

## Self Reconstruction -- The America Play and Topdog/Underdog Under Performance Studies

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### Abstract

**Suzan Lori Parks (1963—) is an American playwright, musician, and novelist who won the Pulitzer Prize for Drama in 2002 for her work *Topdog/Underdog* (1999), becoming the first African-American female writer in American history. In virtue of Richard Schechner's theory of Performance Studies, this thesis tries to interpret Parks's "Lincoln Act", *The America Play* and *Topdog/Underdog* in social performance and aesthetic performance, and explore how the self is reconstructed in performance. Parks investigates the relationship between the self and role and points out the significance of performance in self-development, as well as in social advancement. Therefore, analyzing Parks's plays under Performance Studies has both academic value and social relevance.**

### Keywords

**Suzan Lori Parks; *The America Play*; *Topdog/Underdog*; Richard Schechner; Performance Studies.**

### 1. Pre-Performance: Self-Lost under Social Pressure

In modern society, "people are increasingly finding the world not a book to be read but a performance to participate in" (Schechner, *Performance Studies* 25). "Self", as the main signature in performance, is a powerful means of testing the performer's subjectivity among the diverse interactions. Therefore, the performance demands that the "self" needs to conform to different social roles requirements, if not, the performance fails and the "self" also suffers. The prevalence of performance suggests that people of all ages and classes have the right to get self-improvement and self-expression, but when this need is contradicted by reality, a dissonance in performance would occur and further result in the loss of the self. And this contradiction is exactly faced by the protagonists in Parks's plays. For Parks, the task of a playwright is to find the "literature and the special strange relationship between theatre and real-life" (Parks, *Possession* 4) and then write it down to enlighten the followers. So, in *The America Play* and *Topdog/Underdog*, Parks reveals the covert social elements in the two leading actors who are subjected to everyday life torments, which bounds to the self-lost in family.

Pre-performance is an important but seldom mentioned phrase in performance, Eugenio Barba calls it "pre-expressive", Erving Goffman addresses it as "front" stage. No matter what the term is, it conveys that performance does not start from an impulse or a single source, the performers' private experience that gives rise to the special performance. Firstly, the social performance in families. The family is like a microcosm of society that contains "the ordinary day-by-day interactions of individuals and the consequences of these interactions as they move through social life" (Turner, *From Ritual to Theatre* 32-33). Usually, the family has an ineffable power in curing and healing trauma, however, in Park's drama, the family topic is consistent with disorder performance.

Be that as it may, the capricious parental roles who didn't follow the due regulations exert a vicious impact on the next generation. Parks set their father as "a drunkard" (Parks, *A Casebook*

52) and their mother as “a slut” (Parks, *A Casebook* 52) to build a challenging pre-performance atmosphere of Lincoln. Mom cheated the family firstly, as Booth recalled, “Mom had a man on thuh side” (TD 125). Mom cheated the family firstly, as Booth recalled, “Mom had a man on thuh side” (TD 125). And dad even took Lincoln to meet his ladies. The improper performance indisposed the little Lincoln and exerted a dreadful influence on his future. So to speak, the parental behavior is not merely a terrible performance but a moral leprosy. Along with the promiscuity, the divorce further tear the ideal family show apart. The asymmetrical affection contributed to the anomalous fraternal relationship, in which the other is the one who in possession of half estate. Since parents abandoned the two brothers, Lincoln realized that “I think there was something out there that they liked more than they liked us.” (TD 95) It can be seen that the failure of his parents’ performance caused self-lost of Lincoln, he could not feel the warmth and happiness in the family. Schechner once said, “the efficacy-entertainment braid tightens and loosens” (Schechner, *Performance Theory* 14), in other words, a good performance has the function of both discipline and freedom, however, the parents’ performance failed to attain the balance. Above all, the parent-child relationship is the first topic to be mentioned in social performance. Whether the undisciplined performance of the parents or himself, it will cause the self-restraint of performers. Social performance not only involves the ordinary day-by-day interactions but “the consequences of these interactions as they move through social life” (Turner, *From Ritual to Theatre* 32-33). In this play, the failure of parents’ performance mainly results in the self puzzle of little Lincoln and then generates chain reaction further.

