

Between the Imaginary and the Real: Exploring Duality in Suzan-Lori Parks' *Topdog/Underdog*

N'Guessan Koffi Eugene
enguessan@live.com

Université Alassane Ouattara – Bouaké

Abstract:

Bringing the problematic of the African American identity into focus, this study traces the phenomenology of identity as highlighted in Suzan Lori Parks' *Topdog/Underdog*. It is an identity that vacillates between the exterior self and the interior self of Lincoln and Booth, two brothers entangled in a fraternal and yet dichotomic relations that show the performative identity of the African American: his true character being submerged in the realm of appearances.

Key words:

Imaginary, real, exterior self, interior self, performative, illusion, dislocation.

Introduction

Topdog/underdog is Suzan Lori-Parks' one-act play made of six scenes. It brings to the fore a phenomenological approach to the identification process of an African American family through two young brothers: Lincoln and Booth. They are two symbols of Parks' imaginary world with a basis in reality. It is an exploratory dramatization of the dialectic of the social as well as psychological spaces in the process of black identification, and it reveals the particular experience of self-division or the duplication of the African American individual.¹

Thus, the play deploys in its structure dualism and the double motif characterizes its form and content, and its language. Indeed, the play is layered with a plethora of dualisms that enable the reader to probe and problematize the issue of black identity, consistently questioning any claim to an autonomous, private identity. This important writing feature – the double self – appears as the key-organizing principle or the signifying mechanism in the play. The double meaning in Parks' *Topdog/Underdog* is used as a strategic discursive device. Almost everything is divided into two or double coded. The underlying binary of the “real or true self” and its social “referent” or external self, a dualistic frame represented in multiple disguises inside the bounds of the artificial/real universes of the characters.

The imaginary and reality overlap, blurring the frontier between the two (what is real is made into imaginary and what is imaginary into real). This alternate inversion of perspectives enhances the double self, which permeates the play and constitutes the main element guiding the present investigation, in which I purport to explore the contradictory spaces between reality and performance, between theatre and real life – the dialectic of the social and psychological spaces. As Myka Abramson writes, “*Topdog/Underdog* is both a social drama confronting the issues of racism

¹ This idea of doubleness of the African American has already been exposed or theorized by W.E.B. Du Bois: “double consciousness” or “double vision” in his *The Souls of Black Folk*

and classism in modern America, and a psychodrama in its focus on the individual unraveling of Lincoln and Booth as well as of their relationship.” (Myka Abramson, 78)

Therefore, the question we are confronted with in this inquiry is how the playwright elucidates the relationship between performance and real life in order to assert illusion through the collapse between the real and the imaginary. To put it differently, what lies beyond the real, and what lies beyond the imaginary? The theoretical and critical framework draws mainly on Judith Butler’s theory of performativity and Slavoj Žižek’s psychoanalytic notion of symptom or the symbolic and the real to signify the dynamics of identity.

This research perspective requires an investigation of the play’s framework of signification, focusing on its different dualistic elements or textual strategies of duality: the different paradigms wavering between authenticity and performativity, the real and the symbolic; between “what is” and “what is not.” In the process I shall analyze the issues of the African American masculinity and identity caught between two impulses: performance and reality, creating a double self. The doubled self in the play involves two opposing perspectives or movements: from reality to the imaginary and from the imaginary to reality. Keeping in line with this structure at work in the play, my paper will be articulated alternately as follows: from reality to imagination and from imagination to reality.

1) From Reality to Performance

In many respects, *Topdog/Underdog* is a two-dimensional play in its configuration; a premise that favors and nurtures tension between Lincoln and Booth: two brothers of an African American family. The tension between the brothers is engulfed in a reality-performance nexus. Indeed, in the backdrop of the play, there is a historical event: the assassination of Abraham Lincoln, the sixteenth President of the United-States. This reality of the past is lived out in the present through the minstrel tradition that Park reverses: blacks playing whites’ roles. Thus, in the foreground of the play, is an identity parody, a subversive technique based on a parodic representation of a historical and national American figure to signify the constructedness of history and identity.

