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THE PURSUIT OF HAPPINESS: THE STATE OF THE AMERICAN DREAM IN SUZAN-  
LORI PARKS'S *TOPDOG/UNDERDOG*

by

SABRINA ABID

Under the Direction of Matthew C. Roudané

ABSTRACT

In an interview conducted by Matthew C. Roudané, Arthur Miller elaborates on the extent the myth of the American Dream infuses our literature: “The American Dream is the largely unacknowledged screen in front of which all American writing plays itself out—the screen of the perfectibility of man. Whoever is writing in the United States is using the American Dream as an ironical pole of his story” (374). Suzan-Lori Parks is no exception to this rule. In her Pulitzer-Prize winning *Topdog/Underdog*, Parks reveals the illusory nature of the American Dream on a private, deeply personal level by focusing her drama on two brothers living in one under-furnished room in a rooming house. As the audience watches the main characters spiral into their tragic undoing, we are forced to question the validity of the American Dream and our free-enterprise system that supposedly enables that dream.

INDEX WORDS: Suzan-Lori Parks, *Topdog/Underdog*, American dream, African-American playwright, African-American play

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LORI PARKS'S *TOPDOG/UNDERDOG*

by

SABRINA ABID

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

in the College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

2012

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Sabrina Ann Abid  
2012

THE PURSUIT OF HAPPINESS: THE STATE OF THE AMERICAN DREAM IN SUZAN-  
LORI PARKS'S *TOPDOG/UNDERDOG*

by

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**DEDICATION**

*For those who strive to achieve the American Dream*

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

What happens to a dream deferred?  
 Does it dry up  
 like a raisin in the sun? Or fester like a sore—  
 And then run?  
 Does it stink like rotten meat?  
 Or crust and sugar over—  
 like a syrupy sweet?  
 Maybe it just sags  
 like a heavy load  
*Or does it explode?*  
 —Langston Hughes, “Harlem” (1951)

The “American Dream” existed long before we gave a name to it. In our Declaration of Independence, our forefathers set the foundation for the idea of this dream: “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.” This document declares that all citizens have a right to pursue that which they desire, as long as that path does not trample upon another’s. America allows one to follow one’s dreams for economic gains, social mobility, and family stability. In America, one has the opportunity to attain all of these goals.

The term “American Dream” is further defined in historian James Truslow Adams’s *The Epic of America* (1931): “The American Dream is that dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for everyone, with opportunity for each according to ability or achievement” (415). This definition boasts of a place where “everyone” finds a “better,” “richer,” and “fuller” life. We teach our children about the dream and the choices they have in what they want to grow up to be. This dream does more than light the way for our own children. The brilliance of the American Dream shines beyond our borders: immigrants historically have flocked to America, pursuing a life of opportunity.

Despite the fact that so many of us have faith in the dream as outlined by Adams, often the luster of the American Dream tarnishes. Minorities, in particular, have chased the allusive idea fruitlessly for centuries. On April 16, 1963, Martin Luther King, Jr., exposed the discrepancy between the dream and his American reality. In King's version of the "American Dream," the oppressed were forced to fight for their chances for advancement. In his "Letter from Birmingham Jail," King writes:

One day the South will know that when these disinherited children of God sat down at lunch counters, they were in reality standing up for what is best in the American dream and for the most sacred values in our Judaeo Christian heritage, thereby bringing our nation back to those great wells of democracy which were dug deep by the founding fathers. (100)

Jailed for demanding, via peaceful demonstrations, access to a better life, and despite the institutional racism he faced while incarcerated, King still hoped for a better future, for an improved America. He invoked the "American Dream" as a marker of what *could* be if we all pursued it and worked together. In his famous speech delivered on August 28, 1963, at the Lincoln Memorial, Washington, D.C., King adapted Adams's definition of the American Dream, specifically focusing on racial equality:

So I say to you, my friends, that even though we must face the difficulties of today and tomorrow, I still have a dream. It is a dream deeply rooted in the American dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed—we hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal.' / I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia, the sons of

former slaves and the sons of former slave owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood...I have a *dream* today! (104)

The promise of King's version of the American Dream resonates with us all, regardless of our race, origin, or creed. Each of us wants the potential to achieve our dream. Given the social progress that we have undergone as a nation through the Civil Rights Movement, one might hypothesize that pursuing the dream is easier nowadays. That might very well be true for some, but that does not mean that each American has equal opportunity for advancement.

The fallacy of the American Dream thrives as a salient theme in American literature. For instance, in Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* (1949), Willy Loman dies a miserable failure, unable to cash in on his hopes to achieve the American Dream. In 1961, Edward Albee attacks the notion of the American Dream in his play of the same name, writing in his preface, "[it's] an examination of the American Scene, an attack on the substitution of artificial for real values in our society" (8). Also challenging notions of the American Dream, Suzan-Lori Parks explores the "cost" of the American Dream in her Pulitzer-Prize winning play *Topdog/Underdog*, which is the subject of this thesis. Parks challenges the notion that everyone has equal access to advancement. Although there are many provocative elements in her play, I find Parks's examination of the failings of the American Dream the most fundamental. For Miller's Willy Loman, the dream resides in being able to support one's family economically. For Albee's characters, the perception of having attained the dream matters most, leaving true connections by the wayside. For Parks's characters, the dream lies in bettering their finances, improving social acceptance, and establishing a stable family life.

In *Topdog/Underdog*, Parks reveals the illusory nature of the American Dream on a private, deeply personal level by focusing her drama on two brothers living in one under-

furnished room in a rooming house. As the brothers realize that they are unable to rise socially or economically, they endure devastating consequences: as their dreams unravel, so do their family ties. As the audience watches the main characters spiral into their tragic undoing, we are forced to question the validity of the American Dream and our free-enterprise system that supposedly enables that dream. If one works hard, if one studies hard, one can make something of one's self. One can have that dream job. One can have that dream house. One can have that dream car. One can have that dream family.

As we watch the characters Lincoln and Booth fail in their pursuit of their dreams, we note that our economic system does more than define how we exchange and value products; our system supplants the family unit as a priority, makes commodities of people, and prevents upward mobility. As we strive for the so-called American Dream, as Albee writes, we have let go of "real values" for the "artificial" (8) In pursuing money as a means to happiness, wealth becomes the object of our desire, and, for some, our obsession, elevated above even the family unit. Parks takes this deterioration of values a step further: parents, children, and siblings become commodities whose exchange value outweighs their inherent value. Essentially, what money can be extracted from a family member ranks higher than the bond of shared love and history. In Parks's world of the "*here*" and "*now*" (her own seemingly generic, yet somehow specific, terms for identifying the setting of the play), she portrays the gritty reality of what happens when the dream dries up or becomes what Langston Hughes refers to as the "dream deferred." Parks dramatizes the lives of those who fail in their pursuit of the dream—the uneducated, the unskilled, and as her play demonstrates, young African-American males from a broken home.

My thesis will explore how Parks dismantles the fallacy of the American Dream in terms of its supposed opportunities for economic advancement, social mobility and family stability. To

do so, I will also discuss markers of success and how Lincoln and Booth fall short of these indicators that form the basis of the American Dream as it is perceived today. We seek to have the components of the dream: college, job, home, car, wife, and children. Albee maintains that we are so caught up in the pursuit of the materialistic ends that we neglect our much more meaningful connection with others. The dream no longer focuses on building bonds with other people, but instead on acquiring materials (8). Unfortunately, the dream that Albee criticized still lingers today. How many of us buy homes that we cannot afford? How many of us use credit cards to buy more and more? How many of us acquire debt in order to live the dream?

*Topdog/Underdog* has had a notable stage history. On July 22, 2001, *Topdog/Underdog* debuted at The Joseph Papp Public Theater/New York Shakespeare Festival. George C. Wolfe directed and produced the play. Actors Don Cheadle and Jeffrey Wright played Booth and Lincoln. On April 7, 2002, *Topdog/Underdog* started its run on Broadway at the Ambassador Theatre. Jeffrey Wright reprised his role as Lincoln. Actor and rapper Mos Def played Booth. Soon after, Suzan-Lori Parks won the Pulitzer Prize for Drama for *Topdog/Underdog*, making her the first African-American female to win this award.

Both New York performances (Joseph Papp Public Theater and Ambassador Theater) of *Topdog/Underdog* opened to mixed reviews. For *Variety* magazine, Charles Isherwood calls Parks's effort a "disappointing new play." While Isherwood admired Parks's "sharp" dialogue and "gritty lyricism," he mourned the language's "diffuse" nature and the absence of "depths of feeling in the characters." For the *New York Times*, Ben Brantley raves about both performances of *Topdog/Underdog*. He admits, however, that the latter performance demonstrates a "tighter and tenser" production. He attributes this intensity to the change in casting of Booth from Don Cheadle to Mos Def. In *Talkin' Broadway*, reviewer Matthew Murray also commented on the

fact that Mos Def brings to the role “a sort of street authenticity and a youthful enthusiasm.”

However, he adds that Mos Def sometimes comes across as “working too hard at remembering his lines and not hard enough at remembering what Booth is doing or who he is.”

Not surprisingly, *Topdog/Underdog* (1999) has garnered significant attention from scholars, especially for the effect the play has on its audience. In a recently published collection of critical essays on Suzan-Lori Parks, Jochen Achilles states,

Play negotiates not only the conflict between virtuality and reality, earnestness and fun, but also between order and disorder. Games, as well as art, constitute self-constructed environments which follow their own rules and control contingency and randomness. The clear-cut distinction between ordered and rule-bound play on the one hand and disorderly, unruly real life on the other proves as unsustainable as that between reality and virtuality, however.” (“Reshuffling” 106)

In this excerpt, Achilles likens performative sequences within the *Topdog/Underdog* and *The America Play* to the nature of play in digital games. In the journal of the South Atlantic Modern Language Association, Achilles continues this subject. In “Postmodern Aesthetics and Postindustrial Economics: Games of Empire in Suzan-Lori Parks’s *Topdog/Underdog*,” Achilles identifies performative sequences that “turn *Topdog/Underdog* into a meta-drama that both multiplies and thematizes its own basic constituents” (12). Each performative sequence (i.e., Booth’s anti-capitalist stylization, paid performance of the Lincoln assassination, and conning money through three-card monte) contains an exchange of money; and these transactions function as links between each scenario. When the three distinct sequences collide, the tragic conclusion comes into play (18). Through interacting sequences of play, the playwright unveils

the overreaching, determinate nature of global capitalism (22).

