prevent his elderly brother Lincoln from deceiving him out of the bet of his inheritance dramatizes a paradox in an African American family: His affection toward his mother leads to his brother's death. The article concludes that Parks writes the play and attempts to problematize the deception strategy, casting doubt on the essentialist aesthetics of Black arts and experience.

Key Words

Disguise, Subversion, Mimicry, Fratricide, African American

I . Introduction

Questioning white-oriented history, History, African American female playwright Suzan-Lori Parks writes an essay "Possession" and insists upon the importance of making African American history:

The history of Literature is in question. The history of History is in question too. [...]. Since history is a recorded or remembered event, theatre, for me, is the perfect place to "make" history — that is, because so much of African-American history has been unrecorded, dismembered, washed out, one of my tasks as playwright is to — through literature and the special strange

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relationship between theatre and real-life — locate the ancestral burial ground, dig for bones, find bones, hear the bones sing, write it down.
 (“Possession” 4)

This quotation clearly shows that historicity is a major issue for her; thus, it is obvious that her famous plays *The America Play* and *Topdog/Underdog*, both of which dramatize the assassination of the U.S. President Abraham Lincoln, focus on the historicity.¹⁾ About the performance of *The America Play* at Oracle Theatre, Tom Williams says “written at the height of post-modernism, *The America Play* is a study of African-American historiography and how it relates to identity” (Williams). Like Williams’ comment, many critics actually assert that the repetition of the assassination of President Lincoln unburies African American history, which has been lost in History.²⁾ In addition, Parks tells Ronni Reich the importance of inter-racial resistance, saying “who the world thinks you’re going to be, and how you struggle with that” (Parks qtd in Reich). However, we should remember that, unlike *The America Play*, which challenges the white-oriented historicity through the repetitive assassinations of President Lincoln, *Topdog/Underdog* makes the assassination real. The play puts a fratricide on the stage: That is to say, African American Lincoln is killed by his younger brother Booth. Based on the difference between *The America Play* and *Topdog/Underdog*, it is essential to analyze this murder as well as the inter-racial struggle.

The point is that deception can be described in both Lincoln’s disguise and the fratricide. In the former scene, Lincoln disguises himself as President Lincoln and swindles a white boy out of money; meanwhile, he deceives Booth in Three-Card Monte and wins the bet. In this way the deception of money itself can be found in both scenes, though, needless to say, there are clear differences between them. What can we interpret from the differences? And what is the indication of the differences? This article, focusing on the deception in the scene of Lincoln’s disguise and that of Three-card Monte, further discusses the meaning of his disguise and explores the fratricide in the ending.

II. Power of Disguise to Subvert Racial Dominance

In Scene Five, where Lincoln is fired because he is replaced by a wax doll, he says “I could tell him I’ll take another pay cut. That’ll get him to take me back” (*Topdog/Underdog* 62).³⁾ The dismissal represents economic exploitation of a black man, implying that the importance of the disguise and assassination of President Lincoln in *The America Play* is deprived.⁴⁾ *The America Play* and *Topdog/Underdog* have the assassination in common, so the chapter begins with the interpretation of the disguise of

President Lincoln.

Lincoln says "they fired me cause they was cutting back. Me getting dismissed didnt have no reflection on my performance" and makes "2 thin smears of white pancake makeup, / more like war paint than whiteface" (*Topdog/Underdog* 91). Marie Pecorari connects Lincoln's makeup with the whiteface in minstrel show (Pecorari 196). Booth blames Lincoln, who works at the show, for "you aint going back but you going all the way back. Back to way back then when folks was slaves and shit" (*Topdog/Underdog* 22). The historical fact that both black and white people performed at minstrel show proves that black people utilized their racial feature so as to make a success in the show business. Actually, some black people might perform to escape from racism and poverty at the time. But we should take account of the influence caused by black people's involvement in the white-oriented economic system of minstrel show. Eric Lott discusses problematic blackface by black people: "the notion of the black dancer 'imitating himself' indicates minstrelsy's fundamental consequence for black culture, the dispossession and control by whites of black forms that would not for a long time be recovered" (Lott 118). According to Lott, the blackface shows "fears and desires in the shape of a social narrative involving overpowering black men" (Lott 60). The makeup can represent white desires to dominate black people. Yet, it is the makeup by a black character that is done in the scene; based on the "more like war paint," Lincoln clearly has the spirit of resistance against racial oppression.

