

Black Surrogacy: *Topdog/Underdog* and Suzan-Lori Parks' Dramatic Aesthetic

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Contemporary playwright, novelist, screenwriter, and educator Suzan-Lori Parks won the 2002 Pulitzer Prize for drama for her play *Topdog/Underdog* just a few days after the play debuted on Broadway. By then, many of her plays were already highly regarded, as evidenced by her prestigious collection of accolades, including a Guggenheim Fellowship, two Obie Awards, and a MacArthur Foundation “Genius Grant,” among others. Parks is recognized for her skill in presenting urban chaos and family survival. She reshapes themes from American history by manipulating images, language(s), and tropes to challenge convention. Audiences often categorize Park’s plays as tense, bawdy, and iconoclastic because of their nonlinear, experimental style. And yet scholars and theater critics alike overwhelmingly praise Parks for creating plays in which compellingly articulate characters offer scathing social and political commentaries regarding their respective, naturalistic environments, and circumstances. In appreciation of this nonconformity, one writer exclaims that Parks has “burst through every known convention to invent a theatrical language, like a jive Samuel Beckett, while exploding American cultural myths and stereotypes along the way.”¹ Pulitzer Prize judge and *New York Times* critic Ben Brantley says, “It’s rare these days that you get a playwright who thinks that big and is able to condense their vision into something so much fun.”² In *Topdog/Underdog*, Suzan-Lori Parks uses her unconventional, revisionist style of playwrighting to foreground the plight of two contemporary Black men and to present a palimpsest of the Abraham Lincoln/John Wilkes Booth scenario. She accomplishes this by deploying a dramatic technique (herein called Black Surrogacy) that offers an historical chastisement, racial commentary, and social scrutiny of an imbalanced America.

Black Surrogacy

Black Surrogacy is a theoretical tool by which to decipher and code Suzan-Lori Parks’ dramatic aesthetic. It is the act of replacing white literary and historical figures with Black characters—such as replacing Abraham Lincoln and John Wilkes Booth with Black male characters who bear the same famous last names. In *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*,³ Toni Morrison discusses surrogate figures as the control against which the

¹ John Heilpern quoted in Don St. John, “Suzan-Lori Parks ’85 Wins Pulitzer Prize for Drama,” in *College Street Journal*, April 12, 2002, Mt. Holyoke College, accessed May 6, 2005, www.mtholyoke.edu/offices/comm/csj/041202/parks.html.

² Ben Brantley quoted in Samantha Miller and Sharon Cotliar, “Best in Show: Winning Raves and a Historic Pulitzer, Playwright Suzan-Lori Parks Gets Her Day as Broadway’s Topdog,” *People*, June 3, 2002, 143.

³ Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (Boston: Harvard University Press, 1992), 4-5.

crafters of history and literature measure themselves. This work asseverates that Parks' surrogate figures are the control against which she contemplates rebellion, suffering, fate, limitation, and codes of conduct—especially in as much as these matters relate to her characters' negotiation of their environment and her own shaping of historical memory and myth in her dramas. Indeed, her implementation of Black Surrogacy affords her a theoretical lens and rhetorical opportunity by which to scrutinize contemporary society. Parks explains this substitution, this cultural surrogacy, by saying, “There were people I hadn't seen on the stage that I wanted to get on the stage.”⁴ The phrase “people I hadn't seen,” is likely a signifier that indicates the *historical* figures, Abraham Lincoln and John Wilkes Booth, and the *racialized* figures—the Black characters, the blood *brothas*, the surrogates Lincoln and Booth, whose freighted names present certain precepts regarding the American historical memory. In *Topdog/Underdog*, Black Surrogacy is the theory through which the playwright examines the role of Abraham Lincoln and disrupts and rearranges the neat packaging of history—a history that, for better or for worse, presents Lincoln as the “Great Emancipator” of Black American enslaved people.⁵ In this play, Parks does not take sides in the Union/Confederacy debate; rather, she admits her fascination with Abraham Lincoln, noting: “I have [collected] so many plays on Lincoln. But I didn't choose Lincoln for *Topdog/Underdog*. Lincoln chose me. A voice said, ‘You should write another play about Lincoln,’ so I wrote another play about Lincoln.”⁶ *Topdog/Underdog* is the result.