While Achilles focuses on the presence of play, Harry J. Elam, Jr. focuses on the absence of certain characters. In doing so, Elam highlights a critical connection between Lorraine Hansberry's *Les Blancs* and Parks's *Topdog/Underdog*. Their works embody completely different aesthetics. Hansberry works with realism, while Parks works against realism. However, Elam points to a significant similarity in Hansberry's final play and Parks's Pulitzer Prize drama. In each of these plays, the women maintain an "absent presence" (39). The female characters do not appear onstage, but the present male characters find themselves affected by the interests and desires of the women in their lives. Even though these women never make it to the stage, they mold how men perceive themselves in the world at large.

While Elam identifies where Hansberry and Parks find mutual ground, the anti-linear, anti-Hansberry format of Parks's plays has captured the interest of many critics, including Sanja Bahun-Radunović who examines how and why Parks repeats and rewrites history in her *The America Play* (1992). She determines that "recent reassessments of history in postmodern theater address what is also the crucial tension-point in contemporary philosophy of history and historiography: the attempt to fuse the history of long-time spans and the history of events" (446). In an effort to cast doubt on recorded heroes, in order to disclose lost histories, Parks plays with the linear concept of history. She uses theater, Bahun-Radunović argues, to create a history that has not been recorded. Therefore, each rupture from truth, each repeated word, steps toward making history on the stage. The re-structuring bleeds its purpose: to demonstrate the gaps in history as we know it (447-449; 462-463). To be sure, Parks uses history prominently in her dramas. In *Topdog/Underdog*, repetition of history, not re-structuring, plays a significant role.



The character of Lincoln dies repeatedly at work. At home, he practices dying to save his job. Each “death” brings the audience one step closer to the final scene.

Sanford Sternlicht describes Parks’s characters as being “caught up in the sweep of history, economic maelstroms, and other forces beyond their control” (236). These external forces have the power to destroy those “caught up” in them. Another critic, Eugene Nesmith, argues that Parks’s “primary concern is not with an emotional identification with the characters presented on stage, but rather with bringing to our consciousness a critical awareness of larger structural dynamics that are operating and impacting upon the lives of the masses” (214). Jon Dietrick follows the brothers’ conceptions of money and its relationship to their ideas of real and unreal:

Throughout the play’s often hauntingly repetitive action, money repeatedly emerges as the site of familiar naturalist conflicts between free will and determinism, present and past, the authentic and the mimetic. Through her depiction of the brothers’ various attempts to “escape” the money economy and to become money themselves, Parks elaborates her own visions of the dialectical interdependence of these seeming opposites. (48)

For Dietrick, this concept plays an impetus in the play spiraling to its tragic end, where brother kills brother. Even though the characters’ names suggest a destined ending, Myka Tucker-Abramson states, “It is not predestination that has led to this tragedy but the confluence of economic degradation, systemic racism and definitions of masculinity inscribed from without” (95). Fate does not lead the brothers to their demise. Cultural and social forces beyond their control compel the characters toward a dangerous destination.

Similarly to Tucker-Abramson, Margaret B. Wilkerson explores the forces at play in Parks's drama. However, Wilkerson also addresses the influence of one's family and national history: "*Topdog/Underdog* invites us to think beyond the personal drama onstage and to contemplate familial and national ties bound together through blood and beyond" (139). For Wilkerson, *Topdog/Underdog* motivates the audience into rethinking its values, particularly its conceptions of history. Wilkerson works to demonstrate how inconsistent some American notions are. As Wilkerson notes, Parks sets out to push her audience into contemplating the validity of some of our Western assumptions (e.g., American Dream, clothes make the man). Ilka Saal offers insight that opposes how other critics label Parks's theater as demonstrating mimicry. Saal explains how Parks's plays work toward being non-representational. Rather than echo the linear narrative of history (once again, I point to Parks's setting for the play: "here" and "now"), Parks revises and reinvents history so as to give voice to those people and those issues that find no space in history books. Although I agree with these critics, I would like to bring a fresh perspective to the discussion by examining how pursuing the common dream—secured by our forefathers and enlivened by our capitalist economy—affects family relationships.

#### Parks's View of the Black Play and History

In "The Equation for Black People Onstage" and "New Black Math," Parks defines the essence of a Black play. Both essays present plural meanings for the term. A Black play is not one thing; it is many things:

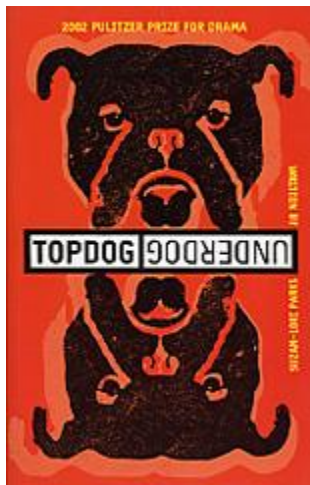
A black play is angry. / A black play is fierce. / A black play is double voiced but rarely confused. / A black play got style. / A black play is of the people by the people and for the people....A black play is a white play when the lights go out. /

A black play is a white play when you read between the lines. (“New Black Math” 576)

Essentially, Parks’s definition stands against earlier, monolithic definitions. Rather than showing the drama of blacks being oppressed by whites, Parks shows other dramatic states of being for black people. Parks re-writes history on stage to fill in history’s blank/black spots. In doing so, she brings forth a new kind of Black play (“Black Math” 576-583). She also acknowledges that there is no one singular way of being Black. Blacks who live in the United States act differently than those who live in another country. Parks works to show and reveal Black stories not yet dramatized. In bringing new content to the stage, she finds that the traditional linear narrative will not do to tell these untold stories. She looks to Black music in order to better express her stories. As jazz repeats itself at certain points, so does Parks’s drama repeat itself for effect, for meaning. For instance, in *The America Play* the echo from gunshots that occurred in the past can be heard in the future. In hearing the echo, characters experience a repetition of a past event. What happened in the past still reverberates today.

Parks rewrites the assassination of Abraham Lincoln in *The America Play*. In this play, one of the characters looks like the President in every way but in race. Parks’s Lincoln is black. By quitting his job as a gravedigger and working as an actor recreating Lincoln’s assassination, he unsuccessfully tries to cash in on his resemblance to President Lincoln. Making a penny-by-penny living acting out Lincoln’s death leaves this former gravedigger’s family without resources to bury him. Parks finds herself attracted to the cult of Lincoln, for she once again features the great president in the play *Topdog/Underdog*. In this second play, Parks’s Lincoln capitalizes on the real Lincoln assassination by re-enacting it in an arcade where customers pay a

fee for the thrill of “shooting” him. The assassination of Lincoln is relived over and over. As in *The America Play*, the actions of the past revisit the present.



**Figure 1.1:** Cover art for Parks’s *Topdog/Underdog*

The cover art of the published play bears an impact on how the reader perceives the play. As such, a careful examination of the art and its links to the text has value. The cover design for *Topdog/Underdog* heads off with “2002 Pulitzer Prize for Drama” in capital-case yellow letters at top of the play cover (See Figure 1). Beneath the “Pulitzer” announcement, the image of a black-colored head of a pit bull takes up the top half of the cover. Below that image is another black-colored pit bull’s head of equal size, but this one rests upside down. The positioning of the dog heads resembles the faces on playing cards. In essence, the cover image resembles an oversized playing card. Like this cover display, a card could easily be read upside down or right-side up. As the formatting suggests, the concepts of topdog and underdog find themselves bound together. Only in relation to the other does one exist. For the struggle to persist, two players must be present.

Between these two canine images lies the title of the play. The image of the two dogs strikes one’s eye; however, one cannot ignore the formatting and positioning of the play’s title. A thick black box outline encases the title. Rather than have a tilted slash divide the two words in the title, a thick straight line divides the box. The conjunction of the title words foreshadows the co-dependent relationship of the brothers. “Topdog” carries a bold font in all capital letters. “Underdog” carries a non-bolded font in all capital letters; however, the cover displays an upside-down and backward lettering of “underdog.” A bright but deep orange-red tone sets off the background of the cover page. A muted red tone encircles each dog’s head. This inclusion of

surrounding each dog with color creates a shadow. The placement of right-side up and right-side down dog head images, as well as the divided lettering of the title, creates a cover image that has an impact on its upside and on its downside. The dramatic difference in viewing the page downside up comes in seeing that the tile portion of “underdog” now bears the first position on the title line, not the second position. Also, the lettering of “Underdog” now appears right-side up. The “Written by Suzan-Lori Parks” carries the same flip-flop formatting of the title. “Written by” runs along the right side of the top dog, and an upside down “Suzan-Lori Parks” runs down the right side of the bottom dog.

The cover image resembling a customized playing card ties into the playwright using a card game as the running plot device for her play. The choice of background color aligns with the loser card (as the expert Lincoln plays it) in the game of which the main characters participate. Having the cover image represent the losing card suggests the reversal of fortune that comes as the play unfolds. Rather than having the heads of kings, queens, and jacks, the cover carries the image of two pit bull heads. The decision to place dog heads on the cover rather than human royalty heads seems fitting due to the underdog status of the main characters. Of all the dogs to choose from, the pit bull won the position of dog for this cover. This breed carries the burden of public bias due to its aggressive nature, specifically its reputation for killing others in the rather inexplicable popular “game” of dog fighting. The mere presence of these dogs elicits concern for one’s safety. Frequently we see or hear news stories about a pit bull injuring or killing an owner or a bystander. Parks’s selection of dog breed sets the reader up for a fight between like people, brothers to be precise. In the list of players, Parks identifies Lincoln as the topdog and Booth as the underdog. In relation to their card-playing abilities, this assignment comes across as fitting.