From reality to imaginary in Parks’ *Topdog/Underdog* takes on two dualistic perspectives represented by the conflict between Lincoln and Booth. The reality is that both characters are entrapped in economic and social predicaments. As Myka Abramson rightly put, “Both characters are in crisis – economically and with respect to their masculinity – and Parks’ notion of wealth is both a cause of and a metaphor for the crisis.”(Myka 77)

Booth and Lincoln’s fraternal relationship develops into rivalry. As the title of the play indicates, there is a topdog and an underdog. Similarly, there is no Lincoln without Booth, no topdog without an underdog. Who is the topdog? Who is the underdog? The two characters alternate between diametrically opposed roles: the player and the played, the topdog and the underdog. Definitely, Booth and Lincoln “seem two sides of the same man”, fighting for dominance. (Larson, 148)

While Lincoln holds a job as an impersonator in an arcade to make a living, Booth, the younger brother performs or constructs a sense of subjectivity through acts that are supposed to grant him a certain social status or identity. In the process, both characters assume roles that make them double and this rhetorical strategy of doubleness is well embodied in Lincoln’s duplicitous character.

a) The Dynamics of Self: Lincoln's Theatrical Performance for Survival

Lincoln's double self works as a split awareness of both an external self and an internal self, which is pervasive in the play. It is exposed through the role of Abraham Lincoln he has to enact and his sense of self. In the dialogue below, he clearly indicates his double nature:

Booth: He shoot you?

Lincoln: He shot Honest Abe, yeah.

Booth: He talk to you?

Lincoln: In a whisper. Shoots on the left whispers on the right.

Lincoln: "Does thuh show stop when no ones watching or does thuh show go on?"

Booth: Whatd he say, that one time? "Yr only yrself –"

Lincoln: "– when no ones watching," yeah. (34)

In this dialogue, Lincoln indicates that there are actually two Lincolns. One Lincoln is visible (the one the people watch) and the other Lincoln is invisible (the private Lincoln). When there are people around, he is no more himself. This indicates a shift from the social self to the private self. Thus, there is Lincoln and the historical referent Abraham Lincoln. Lincoln, the actor is black and he impersonates Lincoln, a white man. To impersonate is to play the role of someone else; that is to intentionally copy another person's speech, appearance, or behavior. It is therefore a sort of game of disguise, using a mask in order to look exactly like the person that is imitated.

The impersonation of Abraham Lincoln by Lincoln requires the use of a mask. The mask is primarily an external layer that hides Lincoln's identity. It gives and puts him into a role position. It is a veil, a form of disguise that is made possible with the following items as described by Lincoln: "Old black coat not even real old just fake old. Its got worn spots on the elbows, little raggedy places thatll break through into holes before the winters out. Shiny strips around the cuffs and the collar. Dust from the cap guns on the left shoulder where they shoot him, where they shoot me I should say but I never feel like they shooting me."(32! 52!)

Thus these items make Lincoln's doubleness possible: his physical transformation from black Lincoln into white Lincoln. By the same token, the impersonation negates Lincoln's self; it negates his authentic individuation. Lincoln's appearance is distinct from his true personality, a performative context that recalls the legendary African American social mask in his relations with whites. Conventionally, for the African American, wearing a mask has a strategic function as Keith Leonard explains: "We wear the mask implies both an ambivalent moral courage necessary to wear the mask and a possible core of resistance emerging while the world passively and ignorantly dreamed its racist fantasy. The mask was burden, protection, and motive for the public self-definition." ("We Wear the Mask": the Making of a Poet, 207)²

The mask is a survival strategy as well as a metaphor of protection. As if to ward off evil spirits, the wearing of the mask by Lincoln is a necessary strategy to protect him from social and economic deprivation. The mask fulfills a survival mechanism for Lincoln. This disguising strategy creates for the black individual, an exterior personality, a superficial identity: "They say the clothes make the man. All day long I wear that getup. But that don't make me who I am."(29) Actually, the exterior or physical presence made by clothes used by Lincoln to play the role of Lincoln-the-president hide Lincoln's blackness, making him somewhat invisible. Beyond the veil, there is a private Lincoln. In other words, clothes don't ascribe a genuine or authentic identity to their bearer. They rather create a second personality which is in constant struggle with Lincoln's private self.