Topdog/Underdog is especially compelling because Parks uses Black Surrogacy to scrutinize and revise the American historical memory not solely about the real Abraham Lincoln (as in the play's predecessor *The America Play*) but also about the real John Wilkes Booth⁷. And, as it turns out, Suzan-Lori Parks shares a May 10 birthday with John Wilkes Booth, a twist of fate at which even she marvels. Parks remembers when her husband, blues player Paul Oscher, first realized the coincidence. It makes sense, she says, about sharing her birthday with Booth, because “myth [and legend] stories are my favorite stories... and I borrow iconography from history.”⁸ In

⁴ Suzan-Lori Parks, “A Conversation with Suzan-Lori Parks,” interview at the Studio Theatre of Washington, D.C., June 19, 2007.

⁵ Though historical perspectives on Lincoln remember his “emancipatory” act, scholars from Lerone Bennett to John Hope Franklin note that the focus of such perspectives is rarely on the slaves as individual human beings. Bennett and Franklin argue that despite Lincoln's signing the *Emancipation Proclamation* of 1863, the “Great Man” was forever divided about his political decision and his loyalties concerning slavery. Abraham Lincoln concedes that he primarily freed the slaves as “... an act of justice, warranted by the Constitution, upon military necessity” (quoted in *Race, Class, and Gender in the United States*, ed. Paula S. Rothberg, 5th ed. [New York: Worth Publishers, 2001], 463). Many African Americans site Lincoln's moral and political ambiguity about slavery as the reason for their irresolute support. Read more in Lerone Bennett, *Forced into Glory: Abraham Lincoln's White Dream*, (Chicago: Johnson Publishing Covered, 2000) and in John Hope Franklin and Alfred Moss, Jr., *From Slavery to Freedom, A History of Negro People*, 1947, later revised into an 8th ed. called *From Slavery to Freedom: A History of African American People* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2000).

⁶ See note 5 above. The first of her plays in which she writes about Lincoln is *The America Play*, published by Theatre Communications Group in 1995.

⁷ In terms of Black Surrogacy, *The America Play* includes only a Black Lincoln impersonator. *Topdog/Underdog* includes both a Black Lincoln and Booth impersonator.

⁸ Aaron Bryant, “Broadway, Her Way,” *Crisis Forum*, March/April 2002, 43-45.

Topdog/Underdog, a poststructuralist play where meaning is often slippery and language is inventive and repetitive, Parks uses Black Surrogacy to firmly insert African American people into the American story—a story that in the mid-1800s had everything to do with them and yet, according to the written historical record, little to do with them at all. As such, Black Surrogacy works to counter an American Grand Narrative that has, as Toni Morrison suggests, traditionally ignored and deflated the shaping presence of Africans in America.

ABOUT *TOPDOG/UNDERDOG*:

Topdog/Underdog is a racy, modern play about two African American blood brothers, Lincoln and Booth, struggling for power—power over each other and the debilitating circumstances that thwart them. Saddled with the names Lincoln and Booth, given to them by their father as a joke, their nomenclature indicates from the outset that they would have “all sorts of racial and historical baggage piled on top of their deadly dynamic.”⁹ In a postmodernist twist, Booth is a dreamer and a would-be 3-card monte artist who spends his time learning to out-skill his older brother, a natural “top dog,” at the 3-card game.¹⁰ Booth shouts excitedly at his brother, “We could be a team, man. Rake in the money!... Pockets bulging, plenty of cash! And the ladies would be thrilling!”¹¹ As a side hustler, Booth is a petty thief who steals what he needs. He scoffs, “You don’t see me holding down a steady job. Cause its bullshit and I know it. I seen how it cracked [Mom and Pop] up and I aint going there.”¹² In one scene, he robs an apparel store and comes home boasting to Lincoln while wearing all of the layers of clothes he has “lifted”—two suits, two shirts, two ties, even two pairs of shoes. In the play, Lincoln is a side-show performer in an arcade shooting gallery, where—as a Black man—he wears “white face” paint and impersonates Abraham Lincoln for a living. Patrons of the arcade can pretend to assassinate the president by stealing up behind the Black Surrogate Lincoln figure and firing a cap gun of blanks into his skull. Lincoln, once a master card hustler himself, retired from the 3-card monte game after his partner was shot.