Apart from the rivalry between brothers, Parks's play highlights how the dream of Martin Luther King, Jr., has yet to be fully realized. The brothers dream of something better, but forces beyond their control destroy the possibility of those dreams. Because of the brothers' economic, social, and family circumstances, the stage is now set for the dramatization of their failure to attain the American Dream.

## 2 ECONOMICS

One aspect of the American Dream is economic security. As we will see in this chapter, economics places the characters in *Topdog/Underdog* on an ill-fated trajectory. While trying to get an upper-hand on their finances, Lincoln and Booth find themselves mastered by their monetary circumstances. As brothers, they share a tumultuous economic history: they watch their parents struggle financially and both are “bought off” as their parents desert them, yet the brothers develop drastically different relationships with money and diametrically opposing views on capitalism. Lincoln, after “succeeding” financially as a hustler, attempts to achieve the American Dream through so-called “legitimate” work. Booth, fully aware of the costs and losses that Lincoln suffers while hustling, and despite his own obvious lack of skill in running a three-card monte<sup>1</sup> scam, eschews socially-sanctioned employment in his attempt to achieve the American Dream.

To understand how their quest for monetary success takes control of these characters’ lives, I will address relevant criticism. As Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels state in “Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844,” capitalism extracts a high cost from the worker by debasing the worth of the laborer. Marx and Engels note, “On the basis of political economy itself . . . we have shown that the worker sinks to the level of a commodity and becomes indeed the most wretched of commodities...” (764). By exchanging skill for currency, the worker transforms into a commodity. We see this idea at work in *Topdog/Underdog*, specifically in relation to Lincoln’s job. In order to be employed, Lincoln pays the price of self-humiliation. His arcade employer requires that he don the complete Lincoln costume: top hat, frock coat, fake beard, and most troubling, white face paint. Indeed, Lincoln’s position belittles him, making him

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<sup>1</sup> The mark, or the player, must follow the selected card as the dealer shuffles. If the mark can follow the card, he wins. However, the dealer uses sleight of hand so that the mark can rarely win (unless the dealer chooses to let him win).

“the most wretched of commodities” to borrow from Marx and Engels. Lincoln sells his identity and costumes himself as one of the nation’s greatest presidents so that game-playing customers can pretend to assassinate him. Even more demoralizing, Lincoln knows that he gets paid less than his white predecessor. Lincoln’s attempt to rise economically costs him his personal dignity and respect. Upon his return to his rooming house room, Lincoln medicates himself with whiskey as he ruminates about losing his job to a wax dummy.

As mentioned earlier, Marx and Engels declare that employment, particularly within the working class, functions in a way that dismantles the identity of the worker. This disfigurement begins when laborers find themselves separated from the products of their efforts, creating tension between employees and employers. The powerless/powerful dynamic of employee/employer ensues. Marx Engels write ,

The *alienation* of the worker in his product means not only that his labour becomes an object, an *external* existence, but that it exists *outside* him, independently, as something alien to him, and that it becomes a power of its own confronting him; it means that the life which he has conferred on the object confronts him as something hostile and alien. (“Nature” 765)

In *Topdog/Underdog*, the most troubling aspect of Lincoln’s attempt to earn economic stability presents itself repeatedly each time a player “shoots” Lincoln. In dressing as the president for his job, Lincoln commodifies himself and alters his appearance so drastically that even his brother does not recognize him. Unlike the original, Parks’s Lincoln will never succeed in achieving the American Dream. Instead, the means by which he attempts to do so—through legitimate, socially sanctioned employment—demoralizes him and ensures he will never arise from his impoverished and “wretched” condition.



Not only does Lincoln suffer the consequences of commodification, he also endures the effects of so-called “innovation” when a wax dummy replaces him on the job. That such a low-tech creation can replace Lincoln surely further extorts a cost on his vision of self-worth. Those holding positions in manual labor or other “unskilled” positions routinely face displacement. As our capabilities in science and technology change so does our working population. What Marx and Engels call the proletariat in their time, contemporary social critic Slavoj Žižek calls “slum-dwellers” in our time. With the development of science and technology, the “proletariat” has evolved into something else entirely:

Of course, there is a crucial break between the slum-dwellers and the classic Marxist working class: while the latter is defined in the precise terms of economic ‘exploitation’ (the appropriation of surplus-value generated by the situation of having to sell one’s own labor as a commodity on the market), the defining feature of the slum-dwellers is socio-political, it concerns their (non)integration into the legal space of citizenship with (most of) its incumbent rights—in somewhat simplified terms, more than a refugee, a slum-dweller is a *homo sacer*, the systemically generated ‘living dead’ or ‘animal’ of global capitalism. (41)

Parks explores the “exploitation” of those at the lower-end of the American system of economics. In *Topdog/Underdog*, both Lincoln and Booth bear the markings of “slum-dwellers.” As technological-scientific progress evolves, a portion of our workers find themselves pushed into a non-working space. Not only does “improvement” displace them from their livelihood, but also these workers become part of what Žižek calls “white spots, blanks, on the official map of a state territory” (42). These slum-dwellers live outside of the rules and orders of those living under the constraints of capitalism. When the arcade discharges Lincoln and does indeed replace

him with a wax dummy as he fears, he becomes one of those “white spots.” And, by Booth’s “(non)integration” into the system, he, too, exists as a “white spot.” However, how the brothers respond to their “(non)integration” differs. Lincoln attempts to participate in the system, only to find himself devalued. Booth, however, rejects labor. Instead, he turns to crime. Reading Marx’s and Žižek’s theories alongside *Topdog/Underdog* illuminates the complex brotherly dynamic between Lincoln and Booth and their failed individual pursuits of economic success. Unlike his older brother, Booth fathoms what so-called “legitimate” employment does to people—it destroys and demoralizes them. He even believes that economic pressures broke apart the family of his childhood. While Booth refuses to be a part of the system, Lincoln participates in it. In doing so, Lincoln serves as an example of an alienated worker who has no connection to the product he produces/becomes. As Lincoln attempts to find economic advancement by fashioning himself as Abraham Lincoln, he fortifies a sense of alienation from which he never recovers.

To understand why the brothers choose the paths they do, we must examine their economic histories. Struggling with financial pressures, Lincoln and Booth’s parents abandon their children. Interestingly, they “buy” themselves out of their parental responsibilities by leaving money in the wake of their departures. For Booth, this money-parent exchange causes him to elevate cash above its standard exchange value. In Booth’s corrupted economic inner world, five hundred dollars in a stocking equates to more than five hundred dollars. Booth has developed what Marx would call a fetish for the money stocking. In “Capital,” Marx identifies “fetishism” as one of the many ills produced by capitalism. Rather than exchanging an item for another item, capitalism designates a price to each. According to Marx, humans assign a monetary worth to a product without considering the product’s inherent worth. Marx suggests that this assignment fails to consider the labor behind the product. That monetary figure assigned

often is not representative of the use value of the product (782-783). This type of assignment initiates a fetish—one of magical significance—for certain products (e.g., diamonds). As a child, Booth develops a fetish for his mother's stocking. That stocking has extreme sign value for Booth. As an adult, Booth continues to cling to this commodity fetish and the money.

In *On Belief*, Žižek discusses fetishism: “Fetish is effectively a kind of *inverse* of the symptom. That is to say, the 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” (13). In terms of the play, the stocking represents a point of trauma where mother abandons child; furthermore, in keeping that stocking intact Booth represses that same trauma. Maintaining the stocking in pristine condition allows him to cope with the loss of his mother and allows him to believe in her goodness. The stocking becomes an object that both reminds Booth of abandonment and suppresses the emotional trauma of that same event. To “disturb” the object by opening it would ruin the object's ability to both remind and repress. Once disturbed, the memory is destroyed and the repressed is unleashed. Even worse, Booth might discover that the stocking—his “inheritance”—contains no money at all, further devaluing his own worth.

By giving Booth the mysterious stocking, which he calls his inheritance, and by asking him to keep an eye on his older brother, the mother sets these brothers up for an antagonistic relationship. In replacement of her actual self, she gives Booth a stocking that may or may not contain money. In essence, she makes a trade: Booth loses his mother and gains the stocking. The stocking functions as a counterfeit replacement of the mother figure. Furthermore, the mother employs Booth by asking him to look after his older brother, essentially a task in which he fails. Typically, older siblings help watch younger ones, not the other way around. Booth's

first “job”—being his brother’s keeper—gives him a bad taste of the working world because he is assigned a “job” he is unequipped to perform. Lincoln, after his parents leave, runs the streets as he pulls the three-card monte scam. Ironically, Lincoln gives up this dangerous lifestyle, but Booth is drawn towards it.

Further complicating Lincoln and Booth’s economic history, their father also abandons them. When the father extricates himself from the family, he gives \$500 to Lincoln. Again, this trading of parent for money has a profound effect on the boys, especially Booth. The parents have turned themselves into commodities; they serve as merely objects that carry cash value. And, as long as they leave their sons money, they deem their absence acceptable. In attempting to “buy off” their sons, the parents cheapen their worth—literally and figuratively. Also, each parent, in departing, recognizes only one child with money. This treatment further cements the division between these brothers. Knowing the family history of these characters allows us to better understand why they are ill-equipped to succeed in the economic world.

The brothers’ histories with money plague them into adulthood where we first see them in Parks’s play. Beyond sibling rivalry, their extreme impoverishment also contributes to the developing tension between the brothers. From the first stage directions, Parks depicts the destitute situation that surrounds her primary characters—two Black brothers—named Lincoln (late 30s) and Booth (early 30s). The brothers dwell in a single-room apartment without running water and with spartan furnishings: a bed, a reclining chair (which also serves as Lincoln’s bed), and a small wooden chair. They use two mismatched milk crates as a table/bookshelf. As their stark environment demonstrates, the brothers live a step away from being homeless, yet each still strives for his own vision of the American Dream. In essence, their yearning for economic relief

not only captures the hearts of these characters with promises of success but also drives them mad when the promises remain unfulfilled.