² Keith Leonard, " 'We Wear the Mask': the Making of a Poet", in *The Cambridge History of African American Literature*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2011, P. 207 206-219

Lincoln is a double-edged individual and lives in a parallel world, a world of appearance and reality. The clothes and the card game are the extension or metaphors of this duplicitous world that underlies the whole play. The distance between the real and the imagination is closed or covered by clothes and illusion. The mask is thus indicative of a certain illusion. The illusion is quite important in performance as Lincoln exposes in the following:

Its pretty dark. To keep thuh illusion of thuh whole thing. But on thuh opposite where I sit theres a little electrical box, like a fuse box. Silver metal. Its got uh dent in it like somebody hit it with they fist. Big old dent so everything reflected in it gets reflected upside down. Like yr looking in uh spoon. And that's where I can see em. The assassins. ... And there he is. Standing behind me. Standing in position. Standing upside down. Theres some feet shapes on the floor so he knows just where he oughta stand. So he wont miss. Thuh gun is always cold. Winter or summer thuh gun is always cold. And when the gun touches me he can feel that Im warm and he knows Im alive. And if Im alive then he can shoot me dead. And for a minute, with him hanging back there behind me, its real. Me looking like Lincoln. Then he shoots. (49-50)

Illusion is a make-believe that is created by the circumstances or conditions. Lincoln is a player who plays the others through the clothes. Jennifer Larson writes that "The clothes themselves are just empty signifiers. Like a word, a name, or a mask, the audience brings the meaning to them and imbues them with significance based on experience." (125)

Lincoln is quite self-conscious of his double signification: white Lincoln and black Lincoln. His real self is being usurped by the disguise. He confesses: "I said to myself that's exactly what I would do: wear it out and leave it hanging there 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. Don't make me into no Lincoln. I was Lincoln on my own before any of that." (30)

Lincoln survives by enacting this role in an arcade, masking or dismissing his own identity for another. As Lincoln tells his brother: "I am uh brother playing Lincoln. Its uh stretch for anyones imagination. And it aint easy for me neither. Every day I put on that shit, I leave my own shit at the door and I put on that shit and I go out there and I make it work. I make it look easy but its hard. That shit is hard. But it works. Cause I work it. And you trying to get me fired." (52) These words clearly feature the distinction between what is imagined and what is real. Lincoln asserts that, in refiguring Abraham Lincoln, he masks or sacrifices his personal identity and espouses another one through clothes. The result is superficiality and invisibility.

Lincoln is characterized by his cognitive duality: he is torn between performativity and reality; that is between his exterior self and his interior self. In acting the role of Lincoln-the President, there is a double Lincoln: according to his exterior appearance, the appearance of simulacrum or the performative Lincoln and the real Lincoln with an interior and authentic identity. For him it is a performance for survival. He was a former card hustler and when his friend got killed, he resigned and found this job at the arcade: "I swore off them cards. Took nowhere jobs. Drank. The Cookie threw me out. What thuh fuck was I gonna do? I seen that "Help Wanted" sign and I went up in there and I looked good in the getup and agreed to the whiteface and they really dug it that me and Honest Abe got the same name." (53) The card game is based on strategies of doubling and doubleness embodied in Lincoln who has become a somewhat duplicitous character.

The job at the arcade is not well-paid, especially because he is black. Obviously, he would have earned much more if he were white, as the following conversation between him and Booth suggests:

“Lincoln: And as they offered me thuh job, saying of course I would have to wear a little makeup and accept less than what they would offer a – another guy –

Booth: Go on, say it. ‘White.’ They’d pay you less than theyd pay a white guy.” (29)

Though not well-paid because he is black, Lincoln is obliged to keep the job. In the process of performing that job, he develops an active consciousness in his perception of himself: from outside and from inside. Through clothes, Lincoln-the president is recreated and his assassination re-enacted. The impersonation of Abraham Lincoln by a black Lincoln suggests that clothes highlight the fluidity, exteriority, superficiality of identity.