To examine the spirit of resistance, the chapter analyzes the conversation between Lincoln and a white boy. In Scene One, a white boy said that he learned about President Lincoln in history class and asked Lincoln for President's autograph. Lincoln told the boy that the autograph cost 10 dollars, though the boy had only a twenty-dollar bill. Then Lincoln, promising to give the exchange back to the boy later, swindled the boy out of the bill (*Topdog/Underdog* 11-12). This scene reveals that Lincoln disguises himself as the President Lincoln and successfully deceives the white boy, which metaphorically describes the subversion of racial dominance. The argument of the assassination of President Lincoln in *The America Play* is suggestive to interpret the subversion. Masayuki Kishi mentions Foundling Father's (FF) disguise of President Lincoln and his performance, and argues "FF's mimicry intrudes imperial colonial discourse and replaces the center/authenticity with the peripheral non-authenticity. In other words, postcolonial discourse provides the authenticity for what is marginalized in the colonial discourse" (Kishi 2018 79). The assassination show and the disguise of President Lincoln can be seen as substitution of black history for white History. When we can find such a meaning in the disguise of President Lincoln in *The America Play*, what can be read in the disguise in *Topdog/Underdog*?

Homi K. Bhabha explores the concept of mimicry, arguing that "colonial mimicry is

the desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, *as a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite*" (Bhabha 122; emphasis original). In the colonial mimicry, Other in the periphery imitates those in the center almost perfectly. Then the mimicry provides Other with authenticity and "intensifies surveillance, and poses an immanent threat to both 'normalized' knowledges and disciplinary powers" (Bhabha 123). Lincoln disguises himself as President Lincoln by putting on white makeup. In this sense, his whiteface implies that he possibly takes advantages of the minstrel blackface, which has fixed the historically constructed racial prejudice and strengthened racism. Then, as mentioned above, the white boy was deceived into paying his twenty-dollar bill by Lincoln, who disguised himself as President Lincoln. In this way, Lincoln successfully resists the white oppression. In other words, the deception demonstrates that black people mimic and utilize the minstrel makeup, through which white people fixed the racial domination.

More importantly, the white boy asked an autograph for disguised President Lincoln. Even though Lincoln wrote the autograph of President Lincoln, needless to say, the autograph was a fake. In other words, the boy asked the autograph for the disguised President, which indicates that, in spite of the fakeness, the autograph gains authenticity as the one written by President Lincoln. Like the blackface, the autograph represents Bhabha's mimicry as well. That is to say, the autograph can be recognized as the President's one because Lincoln wrote it as President Lincoln; since Lincoln himself is NOT President Lincoln, the autograph is a fake though the "fake" autograph seems to be like the "real" one. This means that the authenticated object can be replaced with the fake. Lincoln's fake autograph possibly threatens the racial domination.

III. Parks' Dramatic Vision about Inter-racial and Intra-racial Issues

Like FF's disguise in *The America Play*, the disguise in *Topdog/Underdog* functions as the resistance against racial oppression. The resistance inscribed in Lincoln's disguise highlights Parks' emphasis on inter-racial struggle. Yet, in her essay "An Equation for Black People Onstage," Parks, discussing a new role of black theaters, explores intra-racial aspects of racial issues:

BLACK PEOPLE + x = NEW DRAMATIC CONFLICT
(NEW TERRITORY)

where x is the realm of situations showing African-Americans in states other than the Oppressed by/Obsessed with "Whitey" state; where the White when present is not the oppressor, and where audiences are encouraged to see and understand and discuss these dramas in terms other than that same old shit.