With barely enough space for the two of them, these brothers do not live in a dream home; they live in a one-room nightmare. After his partner dies while scamming, Lincoln seeks a safer means of earning money. Lincoln's wife Cookie, we learn, deserts him once he leaves his lucrative "job" of hustling. Booth does not work, so he relies on his thefts and on Lincoln's arcade job to support them. Without parental guidance and because he saw his brother's hustling success, Booth dreams of having the success his brother once had. For Booth, hustling is the only type of success he can imagine for himself. With their flawed relationship with money, the brothers are doomed never to enjoy the economic success typically achieved when one lives the American Dream.

Booth lives on the margins of society. He rejects the sanctioned means to success and refuses to acquire a job. Thievery functions as his source to material goods. To escalate his economic position, he sets his sights on running a card swindle. At the onset of the play, we find Booth practicing this street scam called three-card monte, in which the naïve or the cocky passersby bet their money on a usually-losing venture. In this con, the card thrower tries to find someone to bet money on following the black card. At first, following the black card seems easy to the mark, the potential bettor. The simplicity of the game lures the onlooker into believing he or she can win the game. Once a bet hits the table, which is incidentally usually made of cheap cardboard, the thrower creates the illusion that the bettor follows the black card. In actuality, through sleight of hand, and not quickness, the thrower has substituted the red card for the black card. A good thrower creates the illusion of magic. Essentially, the thrower always wins, so the game scams any and all bettors and bystanders. The game involves more than a thrower and a

bettor. In order to draw in a crowd, the thrower works with an accomplice who acts as an onlooker. This “onlooker” works in unison to attract passersby into participating in the scam while keeping a lookout for police.

Booth sees this game as a vehicle to economic success because his brother was so skilled at it. Even though Booth demonstrates a high aptitude for stealing, he chooses to ride all his hopes on hustling. Having seen his brother achieve previous success at three-card monte, Booth feels empowered to achieve his dream. Unfortunately, as the stage directions reveal: “*His moves and accompanying patter are, for the most part, studied and awkward*” (7). From the first scene, the audience sees that Booth is inept at playing this game: “Watch me close watch me close now: who-see-thuh red-card-who-see-thuh-red card? I-see-thuh-red-card. Thuh-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” (7). Not only does his patter fall short, but Booth also inverts the winning card and losing card. Rather than recognizing black as the winner, he calls red the winner, which is a critical failure! Even though Booth shows signs of extreme ineptitude at playing cards, he believes this game will make his dreams come true: he will gain more money, he will earn social acceptance, and he will form a closer bond with his brother.

Prosperity, however, eludes the brothers. Unfortunately, the parents did not offer their children much of an inheritance, leaving them to fend for themselves. When the second parent leaves, Lincoln and Booth are sixteen-years-old and eleven-years-old, respectively. Lincoln spends his money immediately, and Booth holds on to his inheritance for more than twenty years. Not only do the boys experience the trauma of being abandoned by each parent, but each parent marks the event by giving cash to one child only, effectively replacing their presence with

dollars. In doing so, money becomes connected to a trauma the brothers will always remember. For Lincoln, the money comes in an easy-to-open handkerchief. For Booth, it comes in a tightly-tied stocking. Furthermore, the way the children receive their inheritance affects how each brother uses money. Booth's inheritance comes tied-up tight, and he leaves it that way. He does not touch the stocking, and he avoids the legitimate economic system. On the other hand, Lincoln's inheritance comes in a loose handkerchief. He unwraps the handkerchief and spends the money. Whenever money enters Lincoln's hands, he spends it. The pain of how each parent exits affects how the brothers deal with money.

Of the brothers, Booth develops the more flawed relationship with money as a result of his so-called "inheritance." If he wants to possess something, he steals it. He does not risk spending his inheritance on something that he can get for free. Furthermore, Booth's attachment to the stocking serves as his only connection to traditional economic success. The stocking carries a metaphorical value to Booth, for he refuses even to touch it. As long as he has the stocking intact, he still has money, and he still has his mother. Because he has not discovered whether she actually left him money, he can continue to believe he has his unspoiled inheritance. Whether or not the stocking has money in it, the audience (or reader) never knows. If Booth opens the stocking and does not find the promised money, he loses his connection with his mother and has to admit her duplicity. In essence, he would have to admit he was scammed. Lincoln brings up the idea that there might be nothing in the stocking, which angers Booth. Interestingly, to open the stocking resembles the gamble of three-card monte game. The player has the possibility of picking the right card, but the dealer's so swift that such a possibility becomes non-existent; however, believing he has a chance of choosing correctly, the prospect exists in the mind of the player. As long as the card remains unturned, the possibility of winning

exists in the mind of the player. This also holds true for Booth and his stocking. As long as he does not untie the stocking, the possibility of his mother being true to her word remains. The illusion would end if he unties the stocking. Booth does not want his mother fantasy to end. He does not want to be the loser because he would rather not know the truth. He will keep the stocking tied even at the cost of fratricide.

The parents set their boys on a difficult path. Abandoning the children at such an early age leaves its scars. The persistent effect of the past on the present comes to the forefront in Lincoln's ride home after work. A child, seeing decked-out Lincoln on a bus, asks for his autograph. The child assumes the costume to be the equivalent of the man (11). We associate the black-suit, hat, and beard with Lincoln, but we know that the man in the face makeup is not the true man of history. Lincoln tells us that the boy is "A little rich kid. Born on easy street, you know the type" (11). Although both Lincoln and the boy ride the bus, they do so under different circumstances. Lincoln's poverty prevents him from owning his own automobile. The boy, on the other hand, rides because of his age: he is too young to own a car. The boy carries enough money to offer Lincoln twenty dollars for his autograph. On this bus, we have the representation of two different economic classes—the son of an affluent family and the working-poor African-American. Lincoln immediately recognizes that the boy's life follows an easier path than the one he finds himself on. When he takes the cash from the little boy on the bus, he spends it all on buying a round of drinks for those at the bar with him. When Lincoln earns his weekly paycheck, he spends it on the household—food, drink, rent, and electricity. Lincoln works diligently, but he can barely afford to share a space with his brother. The brothers' situation falls short of the American Dream that they envision for themselves. If Lincoln wants to have money to thrive, hustling appears to be his only option.



Even though Lincoln enjoys spending money, he does not buy into the “scheming and dreaming”: “I don’t touch thuh cards, 3-Card. I don’t touch thuh cards no more” (21). Once upon a time, Lincoln made a thousand per day on hustling, but he dropped all of the benefits of card throwing for the safety of a legitimate job. He hustled until the day his partner died. At that point, he becomes scared that his turn will come, so he removes himself from the game. Even though Lincoln fears possible victimization, street hustling victimizes everyday people. A passerby could lose hundreds in minutes. For instance, Lincoln recounts some of his past victims:

We took that man and his wife for hundreds. No, thousands. We took them for everything they had and everything they ever wanted to have. We took a father for the money he was gonna get his kids new bike with and he cried in the street while we vanished. We took a mothers welfare check, she pulled a knife on us and we ran. She threw it but her aim werent shit. People shopping. Greedy.

Thinking they could take me and they got took instead” (55).

The effect of street hustling comes directly and swiftly. Bystanders find their pockets emptied; their earnings stolen from them in plain sight. It is no wonder why some retaliate in an aggressive manner. Lincoln walks the straight and narrow path so as to protect himself. He became willing to take nowhere jobs rather than risk his life. He not only dropped a lucrative scam, but he took on job in which he earned less than his predecessor.

LINCOLN. “...They said thuh fella before me—he took off the getup one day, hung it up real nice, and never came back. And as they offered me thuh job, saying of course I would have to wear a little makup and accept less than what they would off a—another guy—

BOOTH. Go on, say it. “White.” Theyd pay you less than theyd pay a white guy”  
(29).

Lincoln tries to work a stable and legitimate job, but he finds that he must do so at price less than a “white guy.” However, he is willing to do so in order to have an opportunity at a better, safer life.

Despite Lincoln’s satisfaction with his job, Booth wants his brother to know that that the job holds him back from embracing life. He earns money to subsist, but what Booth wants his brother to learn is that he is not living his life.

BOOTH. (*Rest*)

Thats a fucked-up job you got.

LINCOLN. Its a living.

BOOTH. But you aint living. (35)

This excerpt reveals how Booth perceives employment: work is a destructive force. For Booth, work destroys one’s identity and one’s life. Such a negative perception of work developed in Booth’s early years. As Booth sees it, the socioeconomic pressures of family life forced his parents to leave: “She split then he split. Like thuh whole family mortgage bills going to work thing as just too much. And I don’t blame them. You don’t see me holding down a steady job. Cause its bullshit and I know it. I seen how it cracked them up and I aint going there” (68).

Parental abandonment initiated Booth’s dislike and deviation from the traditional path of achieving success and earning a better life. Rather than finish school, he quits. Rather than buy goods, he steals. Rather than work, he dreams. Furthermore, Booth witnesses his brother’s transformation from a confident and successful street hustler to an arcade worker who might lose his job at any time. In the evenings, Lincoln appears to self-medicate himself with whiskey. Both

of the boys call it “med-sin,” a part of their monthly budget (32). Perhaps Booth is right when he says “you aint living” (35).

To some extent, both brothers buy into the American Dream that they believe is for all. Booth dreams of earning big bucks on the streets. In the meantime, when he wants to own something, he steals it. He refuses to purchase commodities when he could just as easily steal them. Booth is a stealer and keeper of objects. He clings to commodities for what they represent. On the other hand, Lincoln dreams of keeping his job. He spends what money he acquires to sustain their livelihood. He does not believe that signs of wealth create substance for one’s self. Each man has his dream. Booth dreams of success by non-traditional means while Lincoln dreams of success by traditional means. In turn, each brother is denied the success that he seeks. Due to lack of talent and training, Booth discovers that he will not become a renowned card thrower. Due to “technological” advancement, Lincoln loses his job. Each loss has devastating consequences on the brothers. As a result, Booth’s aggression increases, and Lincoln turns back to the card game that he once left for being too dangerous.