Besides, the family is a team that contains an overall goal. When the purpose of this collaboration is not the preservation of a family, the group performance fails, and the actors will inevitably suffer. In *The America Play*, the contradiction of social performance arises when the actor’s pursuit is at odds with the rules of the social environment, as Isaac Reed states “the more opposing actors share the same discursive frameworks and value orientations, the more intense this complicity-in-conflict is.” (Isaac 154) Parks clandestinely bespeaks the doomed destiny by naming the leading actor. The Founding Father, for example, whose name suggests two meanings: the reminder of the “Founding Fathers” of the United States; an orphaned child who devoid of care and attention. So, as an abandoned son, the Foundling Father not gained a sense of self-belonging in both the “big family” and the “small family”. The Foundling Father valued personal life, pursuits, and success over family responsibilities. However, an actor who is unable to “really live” (Schechner, *Performance Theory* 46) in their characters, also unable to represent on stage.” The conflict between self and role arises when forced to stay at home, where he spends his days wandering around the house with nothing to do, “standing in the kitchen or sometimes out in the yard (between the right angles of the house) stand out there where he couldn’t be seen standing with his ear cocked)” (AP 163). Finally, he left his family to chase his dream, and “leaving his wife and child after the blessing” (AP 163) with no regret. It seems to him that this is his path, that he is Lincoln’s black doppelganger who has been chosen, and so he leaves behind his five-year-old son Brazil and his wife Lucy, “tuh carry on” (AP 179) and left the east to the west, “to seek his fortune” (AP 182). As to *The Foundling Father*, his performance is far from a father’s role, for his dream is being Lincoln’s imitator, thus, performing a family role for him is imprisoned.

## 2. On-performance: Self-Searching in Imitation Show

The relationship between physical self and mind self on stage is a universal argument to actors. “Self is presented through the performance of roles, through performance that breaks roles, and through declaring to a given public that one has undergone a transformation of state and status been saved or damned, elevated or released.” (Turner, *The Anthropology of Performance*

81) In the two plays, the self-searching can be concluded into two parts: suppression and release in both body and mind. The play takes place within a threshold space, in which the change is short-lived and does not have a permanent effect on the actor. The liminal confusion is the major question of self. For the two imitators, whether in rehearsal or the show, the body functions as the tube of transportation; but physical trauma confuses the two actors that what is the boundary of the virtuality and reality.

The visitors are invisible killers who prefer entertaining play rather than serious history. So Lincoln is afraid of being intimate to the visitors. For the two performers, the visitors are not only the players but the invisible killer. So, every time the customers come in, he feels involuntarily nervous:

“Not behind me yet but I can hear him coming. Coming in with his gun in hand, thuh gun he already picked out up front when he paid his fare...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.” (TU 70)

In the assassination game, the “assassins” kill Abraham Lincoln by touching a real man’s body. Lincoln’s warm body contrasts with the cold gun, and in such a liminal space, Lincoln’s presence was to satisfy the audience’s shooting desire, with the body at an irreversible risk of death. The performance blurred boundary puts more pressure on the actors. Another character who suffered body pressure is The Foundling Father. Unlike Lincoln, The Foundling Father’s self is actively alienates the character. That’s because his performance is so vivid that the audience forgets it was only a show. In order to gain recognition, he attracted the visitors to harm him “to come and throw old food at him while spoke.” (AP 164) When the tourist is observing his body and hurting it, his body has become a spectacle which is “an affirmation of appearances” (Debord 9). He loses the dignity and objectified as a tool for others to release their emotions. The imitation performance drew a vague line between the real world and the images, but as Guy Debord said “When the real world is transformed into mere images, mere images become real beings.” (Debord 11) The Foundling Father invited the audience to participate in the game, which means merging his real body to the imaginary world, an upside-down world, the truth is nothing more than a false moment.

For example, a woman shouts, “Strike the tent” (AP 167) which is not the slogan of the murder Booth, but “the last words of General Robert E. Lee, Commander of the Confederate Army” (AP. Instead of correcting this mistake, The Foundling Father was indifferent to the slogan and answered the shot mechanically, “IIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIES!” (AP 167) “LIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIARRRRRRRRRRRRRRRS!” (AP 167), matching the performance with actual actions that did not check the historical facts. Some audience hard to break through the illusion and return to the real world, so “someone remarked in he played Lincoln so well he ought to be shot” (AP 164). What’s more, many “faithful” guests come back once a week to “assassinate” The Foundling Father and purposely choose “The Derringer” (AP 166) to use. And then, the frequent shooting caused “a slight deafness in this ear” (AP 169) to The Foundling Father. Therefore, the virtual performance caused real damage to the performer.