Parks sets her play in a seedy, one-room apartment that one reviewer calls “vile... an incubator of petty grudges and lifelong pain.”¹³ When the play opens, the Black Booth is practicing his 3-card monte scam using the standard equipment: 3 playing cards and one cardboard box set up atop two mismatched milk crates. As he shuffles the cards on the box he chants:

Watch me close watch me close now: who-see-thuh-red-/
card-who-see-thuh-red-card?I-see-thuh-red-card. Thuh-/

⁹ Marc Peyser, “‘Topdog’ on Broadway,” *Newsweek*, April 2002, 64.

¹⁰ The 3-card monte game is a street hustle in which the gambler, usually a tourist, tries to keep his eyes on a particular faced-down playing card while the dealer shuffles the mini-deck and performs a related, rhyming narration.

¹¹ Suzan-Lori Parks, *Topdog/Underdog*, (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 2001), 20.

¹² Parks, *Topdog/Underdog*, 68.

¹³ Peyser, “‘Topdog,’” 64.

red-card-is-thuh-winner. Pick-thuh-red-card-you-pick-uh-/winner. Pick-uh-black-card-you-pick-uh-loser. Theres-/
thuh-loser, yeah, theres-thuh-black-card, theres-thuh-other-/
loser-and-theres-thuh-red-card-, thuh-winner.¹⁴

In his overall behavior and composition, Booth is a character defined by tension, multiple identities, and fragmentation. He desperately wants to master “the game”—both 3-card monte and, metaphorically, the game of life. Because his name recalls a U.S. identity and history freighted with oppression and aggression, for audiences and readers alike the Black Surrogate Booth interrogates the past (as a re-refiguring of John Wilkes Booth) and embodies the present. Acting upon the hostility and historical violence that the name “Booth” evokes, Parks’ character Booth recalls and reinforces the pathologies characteristic of a divided nation during Civil War times. As in real life, Booth carries a gun in the play:

Lincoln: “You got it on you right now?”

Booth: “I always carry it.”

Lincoln: “Even on a date? In yr own home?”

Booth: “You never know, man.”¹⁵

To compound the Black Booth’s reality, his contemporary persona casts him as a Black male stereotype. Right on the stage he curses profusely, pleasures himself, and drinks whiskey to ease his pains. Moreover, he boasts about conning tourists and dominating his woman. Based on his actions and personality in the play, Booth functions as a caricature and a stereotype of Black male identity.

If Booth’s identity keeps him struggling against historical perceptions and real stereotypes, then Lincoln’s professional and personal duality keeps him psychologically freighted. Through his attire, for instance, audiences see Parks’ Black Lincoln negotiating a put-on identity. The stage notes report that he “is dressed in an antique frock coat and wears a top hat and fake beard, that is, he is dressed to look like Abraham Lincoln”.¹⁶ Booth calls him a “spook” in “that damn face paint”.¹⁷ Through the costuming and the unique way in which the play disrupts linear history, audiences begin to see the Black Lincoln attempting to eke out power from an identity that is not his own. Going to his job in “white face” paint to be “murdered” every day, this Black Lincoln remembers the hypocrisy entrenched in the American creed “freedom and justice for all.” And yet none of this seems lost on him—or on Parks. Link, as he is frequently called in the play, recognizes

¹⁴ Parks, *Topdog/Underdog*, 7.

¹⁵ Parks, *Topdog/Underdog*, 72.

¹⁶ Parks, *Topdog/Underdog*, 8.

¹⁷ Parks, *Topdog/Underdog*, 11.

that both of his identities are flawed—the hustler identity and the identity in which, ironically, he is paid to dramatize Abraham Lincoln’s death for a living. He says:

... I would make a living at it. But it don’t make me. Worn suit coat, not even worn by the fool that Im supposed to be playing, but making fools out of all those folks who come crowding in for they chance to play at something great. Fake beard. Top hat. Dont make me into no Lincoln. I was Lincoln on my own before any of that.¹⁸

Characterized as the “topdog,” Lincoln is brutally aware of himself and of the dichotomy that his arcade impersonation represents, so if he pretends that something dies in him each time a customer pulls the trigger, then it is no surprise. After all, his name and current profession make him a prisoner of the past even as he asserts his own power and identity in the present:

Lincoln: I dont gotta spend my whole life hustling. Theres more to Link than that. More to me than some cheap hustle. More to life than cheating some idiot out of his paycheck or his life savings.¹⁹

Booth: “Thats a f@#!ed-up job you got.”