### 3 SOCIAL MOBILITY

Although everyone holds an individual notion of what the American Dream entails, there are some commonalities that most of us pursue. Many of us seek to better our economic situation, social position, and family life. The majority of us try to do so via socially-sanctioned avenues: education, hard work, tenacity. Others, however, prefer less legitimate means: crime, “working” the system, dishonesty. In *Topdog/Underdog*, two brothers search for the “success” that most people associate with the American Dream. Both brothers yearn to advance their social status, but they go about it in very different ways. The issue of appearance preoccupies Booth’s world; he longs to project an outward show of wealth. Ostensibly, Booth cares very much about how others perceive him. Interestingly, given his obsession with his social position, he sets out to improve his status through non-socially-approved means. Booth maintains his meager living situation by relying on his brother’s work efforts instead of his own. In addition, Booth steals objects and clothing in order to give the impression that he has more wealth than he actually does because he wants to show that he possesses what he considers to be the material markers of success. In a rather misguided attempt to augment his social image, he plots to become the best card thrower on the streets. Oblivious to the fact that most people condemn such illegal acts, Booth strives to boost his low social status by street hustling, even though he has absolutely no talent or skill in three-card monte.

While Booth attempts to scratch out a living through criminal means, his brother Lincoln forsakes hustling, despite his proclivity toward conning, in favor of a sit-down arcade job—a different, but socially legitimate con-game. In the “here” and “now” of the play, Parks’s setting, Lincoln does not share his brother’s preoccupation with appearances. In fact, for his job, Lincoln has to wear white-face makeup, which annoys his brother, yet does not seem to impact Lincoln.

The fact that he dons his Abraham Lincoln costume outside of the arcade seems to pronounce his indifference to how others view him. Yet as we watch the brothers emotionally implode, we see the complicated components of Lincoln's character. We should not mistake Lincoln for his "Honest Abe" namesake. Though he tries to project otherwise by giving up "thuh cards," Lincoln's past aligns him with the criminal sector, a community that Booth longs to join and one that beckons Lincoln to return. Overtly, Lincoln's dedication to his job sustains the brothers' daily living expenses, for without Lincoln, Booth would not have the means to maintain his self-inflated social status. As we learn more about Lincoln's criminal history, however, and his work ethic (or lack thereof), we discover that Lincoln enjoys his job mostly because it is not physically or emotionally challenging: "I like the job. This is sit down, you know, easy work. I just gotta sit there all day. Folks come in kill phony Honest Abe with the phony pistol. I can sit there and let my mind travel" (33). While Lincoln may have an "honest" job, his motivations and attitude are less than honorable. In fact, Lincoln comes across as rather lazy and indifferent. Through different means, each brother attempts to grasp hold of his own vision of the American Dream. In the end, however, the brothers find that they cannot get away from the identities they inherited from their parents and the self-fulfilling prophecies that accompany their names.

Parks cleverly frames her play *Topdog/Underdog* in a familiar context: she brings our collective past to her drama's present by naming the play's two sole characters Lincoln and Booth. By giving her characters these names, she creates a backdrop for the play well before the curtain opens. On April 14, 1865, John Wilkes Booth, a Southern actor whose roles sometimes involved assassinations, shot President Abraham Lincoln at Ford's Theater in Washington, D.C. Booth murdered the president by shooting him in the back of the head. Booth jumped from the balcony where the murdered president had been sitting onto the stage, breaking his leg. He

escaped on horseback, only to be shot upon his apprehension in a barn near Bowling Green, Virginia. Most Americans certainly know the general story: one of the greatest American presidents—Abraham Lincoln—died at the hands of a notorious assassin—John Wilkes Booth. With this historical background, Parks prepares her audience for the drama to ensue. The historical legacy of the names “Lincoln” and “Booth” adds to the overt tension between the brothers in the play. The brothers are named in jest by their father, we are told, after the historical icons. In addition to the irreverence the father displays by naming his children, he also points toward their destiny, for their names prompt us to anticipate their future actions. However, the genius of this drama comes in how the end plays out.

In *The Epic of America*, James Truslow Adams states, “Lincoln was not great because he was born in a log cabin, but because he got out of it—that is, because he rose above the poverty, ignorance, lack of ambition, shiftlessness of character, contentment with mean things and low aims which kept so many thousands in the huts where they were born” (411). Lincoln, or “Honest Abe,” came from humble beginnings but climbed above his station in life to become president. Parks’s Lincoln does not resemble the great president in appearance or in action, for he does not rise above his low station. In fact, he appears content to stay in such a position. Despite the stark contrast between these two Lincolns, they have one commonality: both Lincolns face the same horrific ending—murder by gunshot. The assassin John Wilkes Booth, who played the part of an assassin many times, came from an acclaimed family of actors. However, Booth’s brother Edwin garnered more success than Booth:

John Wilkes lacked the qualities that made his brother a star. Time and again in the course of his brief life, the younger Booth stood by as Edwin scored victory after victory, amassing large profits and raising the bar of achievement higher.

Edwin had been furious when he heard of his brother's crime. He interpreted Lincoln's murder as a direct attack on the celebrity he worked so hard to win.

(Titone 14-15)

Through his heinous crime, John manages to overshadow his brothers's success. Parks's Booth compares to John in that both possess a more successful brother, and both Booths fall into the family business. Whether acting on stage or hustling three-card monte on the streets, performance lies at the center of these professions. The most dramatic connection between these two Booths comes in that they both assassinate their respective Lincolns. In doing so, the less successful brother outshines the more successful brother.

Rather than name her play "Lincoln/Booth," Parks uses the expression "Topdog/Underdog." In doing so, she implies that a struggle will take place. Given that the cover art sports two pit bulls, this image alludes to the illegal activity of dog fighting. Again, the playwright directs us to anticipate a bloody fight. All signs point to an ultimate clash that ends in the murder of Lincoln. In the listing of the players, Parks identifies Lincoln as the "topdog" and Booth as the "underdog." By doing so, she sets us up to root for the younger brother. However, we quickly discover that Lincoln and Booth do not exemplify the characteristics that their respective assigned positions as topdog and underdog suggest. Instead, we must grapple with our loyalties and decide who is topdog and who is underdog as the dynamic shifts throughout the play. Although Lincoln gives up hustling for traditional employment, he does so for selfish reasons: "One day I was throwing the cards. Next day Lonny died. Somebody shot him. I knew I was next, so I quit. I saved my life" (35). One might presume that he did so in an effort to reform and/or conform, but we learn that he did it on the basis of self-preservation. Fearing his luck will run out, he leaves the game before he loses his life. Booth does not come across any better than

his brother: he does not work, but instead steals to obtain the objects he desires. Believing that economic pressures dismantled his family, he refuses to engage in traditional employment. Even though Parks designates a “topdog” and an “underdog,” neither merit our sympathy.

Both brothers seek social advancement, but their family background places them on unsteady footing to achieve this end. Essentially orphaned and apparently having only his brother as a role model, Booth idolizes Lincoln’s acumen as a three-card monte con artist and longs for similar success. In the opening scene, Booth pretends that he is on a street corner, trying to reel in marks. Like many Americans, Booth believes he can accomplish what his heart desires, if, oddly enough, he “works” hard enough at this “job” of learning the card game. Booth’s picture of the American Dream, of course, is flawed from the outset. Most Americans have been inculcated that anyone who works hard enough can achieve success. Booth misinterprets one of the prevailing notions of the American Dream, that is, hard work equals social mobility and acceptance. Booth’s crooked idea of the way to achieve “success” is both pathetic and troubling for those who believe in the American tenet of social mobility. We watch Booth “work” himself into self-destruction, all the while knowing that he is doomed to fail. Crime does not pay, we have been told. Or does it?

Lincoln, unlike Booth, sets out to fulfill his version of the American Dream through what many might call “honest” work. Having already tried and tasted the success (monetary gain) and the failure (the dissolution of his marriage and the loss of his wife, aptly named Cookie, as well as the murder of Lonny, his co-conspirator), Lincoln sustains his livelihood through lawful employment. His “work” takes him to an arcade booth where he re-enacts the role of Lincoln’s assassination. Anyone who pays, can play the assassin, John Wilkes Booth. One cannot help but take note that Lincoln’s means of economic survival entails traveling down a road of



humiliation: Lincoln has to play dead while decked in Lincoln-esque clothing and painted-on white face. Eventually, Lincoln's attempts at social conformity cost him his life. Even though Lincoln holds a "legitimate" job, he relies on his brother's inconstant hospitality to provide him with a place to live, relinquishing his weekly paycheck to Booth, renting a place to stay—shabby as it is. Through Lincoln, Parks presents an example of a hopeless, impotent member of a capitalistic society. His ex-wife Cookie turns to Booth for sexual satisfaction while married to Lincoln. A member of the working poor and unable to pull himself out of poverty, Lincoln persistently worries about losing his demeaning job. As we watch the brothers pursue diametrically-opposed avenues to success, we ponder the tenability of both. As the play unfolds, neither brother represents "topdog" status.

To secure his dream, Booth immerses himself in the card game. He even goes as far to rid himself of the white and negative name Booth: "Watch me close watch me close now: 3-Card-throws-thuh-cards-lightning-fast. 3-Card-that's-me-and-Ima-last" (7). When Booth announces his renaming to his brother, Lincoln reminds him of the social impact of a name:

You gonna call yrself something african? That be cool. Only pick something thats easy to spell and pronounce, man, cause you know, some of them African names, I mean, ok, Im down with the power to the people thing, but, no ones gonna hire you if they cant say yr name. And some of them fellas who got they African names, no one can say they names and they can't say they names neither. I mean, you don't want yr new handle to obstruct yr employment possibilities. (14)

According to Lincoln, in order to find work, one must have a name that mainstream society—that is—white society—can pronounce—that is—a name that white people find acceptable. Lincoln confesses to being "down with the power to the people thing," but he behaves in ways

that contradict that concept, for he allows himself to be treated differently from his white counterparts at work. Lincoln's "honest" work and his notions about what society deems acceptable belie a sinister self-loathing.