Moreover, Lincoln’s impersonation of the historical white Lincoln is a mechanical replacement, and at the same time, it is a parody of the minstrel tradition. It allows the playwright to reverse the role: Lincoln puts on white make-up to imitate a white. During the minstrel tradition, whites imitated blacks (caricatured or stereotyped images) in order to make fun of them. But here, Lincoln is not joking about whites; he plays the role of a white in order to survive, to hold a job. To some extent, the author seems to draw our attention on the fact that owing to some particular circumstances, especially some imposed social conditions, the black American has to disguise or change identity sometimes. Therefore, black identity is generally performative.

In other words, Lincoln’s role highlights the fact that the African American’s identity is sometimes distorted and imposed on him through the social and economic structures that force him to accommodate. In the same light, we shall now consider Booth, Lincoln’s second self, as another example of the African American who is psychologically forced to a certain appearance that is different from his authentic real.

b) Booth’s Performative Subjectivity

Booth differs from Lincoln in the sense that, while Lincoln is conscious of his dual personality, Booth seems to be oblivious of a private self different from his public self. For him, what is important is the individual’s outward appearance, his sense of self in the eyes of others. For instance, he claims that the clothes bring out Lincoln’s real self : “You look sharp too, man. You look like the real you. Most of the time you walking around all bedraggled and shit. You look good. Like you used to look back in thuh day when you had Cookie in love with you and all the women in the world was eating out of yr hand.” (30)

Booth displays a particular character which is different from his real or private self. Such a character can be regarded as his persona: an image he presents to the world that is designed to make a particular impression on others. For Booth, the individual’s identity is necessarily what is external, what other people can see, and what they ascribe on the individual according to what they can see, or what is visible. For him, identity is exclusively defined in relation to the others, through the gaze of the other. Consequently, Booth is committed to an identity construction based on his external appearance.

As a black in a white oppressive society, Booth’s identity construction and assertion lies in the economic realm and his definition of masculinity, and both converge toward his manhood. Thus he is involved in a gender construct, which implies a double and interrelated quest: economic and masculine. He attempts to negotiate his identity by determining his gender role as a man. This impetus toward self-invention or self-construction takes him to excel in make-believe: a performative subjectivity prompted by the external symbolic order that regulates social reality.

The psychological and the social of the African American are inextricably linked according to Myka who writes that: “His [African American] assessment of worth depends on his ability to

identify both with the symptom of his oppression and with the symbol of recognition: money” (Myka, 78) It is in this light, and without any active consciousness, that Booth constructs his reality and negates his inner self for a life of appearance in order to preserve a sense of dignity and selfhood, as he indulges in behavior and attitude that conform with values beyond himself.

Bound to social norms and expectations, Booth’s masculine performative behavior gets him to stereotypical frames of the black male. Thus, his masculinity encompasses such images of a black man prone to aggressivity, or violence, theft, and hyper-sexuality. The play is replete with Booth’s role performances that aim at asserting his manhood. Indeed, in a racist context, Booth seems to have internalized his “supposed emasculation,” or “the underdog.” Gender being performative, according to Judith Butler, Booth’s masculine role is invented and reinvented through the repetition of actions. And his behavior and actions are an interpretation of what he believes to be a man, “the topdog,” which is related to the construction of his identity.

Thus, poor and deserted by his parents, Booth is committed to petty thefts from downtown stores. What he steals is essentially destined to improve his outer appearance: clothes. The goal is to affirm his manhood that is threatened and negated by his reality. Booth’s masculine self-fashioning is based on economic worth: economics is always involved in construction of masculinity, through its associations with power, success, and autonomy. In other words, Booth is committed to a role identity based on an imaginative view of himself in a position of a rather idealized masculine status.

Booth’s world is made of dreams, sometimes unattainable dreams that hide his reality. He envisions a successful life, a future that will be made possible by his teaming with Lincoln in the three-card monte game: “Yeah. Scheming and dreaming. No one throws the cards like you, Link. And with yr moves and my magic, and we get Grace and a girl for you to round out the posse. We’d be golden, bro! am I right?” (20) Booth’s economic conception of masculine power, or his longing for material wealth and power, draws him to talk to his elder brother in going back to his former job as a game hustler in order for both of them to earn much money in tricking people.