Lincoln: “Its a living.”

Booth: “But you aint living.”²⁰

Ben Brantley suggests that for Lincoln and Booth, “Brotherly love and hatred is translated into the terms of men who have known betrayal since their youth, when their parents walked out on them... Implicit in their relationship is the idea that to live is to con.”²¹

As Parks would have it, the Black Lincoln and Booth are trapped within a constricting poverty. They have no running water, no toilet, and no phone in their tenement. At every moment, they are in an ethical, social, political, and economic struggle for agency over their naturalistic circumstances. According to one writer, “The play is a commentary on self-atonement, introspection and the ironic, sometimes difficult ethos of community.”²² Parks remarks that “*Topdog/Underdog* has a lot to do with the artifice of everyday life, with the performative aspect of life, with the masks we wear, with characters who are between a rock and a hard place.”²³

¹⁸ Parks, *Topdog/Underdog*, 30.

¹⁹ Parks, *Topdog/Underdog*, 55.

²⁰ Parks, *Topdog/Underdog*, 35.

²¹ Ben Brantley, “Not to Worry, Mr. Lincoln, It's Just a Con Game,” *New York Times*, April 2002, E5.

²² Aaron Bryant, “Broadway, Her Way,” *Crisis Forum*, March/April 2002, 43-45.

²³ Parks quoted in “Newsmakers: Suzan-Lori Parks, 1st Black Woman to Win Pulitzer for a Drama,” *Jet*, April 2002, 25.

Perhaps it is this perspective on playwriting and theatre that has enabled her to tune into her characters so intensely. Parks insists that her job is not simply to write plays, but to actually record the characters' voices that she hears in her head and the movements that she sees them make. Put another way, she allows her "possession" by these characters to guide her attentions.²⁴ She says, "I don't know if writers have things to say as much as writers, at least in my case, are possessed by things. Writing it down is the only way to get it out of your system."²⁵ "Some writers are haunted by things," she said. "They write them down to set themselves free."²⁶

Audiences Think Obscure

By nearly every playwriting standard, Parks has achieved tremendous success. Despite the success, her plays have drawn mixed sentiments from some audiences and scholars. Liz Diamond—who directed two of Parks' plays: *Death of the Last Black Man in the Whole Entire World* and *Imperceptible Mutabilities in the Third Kingdom*—acknowledges the varied responses to Parks' plays. She says:

I think people want to be astonished, people want to be blown away ... I think that [Suzan-Lori's] plays do make that possible, but I think that they also offer up ideas that frighten people because they portray the world as a complex place... they don't offer the comforts of plays that are structured along more linear lines.²⁷

Bonnie Metzgar, who produced one of Parks' latest works (*365 Days, 365 Plays*) as part of the 365 International Festival, notes that, "Theater attracts people with huge personalities, but Suzan-Lori isn't selling a persona [...] She's very direct."²⁸

Direct she is. So direct that when *Topdog/Underdog* premiered off-Broadway in 2001 and later opened on Broadway in 2002, some audiences and critics were bewildered by the shows noting that Parks' "plays are obscure, impenetrable, pretentious, even infuriating."²⁹ Carolyn Casey Craig notes that, "Just what Parks is saying [in her plays] continues to puzzle and provoke

²⁴ Suzan-Lori Parks, "Possession," in *The America Play and Other Works* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1995), 3-5.

²⁵ "Suzan-Lori Parks," *Writer*, January 2004, 66.

²⁶ Dinitia Smith, "Tough-Minded Playwright Chooses a Title Tough to Ignore," *New York Times*, March 2003, late edition, 2:11.

²⁷ Carolyn Casey Craig, "Suzan-Lori Parks: Putting Dirt and Deadly Games on Stage," in *Women Pulitzer Playwrights*, (Jefferson: McFarland and Company, Inc., 2004), 262.