(“An Equation for Black People Onstage” 20; emphasis original)

The black theaters, according to Parks, should be the ones in which black people are not treated as counterparts of white people. The relationship between white and black is not defined as dominance, nor should black people adhere to the damage caused by racial oppression. As discussed above, it is difficult to conclude that Parks does not place emphasis only upon inter-racial struggle between black and white people. At the beginning of the play, Booth tells his brother to stop putting on the costume of President Lincoln: “Take off the damn hat at least” (*Topdog/Underdog* 9). It may be understandable that Booth criticizes his brother for the costume which reminds him of minstrel show. However, since Lincoln’s disguise can disturb racial domination, Booth’s remark can be regarded as his indifference to racial struggle. Such indifference connotes the presence of African Americans who do not take account of the resistance against the white-oriented society. This account requires us to contemplate that Parks treats racism not only as inter-racial but also as intra-racial.

To explore racism in terms of an intra-racial issue, this chapter begins the argument with the strife between Lincoln and Booth. Throughout the play, Booth repeatedly attempts to persuade Lincoln to work as hustler again. He also practices Three Card hard to work as stickman with Lincoln. Jon Dietrick contends that “Booth’s desperate plans to “team up” with Lincoln are of course thinly veiled attempts to re-establish some kind of *intimate* connection with his brother. [...]. Working the con with Lincoln is the only way Booth knows to try to re-establish the familial bond that was shattered when his parents left” (Dietrick 63; emphasis original). While squabbling with his brother, Booth has to make a living with his brother; Dietrick locates Booth’s affection in his attempt to work with Lincoln. But in the ending, where the brothers play Three Card, Booth says to Lincoln, “plus I beat you for real” (*Topdog/Underdog* 103). Of course, he means that he just wants to beat his brother in Three Card, but why does he display his hostility against Lincoln, whom he loves and admires? The point is that Lincoln used to be a famous hustler. In her interview with Rick DesRochers and George C. Wolfe, Parks says to them, “he [Lincoln] comes home to Booth, who knows who Lincoln is, and more importantly who he *was*” (DesRochers 109; emphasis original). They bet their own money on the game. While Booth’s money is his inheritance from his mother, Lincoln’s one is what he won in hustling. At the beginning of Scene Six, Lincoln appears with a large amount of money: The stage directions say “He pulls an enormous wad of money / [...] / Then he takes the money out again, counting it / all over again, but this time quickly, / with the touch of an expert hustler” (*Topdog/Underdog* 83). Once Lincoln is dismissed, he cannot earn money by enacting the assassination of President Lincoln. Based on the stage directions above, Lincoln should begin to work as

a hustler again. Winning the money Lincoln gets in hustling indicates not only that Booth wins the game, but also proves that he improves his skills of Three Card by defeating the famous hustler. The victory and improvement must be the achievement of his dream. Although Booth seems to be on good terms with his brother, we can interpret emotional conflicts of respect and rivalry in Booth.

IV. Intra-racial Conflicts and African American Familial Inheritance

As for the fratricide in the ending, Robert Faivre wrote a drama review and attributes the murder to African Americans' individual responsibility:

On the one hand, the characters' narrative "fate" is preordained by their names; on the other hand, they have a "choice" — a "chance" — to rewrite the historical narrative of Booth killing Lincoln. Thus, that the black Booth kills the black Lincoln in the end is explained through the logic that blacks have no one to blame but themselves for black on black violence; it is a matter of "individual" responsibility. (Faivre)

Since Booth himself is outraged at Lincoln's deception and shoots his brother to death, he is to blame for the killing; in this sense, it may be reasonable to emphasize the individual responsibility. However, we should remember that the money Booth bets on the game is his inheritance from his mother. Unlike the money Lincoln gains in hustling, it is not quite difficult to presume that the inheritance includes the memory of his family. Faivre's argument lacks the parents' influence upon their children, Lincoln and Booth. Based on the argument above, this section discusses the fratricide further, taking account of the relationship between the black brothers and their family.