When his elder brother shows reluctance to follow him, he protests with anger and threat: “Here I am interested in an economic opportunity, willing to work hard, willing to take risks and all you can say you shiteating motherfucking pathetic limp dick uncle tom, all you can tell me is how you don’t do no more what I be wanting to do. Here I am trying to earn a living and you standing in my way. YOU STANDING IN MY WAY? LINK!” (21)

In the economic sense, the conventional construction of Booth’s identity can also be accounted for by his willingness to drop his name “Booth” and change it into “Three-card,” a name directly related to the job. Booth would like to be called three-card, a name related to the employment he would like to have. Here, Booth is willing to bear a name that makes one with the job, exactly like Lincoln’s name which is also related to the employment he takes on in the arcade. As Myka Tucker-Abramson asserts, “In a world where even our names – our symbolic identities – are formed through the economic, it is unsurprising that the rest of our lives and relationships are also formed and altered by class.” (91)

The purpose for Booth is to legitimate his imagined identity in the eyes of others, especially women. For Booth, women will be attracted to him if he possesses money. His masculine assertion passes through his acquisition of money, which in turn will give him a certain power with women. Masculinity and money or the wage-earning powers are therefore strongly related, as he says: “...Pockets bulging, plenty of cash! And the ladies would be thrilling! You could afford to get laid! Grace would be all over me again.”(20)

So, for Booth, economic power rhymes with success with women, his means of masculine assertion. Thus, the clothes that he steals from stores are supposed to help in his ambition to assert

and maintain a particular social position. Referring to some clothes he has just stolen, he declares: "Ima wear mine tonight. Gracell see me in this and she gonna ask me tuh marry her. I got you the blue and I got me the brown." (28) The ability to obtain and control women is an extension of the ability to obtain and control money, and power.

So, in addition to his thrust for economic power, Booth actively engages in a process of self-reinvention grounded in sex. His obsession with women or sexuality is related to his conception of masculinity, and the play reveals that Booth is constantly obsessed with sexual relationships. Women are considered as symbols of masculine power and Booth does not fail to use sex to assert his manliness. Definitely, he indulges in representations of masculinity through sexual fantasies which take him to the invention of Grace and the projection of his official union with her. For Grace, he has stolen a ring, the symbol for their future union as he reports to Lincoln: "I got her [Grace] this ring today. Diamond. Well, diamond-esque, but it looks just as good as the real thing. (10)

Once, to enhance his masculinity, he simulated a forthcoming visit by Grace, his girl-friend, and for the occasion, he arranged their dwelling place using every necessary trick at hand in order to entice her. The scene is described in the following stage direction:

In its place (the monte setup) is a table with two nice chairs. The table is covered with a lovely tablecloth and there are nice plates, silverware, champagne glasses and candles. All the makings of a very romantic dinner for two. He sits back down. He goes over to the bed. Checks it for springiness. Smooths down the bedspread. Double-checks 2 matching silk dressing gowns, very expensive, marked "His" and "Hers" (59)

But the fact is, Grace never showed up. She is absent in the play and in Booth's life. Simulating her presence is for Booth a way to project his hysterical sexual frustrations. She is to fill the void of his sexual prowess, and above all, without a feminine companion, Booth may feel "less of a man." Inventing her enables Booth to feel "more like a man." As Myka Tucker Abramson maintains, "Booth's desire for Grace is at once sexual and symbolic: he wants to have sex with Grace, but that sexual act represents the salvation of his masculinity." (90) And her absence in the play can be interpreted as "both Booth's failure sexually and also the failure of his sense of self." (90)

Definitely all his stories about women are imagined; a lie to cover up his failed masculinity. The reality about his sexual life is revealed by the sex magazines that he hides under his bed. As a matter of fact, lacking the opportunity to fulfill his powerful sexual desire, he cannot but imagine or fantasize about the girls that he finds in erotic magazines. These magazines that he hides under his bed serve as objects of his sexual gratification. When Lincoln discovers the truth, Booth asserts the following: "Im hot. I need constant sexual release... I'm a hot man. I aint apologizing for it. When I don't got a woman, I gotta make do. Not like you, Link. When you don't got a woman you just sit there. Letting yr shit fester." (45) In this passage, Booth contrasts his own virility with Lincoln's impotence, which is nothing less, as Myka Tucker-Abramson put it, "than a desperate assertion of his manhood." (90)