²⁸ Samantha Miller and Sharon Cotliar, "Best in Show: Winning Raves and a Historic Pulitzer, Playwright Suzan-Lori Parks Gets Her Day as Broadway's Topdog," *People*, June 2002, 143.

²⁹ Don Shewey, "This Time the Shock Is Her Turn toward Naturalism," Review of *Topdog/Underdog* in the *New York Times* (22 July 2001, late edition) sec. 2: 4, 12.

critics into heated controversies about her methods and merits as a playwright.”³⁰ Parks understands that *Topdog/Underdog* comes across as edgy, raw, and sardonic—and she knows that this unsettles even tolerant playgoers. “I know my plays aren’t for everybody,” she admits.³¹

Nonetheless, Parks’ plays continue to meet the standards set forth by awards committees, such as the Pulitzer Prize Board and the Obie Award Committee. The Pulitzer Prize Board lauded *Topdog/Underdog* as a re-visionary historical play full of intensity, derision, and candor. In response, Parks declared that her Pulitzer win “has a lot of meaning. It’s great for African-American people; it’s great for all of us.”³² However, not everyone agrees with Parks’ depiction of the Black Surrogates, Lincoln and Booth, as hustlers or con artists in “white face” paint and stolen clothes. Shawn Marie Garrett, for instance, articulates that the playwright’s

methods make some in the African-American theatre community uncomfortable, and, significantly, Parks’s plays are rarely produced at theatres exclusively devoted to the production of African American drama... Her tendency to attract predominantly white audiences and directors sparks further questions in some minds about whether she is speaking to or for the African American experience.³³

Seymour Topping, a former Pulitzer Prize administrator, is familiar with the way in which Pulitzer nominations and wins can create a groundswell of dispute and misunderstanding about dramatic themes and approaches. He admits that:

Over the years the Pulitzer board has at times been targeted by critics for awards made or not made... The board has not been captive to popular inclinations. Many, if not most, of the honored books have not been on bestseller lists, and many of the winning plays have been staged off-Broadway or in regional theaters.³⁴

This phenomenon begs an investigation of the criteria by which the Pulitzer Prize and other prestigious commendations are bestowed upon playwrights. It also begs for a more informed reading of Parks’ award-winning play.

If the point of *Topdog/Underdog* is to interrogate the tensions and contradictions interwoven into American myth and historical memory, then the sub-point of the play is to insist

³⁰ Craig, “Suzan-Lori Parks,” 264.

³¹ Quoted in Craig, “Suzan-Lori Parks,” 265.

³² Quoted in Miller and Cotliar, “Suzan-Lori Parks,” 144.

³³ Garrett, “The Possession of Suzan-Lori Parks,” *American Theater* 17, no. 8 (2000): 26.

³⁴ Seymour Topping, “History of the Pulitzer Prizes: Joseph Pulitzer and the Pulitzer Prizes,” The Pulitzer Organization, accessed June 27, 2007, <http://www.pulitzer.org/history.html>.

that those myths be transcended for any self-knowledge to take place. Whether audiences and critics agree or disagree with Suzan-Lori's particular form of artistic rebellion, one thing is certain: her dramatic aesthetic of de-familiarizing history and re-memorizing the historical archive (e.g., with *Venus* and *Porgy and Bess*) is a unique contribution to the genre of neo-historical drama. Despite the situation of her plays in era-specific time periods, these dramas exist in liminality. That is to say that they exist as representations that expose an uncertainty of meaning regarding "past" and "present." This disrupts not only the American historical memory, but also its archive, thereby making several, broader, more inclusive interpretations plausible. The Black Surrogate characters in these plays (i.e., Lincoln, Booth, and Hester, too, from *In the Blood*) experience a kind of liminality—a disorientation that occurs during their rite of passage toward self-actualization. In *Topdog/Underdog* specifically, by three fourths of the way through the play, neither of the Black Surrogate characters holds his initial position; and yet neither has fully shaken the drama associated with his name nor arrived to a new identity in which he can escape his ultimate fate in the Lincoln/Booth scenario.

As Suzan-Lori Parks crisscrosses the country to engage audiences and inspire directors, there is no doubt her dramatic contribution, *Black Surrogacy*, will continue to invite further scholarly investigation.

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