The brothers have conflicting notions about ways to acquire money and the things they need to survive. Booth repeatedly points this out to his brother. For example, Lincoln, as Booth reminds him, took the arcade gig for less money than the previous employee: "Go on say it. 'White.' Theyd pay you less than theyd pay a white guy" (29). Lincoln willingly accepts less so that he can hold a job. It is no wonder that Booth calls his brother a "shiteating motherfucking pathetic limp dick uncle tom" (21). When Lincoln finds himself fired, he admits that he would take another pay cut so that he could keep his job: "I could go back in tomorrow. I could tell him I'll take another pay cut. Thatll get him to take me back" (62). Lincoln so desperately wants this job that he finds himself ready to accept even less pay. In addition to the lower salary, Lincoln receives further "special treatment" at the arcade, for he must undergo a daily inspection. Lincoln says, "They looking me over to make sure Im presentable. They got a slew of guys working but Im the only one they look over every day" (54). Booth compares his brother's self-compromising position to the oppression endured by blacks during the times of slavery: "You play Honest Abe...you going all the way back. Back to way back then when folks was slaves" (22). In order to survive, Lincoln participates in an oppressive work environment; Booth would not allow himself to work under such conditions. Consequently, he tries to find his way to success through hustling. Booth struggles to rise above his current status. While Lincoln operates within the capitalist system, Booth does what he can to avert traditional employment; however, Booth cannot avoid the effects of capitalism. Slavoj Žižek, in "Nature and Its Discontents," notes the sweeping power of our free enterprise system: "The rise of global capitalism is presented to us as

such a Fate, against which one cannot fight—one either adapts to it, or falls out of step with history and is crushed” (67). Both Lincoln and Booth face this “Fate.” On the one hand, Lincoln chooses to “adapt” to his unfair position so that he can survive through mainstream means. On the other hand, Booth falls by the wayside and later finds himself “crushed” for his refusal to change.

Obsessed by appearance, Booth balks at his brother’s indifference to it. In scene 1, Booth rehearses the game, and his brother, still wearing his Abraham Lincoln outfit, walks in and stands behind him: “*Booth, sensing someone behind him, whirls around, pulling a gun from his pants. While the presence of Lincoln doesn’t surprise him, the Lincoln costume does*” (9). At “sensing” someone enter the room, Booth’s natural response is to brandish a weapon. As if that were not troubling enough, Booth threatens to shoot Lincoln for being decked out in his arcade costume. Booth exclaims: “And woah, man don’t *ever* be doing that shit! Who thuh fuck you think you is coming in my shit all spooked out and shit. You pull that one more time I’ll shoot you!” Calling Lincoln’s outfit a “disguise,” Booth is repulsed and embarrassed by it. In the opening scene, Parks exposes the tension between the brothers as she foreshadows what will come. We already know how the play will end, and we wait nervously for the gunshot.

Lincoln’s appearance incenses Booth: “I don’t like you wearing that bullshit, that shit that bull that disguise that getup that motherdisfuckingguise anywhere in the daddy-dicksticking vicinity of my humble abode” (9). Booth’s reaction to Lincoln’s garb arises from what it represents—Lincoln’s employment and his departure from three-card monte hustling. On this matter, Jason Bush writes,

The disjuncture between Booth’s remembrance of Lincoln’s former self and Lincoln’s present humiliating appearance causes a crisis of identity in Booth. His

previous pride demonstrated by his playful imitation of his brother is confronted with the present reality of Lincoln dressed as a poor imitation of a famous white man complete with white makeup. (79)

Booth detests Lincoln's "job" because he recognizes the racial and social implications of a black man dressing up as a white man in order to earn a paycheck. That is, he rejects the idea that in order to raise one's social status, one must humiliate oneself in the process. Also, Booth expresses concern over what other people will think about Lincoln for doing so: "Take off the damn coat too. Damn, man. Bad enough you got to wear that shit all day you come up in here wearing it. What my women gonna say?" (10). Booth abhors his brother's disregard for how others might view him; he particularly dreads how his "girlfriend," Grace, might respond to seeing Lincoln costumed. Booth fears his brother's outfit will reflect on his own identity (or in how Grace sees him): "She sees you in that getup its gonna reflect bad on me. She coulda seen you coming down the street. Shit. Could be standing outside right now taking her ring off and throwing it on the sidewalk" (10). Booth worries that his "graceful" relationship could be disrupted by something his brother does/wears for a living. Despite the fact that Grace has previously taken off her ring and thrown it, Booth claims that his brother's appearance could initiate a repeat event.

A complicated character, Booth, on the one hand, fathoms the social ramifications of what Lincoln does for a living, showing more insight into the situation than Lincoln does. On the other hand, however, he lives in a dream world. He dreams of having money, but he refuses to do what is necessary to earn that money (i.e., get a socially-acceptable job). Lincoln's costume threatens Booth because it represents the real world—a world he has been avoiding. Booth wants to reap the rewards of capitalism without expending any effort. He wants to achieve his

American Dream without earning it. If Grace were to see Lincoln's costume, she might be reminded of her lover's lack of employment. Apparently, as revealed in the dialogue, Booth's lazy nature has disturbed his relationship with Grace (if she really exists) in the past. By telling Lincoln to take off the "getup" before Grace arrives, Booth orders him to hide the visual cues of his employment, perhaps worried that it will remind Grace of his own lack of employment.

Booth fabricates his social status through theft. He has faith in the power of goods; his belief is imbued in his words about his pending encounter with Grace. Dressed in his boosted suit, Booth tells Lincoln, "Ima wear mine tonight. Gracell see me in this and *she* gonna ask me tuh marry *her*" (28). Booth believes that wearing an expensive suit will impress his girlfriend and entice her into marriage. He believes that having an object that costs a lot of money and that makes him appear wealthier than he actually is will be enough to persuade Grace to come back to him. When Booth models his stolen suit to his brother, he asks: "You think she'll go for me in this?" (30). Each brother enacts a performance in costume. Booth, much like Willy Loman, has faith that clothing makes the man. The expensive suit, a prime marker of economic security and achievement, carries more weight in its sign value (social significance) than its exchange value (or cost). According to Jon Dietrick, "In fact, Booth's approach to three-card monte is of a piece with a general approach to life he evinces throughout the play, one that values word over action, symbol over referent, appearance over essence" (49-50).

Lincoln quickly counters Booth's consumerism. He tries to educate Booth about the illusory nature of an American platitude. Lincoln says, "They say the clothes make the man. All day long I wear that getup. But that don't make me who I am" (28). Lincoln wears a suit similar to the one the president wore, but the clothing does not make him feel more of a man, nor does it cause Lincoln to adopt the positive characteristics of the president, nor does it make society view

him in a better light. In fact, as I have mentioned, in Lincoln's case, clothing humiliates him and signifies his position as a member of the working poor. Nonetheless, Booth still believes in the sign value of clothing. Showing him the suit he stole for him, Booth tells Lincoln: "Just wear it around. It'll make you feel good and when you feel good y'll meet someone nice" (30). Although Lincoln does try on the suit, and is "pleased" we are told, by his appearance, his thoughts quickly return to the reality of their situation. He tells Booth, "Do thuh budget." The nature of Booth's complex character surfaces repeatedly throughout the play. At times, his keen perceptions belie his youth, in particular, his realistic view of Lincoln's humiliating job. In other ways, however, Booth's lack of sophistication surfaces repeatedly.

As mentioned earlier, Booth cares more about appearance than substance. Booth frequently talks about the way things are and will be, but his actions do not support his words. First, Booth's rehearsal at the beginning of the play comes out in a "studied and awkward" manner (7). He envisions himself a deft player, but he struggles with the words and moves. The depth of his ineptitude becomes apparent once Lincoln performs his card throwing sequence. His expertise at playing further demonstrates his brother's lack of talent in card play. Second, Booth names himself after a game in which he has little to no skill. Dietrick writes, "Despite Lincoln's repeated attempts to teach Booth that becoming a three-card monte hustler takes much practice and understanding, Booth seems to believe that once he calls himself one, he will be one" (50). For Booth, taking on a new name marks his transformation. However, the only alteration that has occurred is one of name, like the clothes, not substance. Third, rather than tell his brother about practicing three-card monte, he tells him that has been playing solitaire. For no apparent reason, he conceals the truth from his brother, his sole friend. Fourth, Booth says that Grace loves him once again, but he has no proof of that. When there is a scheduled date at Booth's place, Grace

does not show up. Given her conspicuous absence throughout the play, Grace's actual existence comes into question. For all we know, she might be a mere figment of Booth's overactive imagination. Given Booth's affinity for all things superficial, he has demonstrated the potential to produce such a gross fabrication. Booth's proclivity to style over substance permeates all that he does and says. In effect, Booth's words simply do not add up. He says things, but does not show proof of what he says.

To further understand the character of Booth, it is useful to look at Jacques Lacan's essay "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience," in which he discusses the mirror-image concept: "We have only to understand the mirror stage *as an identification*, in the full sense that analysis gives to the term: namely, the transformation that takes place in the subject when he assumes an image—whose predestination to this phase-effect is sufficiently indicated by the use, in analytic theory, of the ancient term *imago*" (1286). As a child, Booth "assumes an image" of his older brother Lincoln. When Booth's mother abandons him, she asks that he look after his older brother, thereby establishing Lincoln as Booth's equal—his mirror image. This view infuses Booth's perception of himself, causing his self-image to be distorted.

If we examine the text in this light, Booth's dreams and visions make better sense. While Lincoln demonstrates exceptional skill at three-card monte, Booth displays complete incompetence at the game. Having assumed his brother's image, Booth thinks of himself as skilled in playing cards. Essentially, since Lincoln is a talented card thrower, Booth sees himself as that. Since Lincoln attained success through three-card monte, Booth thinks he will do the same. Applying Lacan's idea of the mirror image allows us to understand Booth's overconfident claims, but at the same time, Booth's strong distaste of his brother's legal employment becomes

even clearer. Booth dislikes Lincoln's job because he would never pursue such employment. Booth willingly and openly refuses to operate in the world of sanctioned economic activity. He seeks to avoid that which he believes tore his childhood family apart. By identifying himself with his brother, Booth rages against the idea of his Lincoln working a humiliating, low-wage job. When Booth aims a gun at his brother's face for wearing the Lincoln costume, he does so because his brother's work reflects on himself. Booth would never subject himself to white face.