Thus, Booth's world is a self-constructed world, an imaginary world whose purpose is to support his role identity. In his world of performance, Booth acts and constructs his reality according to gendered stereotypes: for instance, talking about women, he tells his brother: "How you gonna get a woman if you dont got a phone? Women these days are more cautious, more whaddacallit, more circumspect." (31-32) What Booth means here is the necessity for him to devise an artificial world so as to match with reality. In the following, he demonstrates in three steps the

meta-language of a home telephone number to a lady, especially, how one can court a woman with a home telephone number:

She gives you her number and she asks for yrs. You give her yr number. The phone number of yr home. Thereby telling her 3 things: 1) you got a home, that is, you aint no smooth talking smooth dressing *homeless* joe; 2) that you is in possession of a telephone and a working telephone number which is to say that you got thuh cash and thuh wherewithal to acquire for yr self the worlds most revolutionary communication apparatus and you together enough to pay yr bills! 3) you give her yr number you telling her that its cool to call if she should so please, that is, that you aint got no wife or wife approximation on the premises (32)

Booth is against authenticity and in his mask deployment he used to tell lies in order to boast. Contrasting with Booth's boasting artificialities, is the obliterated reality that is revealed in the stage direction: "He quietly rummages underneath his bed for a girlie magazine which, as the lights fade, he reads with great interest." (53) Actually, there is no Grace, and Booth's sexual drives and phantasms are expressed through some magazines that picture women. And the irony about the whole thing is that Lincoln is aware of all this fabrication; as he tells his brother: "You laying over there yr balls blue as my boosted suit. Laying over there waiting for me to go back to sleep or black out so I wont hear you rustling thuh pages of yr fuck book." (44)

Basically, the social consciousness, which is "the unconscious of the brothers" according to Myka, is the reality that prompts Booth into performativity. Thus, Booth's masculine adjustment is socially constructed. He has invented himself, and he exhibits a world wherein the make-believe has replaced his real self. Unlike Lincoln's double-edged nature, Booth develops a single-edged nature and this outer self is a gender constructed self. It is a second personality that Booth creates, which ends up with the annihilation of his inner personality.

For Booth, seeing himself through the eyes of others is what matters. Therefore, the re-enactment of socially legitimized behavior constitutes the focal point of his self-making; and the guiding principle of his life is grounded in his desire to fit in. Through "performative" acts, he takes on the conventional role of the black male, and, without self-conscious, this stand downplays his individual self. Completely engulfed in his social self image, the race gender construct or the mask drains Booth' self and absorbs his essence.

His behavior erases the realities of an authentic black life, and favors the cultural image imposed by white racism. For him, identity is what is put on, and the result is self-concealment; that is his "true self" is trapped beneath what can be considered as a mask: his created sense of subjectivity. In other words, Booth creates a second self or personality he takes for his true self, and he only reveals himself through this external envelop; that is with the mask. On the whole, with Lincoln and Booth, Parks seems to suggest different conditions and the phenomenology of the African American identity: what is real might be just imaginary (Lincoln) and what is imaginary might be real (Booth). This versatility or ambivalence of identity is also highlighted through the transition from the imaginary to the real.

2) From Performance to Reality: The Disruption of the Imaginary

Booth's male status is built and secured by this personal constructed world wherein his exterior self prevails over his interior self. Put differently, the mask Booth has been wearing as a mode of subjectivity hid the real state of things: the elusive fragmentation of his personality. The mask is a simulation and as Jean Baudrillard writes, "Simulation threatens the difference between

the ‘true’ and the ‘false,’ the ‘real’ and the ‘imaginary.’” (*Simulacra and Simulations* 4)³ Reality has been repressed and replaced by illusion, and Booth has been “living underground,” in a state of hibernation, like Ralph Ellison’s invisible character in *Invisible Man*.⁴ The process from performance to reality in the play is the process of the eruption of Booth’s mental trauma that challenges his invented and delusory universe.