Deborah R. Geis points out that the memory of the brothers' family enables them to survive in the harsh reality:

A key theme of *Topdog* that echoes Park's earlier works is one of legacies and inheritances, lineage and the recording (and sometimes misremembering) of history. [...]. The first kind of history that *Topdog* traffics in is a familial one. [...]. Parks shows us simultaneously the painfulness of their memories and the sense that even so, they are what unify Lincoln and Booth as brothers: their shared past, their legacy, along with the rituals they have devised to entertain themselves, keep them going. (Geis 120-121)

In the epigraph, Parks identifies the play as “a play about family wounds and healing” (*Topdog/Underdog*). Although Lincoln and Booth struggle with severe poverty and segregation, Lincoln attempts to overcome such predicament by remembering their past memory: “we had some great times in that house, bro” (*Topdog/Underdog* 65). “Healing” in Parks’ epigraph dramatizes the African American familial memory, which enables the brothers to struggle with the severity.

Yet, Christine Woodworth argues that the tragic fratricide is attributed to the successive poverty and betrayal from the brothers’ parents:

Booth and Lincoln are metaphorically and literally destroyed by their inability to break free from the cycles of poverty and betrayal inherited from their parents.

Topdog and *The America Play* feature characters whose childhoods emerge as ghosts that haunt their adult lives. [...]. Brazil in *The America Play* had the spade and the act of digging to connect him to his father. Lincoln and Booth had their inheritances as physical reminders of their parents in *Topdog/Underdog*. (Woodworth 144-145)

In Scene Five, where he talks about the reason the brothers’ parents left them, Lincoln reveals that each of their parents had something to struggle with. Every day, his father was busy polishing customers’ shoes, while his mother doing housework. Listening to Lincoln, Booth confesses his feelings, saying that a regular job separated his family (*Topdog/Underdog* 67-68). The family had to survive in the harsh society. Each of the parents adhered to their own role (work and housework) so much that they would abandon their children. We can easily assume that racial discrimination and poverty drove the family into separation, and the separation must prevent Booth from having his regular job. Based on these dialogues and accounts, it is difficult to think that the memory and past about their family play only the role of “the rituals they have devised to entertain themselves, keep them going” (Geis 120-121).

Then, Three Card and the fratricide in the ending are suggestive to interpret the complex representation of the family. In Scene Six, during the game, Booth, trying to make the game real, bets his inheritance of \$500 from his mother. But, Lincoln deceives him and wins the bet. Furious at the deception, Booth shoots Lincoln to death, who attempts to cut the knot of the stocking that has the inheritance. Booth talks to his dead brother in the following:

That shit was mines. I kept it. Saved it. [...]. My *inheritance*. You stole my *inheritance*, man. [...]. You had yr own. And you blew it. You *blew it*,

motherfucker! I saved mines and you blew yrs. [...]. Even when you stole it from me it was still mines cause she gave it to me. (*Topdog/Underdog* 110)

As discussed, Lincoln's deception can be analyzed as the subversion of racial domination, though this time his deception drives him to death. Although both scenes describe "swindling someone out of money" in common, why is Lincoln killed by his brother in the latter scene? What is important is that the money Booth bets on Three Card symbolizes his affection for his mother. As soon as the game commences, Booth mentions "thuh thing thatll really make it real," betting his inheritance from his mother (*Topdog/Underdog* 97). His betting may indicate that the money seems to function as the mere bet on the game. His remark clearly makes the practice of hustling the real game, which means that his bet must be the mere money for Lincoln. However, it is obvious that Booth's lines show multiple interpretations about his parent's inheritance, as Michael LeMahieu writes "the knot that secures Booth's inheritance, and the knot that Lincoln threatens to cut after hustling his brother, also represents the play's multiple lines of determination" (LeMahieu 42). As mentioned above, Booth accuses his brother of stealing his inheritance. Jochen Achilles asserts that "the family history is also at stake because Booth's five hundred dollars expose and render vulnerable the memory of his mother, as well as his own identity based on this memory" (Achilles 118). Booth's bet reminds him of the bonds with his mother; in other words, it symbolizes the memory of his mother. For Booth, the signified of his bet changes from the bet to the reminder of his mother. And he murders his brother in order to save his love for his mother, which depicts African American familial paradox: That is to say, securing his affection for his family paradoxically causes him to hurt his family. The fratricide is triggered by the slippery of the representation of Booth's bet: the bet for Lincoln, and for Booth, the reminder of his mother.