This mirror-image concept can be applied throughout the play. In the last scene, when Booth sees the error in the reflection, when he realizes his vision of himself is truly an inverted image of his brother, he explodes in response. When Booth's inflated image of himself shatters and his mirror-stage terminates, he begins to witness his true self in relation to his brother. This event happens as a result of Lincoln's hustling Booth out of his inheritance. The betrayal begins when Lincoln returns to street hustling without including his brother, for Booth has repeatedly tried to form a card team with his brother. The disloyalty continues as Lincoln dupes Booth by letting him win two rounds of three-card monte. However, in the third round, when the money is on the line, Lincoln wins. At this point, Lincoln reveals his duplicity: "Its like thuh cards. And ooooh you certainly was persistent. But you was in such a hurry to learn thuh last move that you didnt bother learning thuh first one. That was yr mistake. Cause its thuh first move that separates thuh Player from the Played. And thuh first move is to know that there aint no winning" (106). Booth finally learns the true nature of the game: only the dealer wins. In turn, Booth's image of himself as a player is destroyed. In this sense, Booth truly becomes the underdog. In "playing" Booth, Lincoln exerts his "topdog" status over his brother. As such, the hierarchical dialectic between the brothers rises to the surface. On this matter, Georg Wilhelm Hegel, in the "Phenomenology of Spirit," writes, "In so far as it is the action of the *other*, each seeks the death



of the other. But in doing so, the second kind of action, action on its own part, is also involved; for the former involves the staking of its own life. Thus the relation of the two self-conscious individuals is such that they prove themselves and each other through a life-and-death struggle” (632). After seeing this difference between himself and his brother, Booth can ascend to his brother’s status of “topdog” through killing him. However, in doing so, Booth kills a part of himself, leaving him to grieve the loss of his brother and the bond he perceived they shared.

The search for social mobility plays a key role in the American Dream. Both Lincoln and Booth attempt to improve their social positions. Lincoln reaches for his goal by giving up hustling and taking on a regular job. Booth reaches for his goal by dreaming and stealing. Only Lincoln’s employment serves as a viable means to such social movement. Even though Lincoln’s work allows him to rise out of the dangers of hustling, it does not allow for much else. Lincoln’s employment carries with it impending termination due to cutbacks: his employer will replace Lincoln with wax dummy. So, the movement and security that his job endows upon him will be revoked once his employer lets him go. Once his employer eliminates his position, Lincoln finds himself returning to a life of crime. Booth strives for his social mobility through playing cards and stealing goods. When he realizes that he does not compare to his brother, when he realizes that he does not possess talent for the game, when he realizes that he is the underdog, he kills his brother. Through this final and devastating action, Booth fulfills the prophecy of their naming. In the end, the brothers cannot escape the destiny written of Lincoln and Booth in history books, and they cannot escape the family destiny of loss and hardship arranged for them when their parents abandoned them. Even though each brother seeks different means to success, neither achieves social mobility. By the despicable act of fratricide, Booth assumes his brother’s “topdog” status.

#### 4 FAMILY

In *Topdog/Underdog*, the main characters, two brothers, try to attain their dreams. Unfortunately, their family legacy and their proscribed social positions prevent them from achieving their desires. Throughout the course of the play, we are told that the brothers once lived in a romanticized family setting—father, mother, and two children in a two-bedroom home, which suggests the foundation of a stable family life. At the same time, however, we are told that the house’s front yard contained “nothing but trash in it,” similar to the junk-littered exterior house setting for August Wilson’s *Fences* (60). The juxtaposition of the idealized American Dream home being surrounded by garbage should cause one to question the reliability of Lincoln’s recollection of his childhood house. His memories about his parents are more realistic. Both parents carry on extramarital affairs and separately desert their children, dismantling the boys’ chances for a steady family life. Yet, the brothers find a way to survive, for when the play opens, they are in their thirties and living in a “seedily furnished rooming house room” (7). The dissolution of their family unit affects how each brother perceives the notion of kinship. Because he comes from a broken home, Booth desperately longs for a sense of unity with his brother and responsibility for him. Lincoln, however, emotionally retreats and cannot be the surrogate mother/father figures that the younger brother needs.

In her prefatory material, Parks writes, “This is a play about family wounds and healing. Welcome to the family.” This ironic statement sets the audience up for a startling surprise, for the play is less about healing than it is about the consequences of a family’s failed American Dream: Parks tells the story of two brothers whose antagonistic relationship culminates in fratricide. In the very first scene, Booth pulls a gun on his brother for entering the apartment in his work costume, the Lincolnesque get-up that infuriates him. This hostile interaction illustrates

one component of their dysfunctional relationship. After Booth puts the gun away, he orders Lincoln to take off his work clothes. Booth governs the domain of his apartment, so Lincoln acquiesces to his demands. Even though Lincoln should be the more mature brother, the one who watches out for his younger sibling, Lincoln behaves as if he were a nomadic loner. To be sure, he does hold a job, but he does not do so for social and/or financial mobility or security. He takes his job, we are told, because it is easy, and he is free to let his mind wander.

Despite the fact that these brothers have a disturbing relationship, Booth repeatedly attempts to repair their strained connection by suggesting that they form a con team: “You and me could team up and do it together. We’d clean up, Link” (19). On multiple occasions, Booth begs his brother to “work” together: “We could be a team, man. Rake in the money! Sure there’d be some cats out there with fast eyes, some brothers and sisters who would watch real close and pick the right card, and so there’d be some days when we would lose money, but most of the days we would come out on top!” (20). But as we know, given the title of the play, there can be only one top dog, a realization saliently made in the final scene. Booth sees the opportunity to join forces with his brother as a means to better his financial status and improve his family life, moving him closer to grasping hold of his version of the American Dream. Booth intends to hustle alongside his brother to steal money from unsuspecting or greedy marks and win back his so-called estranged girlfriend—his Grace.

Lincoln, unlike his younger brother, rejects the notion of the American Dream family. In fact, prior to the “here” and “now” of the play, Lincoln has already failed in his marriage with Cookie, and he seems quite content to sit alone in a raggedy arm chair, with his guitar and his “med-sin.” Lincoln’s introverted demeanor and selfishness ultimately cost him his life when he rejects his brother one too many times. Every time Booth pleads with Lincoln to start hustling

together, Lincoln will have none of it: “I don’t touch thuh cards” (17). Booth desperately desires to form a family/con unit with his brother, as perverse as it might be, and reacts violently when he realizes their union will never happen.

Parks tells us “Welcome to the family,” but who in his or her right mind would ever consider that these two brothers constitute a family? Booth’s faith in this “family” originates with his parents’ departures. Booth reveals how their leaving affected him:

I didnt mind them leaving cause you was there. Thats why Im hooked on us working together. If we could work together it would be like old times. They split and we got that room downtown. You was done with school and I stopped going. And we had to run around doing odd jobs just to keep the lights on and the heat going and thuh child protection bitch off our backs. It was you and me against the world, Link. It could be like that again. (70)

The impossibility of Booth’s plan is glaring: older, shiftless and social outcasts, the brothers are free to live (or not) as they please. It seems that no one cares about Booth and Lincoln. Booth’s fixation with returning to his youth reveals his immature, ultimately dangerous ideas about family ties. He longs to have the close connection he and Lincoln shared after their parents left them. As Jon Dietrick states, “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” (62). In essence, Booth’s emotional growth is stunted when his parents abandon him. Even though he is in his 30’s, he lives like a carefree teenager, refusing to work and “boosting” the things he wants. Despite Booth’s relentless attempts to (re)create a family with his brother, Lincoln continues to show indifference.

In order to assess the brothers' current, flawed relationship, we must examine their past. As children, Lincoln and Booth "lived in that 2-room place with the cement backyard and the frontyard with nothing but trash in it...A whole house. It wernt perfect but it was a house and theyd bought it and they brought us there and everything we owned, figuring we could be a family in that house..." (60; 67). Like the families presented in Sam Shepard's plays, the brothers had the makings of a successful American family. However, things were not as stable as they seemed. The parents ran out on them, leaving the boys to fend/fight for themselves. Booth so badly wants his relationship with his brother to return to what it once was or at least to what he *thought* it was, that he repeatedly nags his brother to return to a life of crime. In addition, he behaves as if he and Lincoln are a family unit despite consistent rejections from Lincoln.

Through thievery and creative homemaking, Booth maintains the particularly sparse household. For sure, the brothers interact in bizarre ways, sometimes even assuming the roles of their parents. In the following, Booth demonstrates his flair for home décor:

I was thinking we don't got no bookshelves we don't got no dining room table so Im making a sorta modular unit you put the books in the bottom and the table top on top. We can eat and store our books. We could put the photo album in there. *Booth gets the raggedy family photo album and puts it in the milk crate.* Youd sit there, Id sit on the edge of the bed. Gathered around the dinner table. Like old times" (13).

Although the brothers jest, Booth actually longs for a return to his skewed vision of their good "old times." The fact that he has kept their photo album highlights his fixation with family. To Booth creating the furniture out of the milk crates signifies forming a family unit. Beyond that, he steals so that he can build a better life for himself and for his brother. In this regard, Booth

acts as the mother/wife figure, while Lincoln serves as the father/husband figure. Booth takes care of domestic concerns while Lincoln focuses on earning a living. This female/male perception of Booth/Lincoln is reinforced by the way in which the brothers refer to each other when payday rolls around:

BOOTH. Lordamighty, Pa, I smells money!

LINCOLN. Sho nuff, Ma. Poppas brung home thuh bacon.

BOOTH. Bringitherebringitherebringithere.

*With a series of very elaborate moves Lincoln brings the money over to Booth.*

BOOTH. Put it in my hands, Pa!

LINCOLN. I want ya tuh smells it first, Ma!

BOOTH. Put it neath my nose then, Pa!

LINCOLN. Take yrself a good long whiff of them greenbacks.

BOOTH. Oh lordamighty Ima faint, Pa! Get me muh med-sin!

*Lincoln quickly pours two large glasses of whiskey.*

LINCOLN. Don't die on me, Ma!

BOOTH. Im fading fast, Pa!