Booth’s elusive realm of manliness or masculine power is the root of the fraternal conflict with Lincoln. The card game stands as a metaphor of the masculinity contest between the brothers. It is used by Parks to describe Booth’s willingness to assert his masculinity and this desired masculine power is tried by the same game when he decides to play with his elder brother. It is through the card game that the move from reality to performance is reversed. The killing of Lincoln is a defensive and aggressive assertion of Booth’s masculinity, his gendered status as a man. The game is therefore the medium of Booth’s psychically liberating confrontation with Lincoln.

Reality or Booth’s opposing self defies and even destroys his image of masculinity. When Booth’s illusory universe or fictional reality is dislocated by Lincoln to become reality, what ensues is the peak in their conflictual relationships which will be resolved through the murder of Lincoln. As Tucker-Abramson Myka maintains, “it is the rage of disempowerment and loss that moves Booth to kill his brother.” (93)

The three-card game epitomizes duplicity, appearance and reality, and the tension between the brothers. As Lincoln tries to teach Booth, the main challenge with that game is based on the ability to distinguish between appearance and reality, for the line between them can easily be blurred. As Lincoln explains, “Theres 2 parts to throwing thuh cards. Both parts are fairly complicated. Thuh moves and thuh grooves, thuh talk and thuh walk, thuh patter and thuh pitter pat, thuh flap and thuh rap: what yr doing with yr mouth and what yr doing with yr hands.” (75) The card game is based on illusion and lure, and the real, whatever it is, remains hidden beneath an enigmatic realm of appearances.

The player should therefore be vigilant and cautious in order to make the distinction between what is and what is not. It is a prerequisite according to Lincoln who cautions his brother: “First thing you learn is what is. Next thing you learn is what aint. You don’t know what is you don’t know what aint, you don’t know shit.” (73) To know “what is” is important; but also important is to know “what is not,” for, there is no essence in the card game, and face-value is illusory, as the adoption of the enigmatic mask, which is the result of the African American cultural alienation.

The difference between “what is” and “what aint” is demonstrated by Lincoln in the game party opposing the two brothers. In the first round of their confrontation, Booth is “made into” the winner. In Booth’s social configuration, being the winner is associated with being “the man.” So, after having picked the right card, he said: “Who thuh man?! And Lincoln responded: “You thuh man, man” (96) But, this is part of the strategy, it is bait. The same is repeated during the second round, Booth is once more “the man”, the winner. Yet, if Booth knows what is, (the surface), he is ignorant of what is not (beneath the surface). Booth has been allowed to win twice and he has gained confidence. Actually, Lincoln has been playing the game, and on the third round, he is the winner, “the man.” What he wins is Booth’s inheritance money that was at stake. Booth has relied on the surface, the face-value of things, and this is deluding, for beneath the surface, rests the real thing.

³Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulations*, Translated by Sheila Faria Glaser.

⁴Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man*, New York, Penguin Books, 1952.

To lose is to be denied the status of man, for, Booth has always associated money with masculine power. The loss of this power amounts to his being the underdog, which enrages him. In addition to his dispossession, Lincoln laughs at him for his being superficial and naïve: “Shit. Sorry. I aint laughing at you Im just laughing. Theres so much about those cards. You think you can learn them just by watching and just by playing but there is more to them cards than that.” (106) Furthermore, Lincoln questions the value and authenticity of the inheritance money, putting forward uncertainty and doubt about the substance and meaning that Booth associates with the stocking money: “How you know? She coulda been jiving you, bro. Jiving you that there really *was* money in this thing. Jiving you big time. Its like thuh cards.” (106)

Actually, the stocking money functions as the key to Booth’s unconscious mind. Deeply immersed into a life of illusion, Booth’s inheritance money functions as a fetish: his linking-object to his mother. Booth does not spend the money his mother left him “in order symbolically to maintain his maternal connection” (Tucker-Abramson 93) In taking that symbol of Booth’s sustenance, which constitutes a rock on which he stands and has always stood, Lincoln undermines or destroys metaphorically his brother’s world of illusion, his fetishistic fascination of his mother’s gift. Booth gets played by his brother whom he thinks he has played. The player becomes the played, and the played, the player. Without the symbol of his attachment to his mother, Booth becomes disenchanting, his visions become hollow, meaningless: “When Lincoln wins Booth’s inheritance, he both reasserts his claim to manhood and usurps Booth’s connection to their mother.”(Tucker-Abramson 93)