Here we can say, the body is an subversive site. From the slavery maltreat to the two actors’ minstrel show, the black body became a publicly consumed spectacle. What’s worse, their occupational performance actively responds to mainstream discrimination, at the same time, the racial violence occurs with the self-destructive execution. That sounds like a vicious cycle: the more vivid performance he enacted, the more death risk he will meet. Admittedly, the body is the material basis of human beings, but its meaning to human beings has long gone beyond materiality. The body is the most intuitive form of “self”. In Environmental Theater, Schechner trained the actors to unbind the body for the “resistances and blocks that prevent him from

acting through, wholly following, the impulses that come from within him in response to the actions of a role." (Schechner, *Environmental Theater* 200-201) The same is true for the two imitators. Like Turner said, only the "liberated and disciplined body itself, with its many untapped resources for pleasure, pain, and expression" would lead the way to a better world. (Schechner, *An Introduction* 67)

### 3. Post-Performance: Self-Fulfillment among Communities

The frustration of self in social performance is the major incentive to the aesthetic performance. After the aesthetic performance, the self-worth has been greatly achieved in real society. In Performance Studies, the relationship between life and drama is a Mobius circle that transforms to each other: life inspires the drama and drama makes people aware of the imperfections and incompleteness in life, improving the social and political consciousness. Therefore, the impact of a reconstructed self will be mainly discussed in this part. Schechner believes that "A performance is a dialectic of "reflexivity". (Schechner, *An Introduction* 20). That is to say, the self rejuvenation is partly owing to the performance reflexivity which is conducive to the further development in social performance, ethnic community, and nation.

For Schechner, everyday life is also full of philosophy: "Paying attention to simple activities performed in the present moment is developing a Zen consciousness in relation to the daily, an honoring of the ordinary." (Schechner, *An Introduction* 29) Corresponding to the failure of the pre-performance, the self-breakthrough is reflected in the awakening of masculinity.

After taking part in a parody show of historical performance, Lincoln and The Foundling Father gained a deeper understanding of the American national narrative, capitalism and patriarchy, and the abandonment of the money-spoofing game was the greatest rebellion against capital-oriented masculinity. Unlike The Foundling Father, whose original intention was to pursue his dream, Lincoln's courage was mainly from economic pressure. Lincoln's parents left him and his younger brother away. His younger brother, Booth, was so lazy that the burden of providing for the family totally relies on Lincoln. Therefore, Lincoln abandoned the fast-money gambling game and chose a relatively job is not irresponsible, on the contrary, to support the family in a legal way and give up the unrealistic idea of getting rich overnight is precisely a manifestation of masculinity and a difficult choice under economic pressure. Lincoln's relationship with his younger brother Booth was also closer after he left his job. In his brother's eyes, he was no longer a money-making machine, but a free man, as Booth put it: "Link. Yr free. Dont go crawling back. Yr free at last! Now you can do anything you want. Yr not tied down by that job. You can—you can do something else. Something that pays better maybe." (TU 86-87) The two brothers are more closely linked as a community. Besides, getting rid of the unsatisfied life and pursuing what they need is another way to express masculinity and the families admitted their hard work and expressed the miss to them in turn. For example, The Foundling Father's wife Lucy expressed her desire for family reunion by imagining the father and son's conversation: "He'd say: 'My how youve grown!' He'd say: 'How's your weeping?' He'd say..." (AP 191). Lucy's imagination did not come from nowhere. This is because Brazil was five years old when The Foundling Father left home, so he did not participate in Brazil's upbringing. As Lucy murmured that work for his husband is "like uh tonic" (AP 168). She once complained that The Foundling Father did not take on the responsibilities for the family while abandoning her. But she also appreciated the decisive courage of The Foundling Father, "he cleared this plot for us. he was uh Digger." (AP 168) In addition, The Foundling Father, who had come back from the dead, was better able to balance work and family. His presence on both television and stage shows that his self-worth was recognised not only by the public but also by his family. On the television, "a replay of "The Lincoln Act"" (AP 194); out of the television "The Foundling Father has returned. His coffin awaits him." (AP 194) Lucy and Brazil started preparing for his funeral, and Brazil

worked hard to dig holes for his father “loved the Great Hole” (AP 197). And The Foundling Father was so well-known that Lucy once said, “There are hundreds of upon thousands of know of of you Daddy, glorified his reputation, and would like to pay their respects.” (AP 195) It is clear that after “quit the business” (AP 197), The Foundling Father was gradually recognized by his family. That is to say, in western concept, the self respect endowed with equal dignity in personhood. Performance is not only about fulfilling a role, but also provides a method of regulating personal identity and interpersonal relationship.