V. Conclusion

In the epilogue of her latest play *100 Plays for the First Hundred Days*, Parks reveals that she was asked to deliver a lecture about diversity. She insists that American citizens should accept their differences and get united: "I know that underneath all of the anger and fear, I know that we were all born to find a way to come together. Our great mission in life is to find a way to overcome our apparent differences and to come together, to find our way back to the Union" (*100 Plays for the First Hundred Days* 93). However, I have to point out that her ideal goal has not yet been achieved. Based on the reason Lincoln is dismissed, it is clear that there still exist racial division and marginalization of minority. But as discussed above, she emphasizes

the inter-racial relationship between black and white, while also depicting problems which such a relationship does not deal with. Her remark quoted above can be interpreted as her appeal to the unity of African American community as well as American citizens.

Division in the same racial group is seen in the fratricide in the ending of *Topdog/Underdog*. Restaging the assassination of President Lincoln, the tragic ending reveals the African American familial paradox: To protect his affection for his family, Booth paradoxically hurts his family. Yet, we should remember that Lincoln attempts to give Booth's inheritance back to him. Hearing about Booth's killing of his girlfriend Grace, Lincoln tries to return Booth's inheritance, which he wins in Three Card (*Topdog/Underdog* 108). In her essay, Parks writes that there is no authenticated black experience:

And gee, there's another thing: There is no such thing as THE Black Experience; that is, there are many experiences of being Black which are included under the rubric. Just think of all the different kinds of African peoples. [...].

I write plays because I love Black people. As there is no single "Black Experience," there is no single "Black Aesthetic" and there is no one way to write or think or feel or dream or interpret or be interpreted. ("An Equation for Black People Onstage" 21)

Parks insists upon the importance of African American diversity and challenges the essentialism of Black Arts. It is not reasonable for Lincoln a former hustler to return his winning money. If Lincoln actually did, Booth could secure his love for his mother, which could prevent Booth from shooting his brother to death. Yet, in the play Booth does not receive the inheritance from his brother and murders his brother. In addition, Lincoln once lost his hustling friend Lonny because of the game, which implies that a chain of African American deaths caused by Three Card underlies in the play. In this way, the play can be interpreted as Parks' attempt to problematize the memory and history of African American family: that is to say, the strife of descendants and the successive deaths of African Americans brought by gambling.

Notes

- 1) *The America Play* and *Topdog/Underdog* have the historical person President Abraham Lincoln and a fictional character Lincoln, who has the same name as Abraham Lincoln. To avoid readers' confusion, the chapter writes the character as Lincoln and the historical one as President Lincoln.

- 2) For instance, Kishi analyzes historical representation in *The America Play* and argues that “what is important is that, by “Rep and Rev,” Parks deconstructs and re-textualizes the unburied history, and points out arbitrariness and fakeness of History” (Kishi 2007 121). “Rep and Rev” is the abbreviation of “repetition and revision” and derives from traditional black music, jazz. Parks applies “Rep and Rev” to her dramatic works; in short, she uses the traditional black art and problematizes the white-oriented historicity. *The America Play* can be regarded as the epitome of her dramaturgy.
- 3) The quotations from *Topdog/Underdog* have some ill-grammatical expressions because the characters’ remarks are based on African American vernacular. The article makes the quotations as it is.
- 4) As explained in Note 2, FF’s disguise of President Lincoln in *The America Play* does not show his pursuit of economic benefits nor white entertainment. Rather, the disguise reveals the arbitrariness of white History and rewrites black history, which was buried in History. On the contrary, in *Topdog/Underdog*, the fact that Lincoln cannot perform the assassination because of his dismissal must be white re-marginalization of blacks.

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