Therefore, dispossessing Booth of this symbol amounts to the destitution of Booth’s imaginary world, his self-invented personality, which occurs as a short circuit to his male status, and projects him into reality. For Booth, the money in the stocking is a symbol with imaginary and real support, it is Booth’s symptom, and when Lincoln attempts to cut open the money, he threatens the symptom by threatening to collapse the tension between the imaginary and the real. In other words, reality surfaces through the loss of the inheritance money, which can be held as a symptom that tears the fabric of Booth’s imaginary world. The symptom, according to Slavoj Žižek, is the articulation of (the) a disruption. “Symptom is the exception which disturbs the surface of the false appearance, the point at which the repressed Other Scene erupts, while fetish is the embodiment of the Lie which enables us to sustain the unbearable truth.” (*Enjoy your Symptom* Preface, x)

To open the stocking is a risk that might take Booth behind illusion. He does not want to reject his reliance on their mother and accept a complete responsibility for his own being. Nonetheless, the realization of the disjunction of the two worlds, especially the crumbling of the personal world founded on imagination, not reality, takes Booth to a deep desperation. As a result, he falls back into his subconscious urge: his obsession with masculinity, and in order to release his masculine aggressiveness, his neurotic anxiety, he changes the rules of the game, resorting to violence. He gets his gun and points it at his brother, and before shooting him, he says:

Who thuh man now, huh? Who thuh man now?! Think you can fuck with me, motherfuckerthink again motherfucker think again! Think you can take me like Im just some chump some two lefthanded pussy dickbreath chump who you can take and then go laugh at. Aint laughing at me you was just laughing bunch uh bullshit and you know it. (109)

Eventually, Booth shoots Lincoln in order to get his money back, his link to his mother, and his manhood. So, Booth kills Lincoln to restore himself, to be free to live his abstract world. Ultimately, Booth’s constructed world collapses in on itself due to the lack of deeper meaning beyond the symbols. Booth is brought back into the real world; collapsing under the weight of his

own imaginary world that could no longer sustain itself. The murder of his elder brother is the return of the uncanny, the return of the repressed. The significance of Booth's reaction is that reality for African Americans is their fictitious life into which they are confined. It is this reality that keeps them alive. A slip out of this conception amounts to danger.

Conclusion

This study has highlighted the nature of black identity in Suzan-Lori Parks' *Topdog/Underdog*, focusing on its double-edged process: between performance and reality, self-concealment and self-display, a discourse about black identity and its representation. As a matter of fact, Parks seems to capture the predicament of the African American, who confronts and embraces alternative identities. In other words, it is the societal forces, the historical contingencies that have dictated the different identities of the African Americans, who have generally been confined into roles imposed on them and their identities have been defined by those roles.

Lying between appearance and reality, the African American identity is like the three monte game that is used by Parks to exalt the African American in his role playing. The power to win is always held by whites (the players) and the African American is always the ball (the played). What is implied by this metaphorical representation by the author is the fact blacks' identities are just performed, therefore questionable representations. Put differently, they are stereotypes, as they vacillate between exterior selves and interior selves.

Drawing on Judith Butler's notion of gender as a performative act, we have attempted to show that the African American identity is instituted through repetitive acts, not an objective representation. In other words, the true self of African Americans is buried beneath the layers of their social beings. As Judith Butler formulates in "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory",

gender is in no way a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts proceed; rather, it is an identity tenuously constituted in time – an identity instituted through a stylized repetition of acts. Further, gender is instituted through the stylization of the body and, hence, must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and enactments of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self. (Butler 591)

Through her exploration of the African American experience, Suzan Lori Parks tries to reveal that black identity is the result of a dialectical play between reality and imaginary, truth and performance. This dialectic certainly blurs or problematizes the idea of essence in black identification. Rather than a private essence, the African American identity is a performative accomplishment, and to use Judith Butler's phrase, it is "an expression of what he does and not what he is."

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