In addition, the imitation performance is propitious to repair the trauma of the black community and help the actors to realize their self-worth in the race. Demonstrating the diversity of races, role-playing is not a way to fight for dominance, but a reflection of the values of playwrights’ desire for racial equality. In the two plays, the performance “exerts a significant reparative force on the psychic traumas experienced by black communities torn asunder by the Middle Passage, enslavement, and Jim Crow” (Paige 298). The unique katharsis effect of tragedy performance makes the black community experience a “rites of repair” (Paige 298) which “revise and reclaim historical narratives, cast off debilitating shame, and collaboratively come to terms with the past and envision possibilities for the future.” (Paige 298) To start with, the impersonation of Abraham Lincoln reflects the rebellious spirit of black people who dare to face history and confront it head-on. There were many historical celebrities in the Great Hole, such as “Amerigo Vespucci hisself made regular appearances. Marcus Garvey. Ferdinand and Isabella. Mary Queen of thuh Scots! Tarzan King of thuh Apes! Washington Jefferson Harding and Millard Fillmore. Mistufer Columbus even.”(AP 180) All these well-known people who appeared in the Great Hole are white people, and finally, The Foundling Father, as the only black man, joined the daily parade with the forerunners together. More surprisingly, he even started his solo speech, “I believe this is the place where I do the Gettysburg Address” (AP 195). Therefore, his performance enables him to parallel with the great white men and surpasses them in some aspects, taking him into the “white only” Great Hole. Besides, receiving equal treatment as white people is another contribution that the performers made to the black community. In Topdog/Underdog, Booth changed his name to “Shango” (TU 20) for hoping to be treated the same as the white man. In The America Play, Parks didn’t name the protagonist; the address “The Foundling Father” “The Lesser Known” were just counterparts or despised copies of “The Founding Father” and “The Great Man”. Thus, the black man, in part, is the appendage of the great man. But at the end of The America Play, when Brazil exhibited his father’s body, the show’s name is “One of thuh greats Hissself” (AP 199), which neither about the white nor the celebrity but focus on the self. The Foundling Father earned the same treatment as Abraham Lincoln; both of them have been worshiped by the public. Parks uses theatre as a carrier to reproduce the scene of Lincoln’s assassination, which shows the cultural significance of the two dramas. By creating a “Theatre of Present” that draws on a specific social event, the stage reassesses past events in the current historical context. The Foundling Father and Lincoln’s minstrel performance does not aim to differentiate between “we” (the African-Americans) and “they” (the white Americans), but recalls the collective memory with the help of self-performance. Finally, the self has achieved the national value mainly lies in two aspects, the first is breaking the national myth, uncovering the social reality of satire, absurdity, and violence. And the second, it embodies the power of individuality “leaves an imprint upon the world by creating an indelible history that cannot be duplicated.” (Harrison 138) To start with, the unreliability of history narration, which mainly reflects in the Lincoln assassination game. The two protagonists take advantage of his physical traits to impersonate Lincoln. The assassination scene has been replayed over and over again. Different lines and “murders” implied that the history was merely a manipulated performance on each scene. The shooting slogan varies from person to person, like “Thus to the tyrants!” (AP 165), “The South is avenged!”(AP 165), “Strike the tent.” (AP 167), which belongs to an American Civil War general, Robert E. Lee., the

Commander of the Confederate Army. The footnotes are the references to the history. Parks uses the footnotes to remind the readers that history was a subjective expression. Besides, the Foundling Father and Lincoln made a living by the "Lincoln Game" which breaks up the orthodox and authority of history. The assassination scene is staged several times repeatedly presents the imperfections of history and belittling the famous event in history into entertainment.

Next, acting the president by a black man is a challenge and a prejudgment of the American political environment. According to Cornel West said in *Race Matters*, the tragedy of African American is due to "the low quality of black leadership and the relative inattention to the deep crisis of black youth" (West x). As we all know, American politics has always been dominated by Anglo-Saxons. Before Barack Obama became president, there was no black precedent in the United States. But on the stage, the black president gives the audience a different visual experience and psychological impact. As the audience walked out of the theater, they also pondered the possibility of a black regime. And as Harrison said, "both plays were written and produced several years before the election of Barack Obama, the first African American ever elected President of the United States" (Harrison 35). So there is an insidious link between art and politics. Performance provides the actor not only with economic power, social status, the future direction, but foretells the emergence of a black leader who "love and respect black people enough to tell them the truth--and trust them with the truth" (West x). Therefore, the performance transcends the parochialism and reaches to the nationalism, that is the worth of self and art.

#### 4. Conclusion

The *America Play* and *Topdog/Underdog* are both historical and family dramas. Both of them have received widespread attention since published. In the two works, Parks mainly discusses how, after experiencing the failure of social performance, the protagonists find himself from the aesthetic performance and realize the self value. Parks focused on the black male in contemporary society, from the family, race society and other aspects of the black male performance crisis in society. By virtue of Richard Schechner's *Performance Studies*, this thesis explores the causes of self-loss and the process of self-seeking from both social and aesthetic performances. It can be concluded that a qualified social role must follow the role requirements, making the character shine while maintaining his ego.

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