LINCOLN. Thinka thuh children, Ma! Thinka thuh farm! (26)

In playacting, the brothers actually confirm the female/male dynamic by using the names commonly ascribed to these roles, Ma and Pa. Booth plays the stay-at-home mother; Lincoln plays the working father. Lincoln concerns himself with bringing home the bacon (in this case, Chinese food) while Booth concerns himself with keeping the home in order. This scene demonstrates yet another aspect of the brothers' relationship. Rarely do we see them interacting in such a genial way. Their lightheartedness, however, turns dark when we consider the

seriousness of Lincoln's words—"Thinka thuh children." Such a thought surely did not cross the minds of Booth and Lincoln's parents.

One critic has an interesting take on this rather odd part of the play. Amy S. Green comments on this scene's allusion to Negro vaudeville:

Instead of staging a contrived debate about the impact of negative images on the fortunes of contemporary African Americans, Parks invokes this loaded cultural icon that carries the twin specters of good-hearted self-deprecation and humiliating subjugation. The brothers may think they are light-years beyond the minstrel show, but they live in its lingering shadow. Like the old-world, homespun rubes they love to imitate, Link and Booth are stuck on the outskirts of the American dream, living hand-to-mouth with no real prospects. Our delight in their game is offset by the recognition of how small a leap of imagination it actually requires. (155)

Of course, Lincoln's white face is a farcical satire on the black-face minstrel shows. Any humor gleaned from the scene is overshadowed by the realization that the brothers' reality is close to the minstrel show characters they mimic. In calling each other "Ma" and "Pa" and in fawning over the presence of "greenbacks," the brothers perform a comic exchange that references minstrelsy. The brothers revel in their imitation; however, as Green states, the brother's situation parallels the situation of black Americans in the first half of the nineteenth century. Neither brother can survive without the other. Only through their economic co-dependency do they manage to subsist on a "hand-to-mouth" basis. Even though the brothers may have hopes and dreams for themselves, their future has "no real prospects" (Green 155). The grubby existence that they inherited from their parents keeps them immobile.

Even though the brothers together form a “family,” even though Booth tries to nurture the connection between them, money perverts the relationship. If Lincoln has money for his brother, Booth welcomes him; Booth tells Lincoln that his invitation to stay depends on his paycheck. Ever oblivious, Lincoln ignores this monetary requirement until Booth explains it to him:

BOOTH. Its my place. You don't got a place. Cookie, she threw you out. And you cant seem to get another woman. Yr lucky I let you stay.

LINCOLN. Every Friday you say *mi casa es su casa*.

BOOTH. Every Friday you come home with yr paycheck. Today is Thursday and I tell you brother, it's a long way from Friday to Friday. All kinds of things can happen. All kinds of bad feelings can surface and erupt while yr little brother waits for you to bring in yr share.

*(Rest)*

I got my Thursday head on, Link. Go get the food. (15)

In this excerpt, Booth makes it clear why his hospitality ebbs and flows throughout the week. Apparently, Booth's acceptance of his brother's extended visit depends on the cash he brings in. What ties these men together is a bit of love and hate and a weekly paycheck.

We can better understand their relationship through the writing of social critic Slavoj Žižek, who argues that the exchange of money for a personal service functions as a “social link” that creates “the capitalist society in which intersubjective relations are mediated by money” (17). Like worker and employer, the brothers thrive in a relationship that is “mediated by money.” The exchange of money from the older to the younger serves to maintain a harmonious balance in the relationship. According to Žižek, disturbing this exchange for the sake of overturning the hierarchical power structure would result in failure: “...every rebellion against



authority is ultimately self-defeating; it ends up in the return of the repressed authority in the guise of guilt or self-destructive impulses” (17). Lincoln hustles money from Booth, inverting their traditional exchange of money. A “rebellion” occurs at the end of the play when Booth shoots his brother Lincoln, thereby reversing the “social link.”

Even though the brothers had to struggle with being abandoned, they managed to survive. In their loss, they formed a closer bond with each other. At least, that is what Booth believes. In the final scene of the play, Lincoln loses his job and returns to playing cards. He now “touch[es] thuh cards,” but he still does not include his brother in his scheme (17). Lincoln does not want to team up with his brother for his own reasons. Booth craves a deeper connection to his brother, yet Lincoln refuses all of Booth’s attempts, frustrating and angering Booth. For Booth to have success, he needs Lincoln to join him. Lincoln not only serves as Booth’s connection to the past, but he also serves as his brother’s “link” to having a family and money. However, Lincoln continues to deny that connection by “standing in the way.” According to Achilles, “...Booth’s urgent pleading with Lincoln to become a three-card monte dealer again and to accept him, Booth, as his partner reveals itself as a strategy to reestablish the broken familial bonds. Booth wants to reknit himself to the familial harmony of his childhood by using the system of assigned roles within the three-card monte con as a surrogate for equally clearly structured family relationships” (“Reshuffling” 110). In order for Booth to succeed at three-card monte and reform his family, Booth needs Lincoln’s help. Without Lincoln, Booth will not succeed.

Neither brother possesses an admirable character. Lincoln does not set boundaries in hustling; he is apt rip off anyone, even his brother. In his past, he conned all sorts of people. In his present, he even cons a child. Both brothers engage in criminal activity. What sets Lincoln and Booth apart are the victims of their crimes and how the brothers spend their gains. The fact

that Lincoln hustles a young boy on a bus out of \$20 reflects his character. For Lincoln, the deception of a child lies in the realm of acceptable behavior. Booth, conversely, does not steal not from individuals but from “a big-ass department store” (28). Lincoln looks out for himself; he never gives a thought to his brother. In fact, when Lincoln cons the child out of money, he spends the cash on himself and some patrons of a bar in order to inflate his ego:

BOOTH. Whatd you do with thuh 20?

LINCOLN. Bought drinks at Luckys. A round for everybody. They got a kick out of the getup.

BOOTH. You should called me down.

LINCOLN. Next time bro. (12)

Lincoln does not even invite his brother to join in the merriment. Instead, he promises to include his brother “next time.” When Booth steals, however, he “boosts” for himself *and* his brother. In fact, he steals complete suit sets for each of them. Booth watches out for his brother, but Lincoln does not do the same for him. Achilles states, “Lincoln is neither Honest Abe nor an honest brother but a player following his self-interest, as he believes everybody else is, too. He cannot understand that this is different for Booth” (“Reshuffling” 119). When Lincoln comes into extra cash again after being fired, he goes out and spends it on others. Once again, he does not include his brother on his spending spree. When Lincoln returns to hustling and “rakes” in some money, he goes back to a bar to celebrate. For a third time, he does not include his brother in the activity. Lincoln’s self-centered actions counter Booth’s family-building ones. Booth tries to have a connection with his brother, but Lincoln does not show interest in nurturing that effort.

Furthermore, the individual interests of the brothers can be revealed in how each treats the family inheritance. On the one hand, Lincoln spends his \$500 immediately. On the other

hand, Booth holds on to his inheritance for years, refusing even to open the stocking. The brothers reveal the fate of their inheritances in the following dialogue:

LINCOLN. “You don’t got no money. All the money you got I bring in here.

BOOTH. I got my inheritance.

LINCOLN. That’s like saying you don’t got no money cause you aint never gonna do nothing with it so its like you 50on’t got it.

BOOTH. At least I still got mines. You blew yrs. (17)

Booth values family ties, so he cares about preserving his inheritance as much as he cares about having “intimate connections” with his brother (19-20). We see this in how Booth cares for the home. Booth continues his connection with his parents by keeping his money stocking intact and maintaining the family photo album. Like his Chinese fortune cookie, “Waste not want not,” Booth refuses to “waste” family items, but Lincoln does not care for such things. In fact, Lincoln burned what clothes his father left behind when Booth wanted to keep them. Lincoln’s concern with only himself, and Booth’s concern for family surfaces in his childhood memory:

You know what Mom told me when she was packing to leave? You was at school motherfucker you was at school. You got up that morning and sat down in yr regular place and read the cereal box while Dad read the sports section and Mom brought you yr dick toast and then you got in the damn school bus cause you didnt have the sense to do nothing else you was so into yr own shit that you didnt have the sense to feel nothing else going on. I had the sense to go back cause I was feeling something going on man, I was feeling something changing. So I— (21)

When the parents have troubles, Booth “senses” it. Lincoln, caught-up with himself, according to Booth, does not perceive the potential trouble. In Booth’s view, he again demonstrates how much he cares for the family and its functioning while his brother demonstrates indifference.

Eventually, Booth arrives at a point where he can no longer accept these rejections. In the final scene of the play, Booth asks Lincoln to leave the apartment. Lincoln responds with a quick and calm, “No Sweat. Ill just pack up” (87). The ease of his response upsets Booth, perhaps taking him back to the time when abandoned by his parents. Booth says, “Just like that, huh? ‘No sweat’?! Yesterday you lost yr damn job. You 51on’t got no cash. You don’t got no friends, no nothing, but you clearing out just like that and its ‘no sweat’?!” (87). Booth cannot believe that his brother can abandon him so easily. This response unsettles Booth, for how could his brother leave if he cares about him? Booth begins to realize that there is no bond of love between them.

In the event that plans with his brother do not work, Booth has a back-up plan—his Grace. Buying into the traditional marker of American success, Booth also dreams of capturing a lost love, aptly named Grace: “I got a date with Grace tomorrow. Shes in love with me again but she 51on’t know it yet. Aint no man can love her the way I can” (10). Booth, a “scheming and dreaming” character, has hopes of being a card thrower, thinking that if he succeeds at this job, he will win “[g]race.” In preparation for proposing to Grace, he steals a ring: “Yeah. I thought about spending my inheritance on it but...” (11). Booth cares so much for Grace that he *thinks* about spending his inheritance. Merely thinking about spending or even saying he thinks about spending is significant for Booth because he has stashed that inheritance for so many years. However, talking about spending is as far as he goes. He appears so sure of his sway with Grace that he steals an engagement ring for her:

I got her this ring today. Diamond. Well, diamond-esque, but it looks just as good as the real thing. Asked her what size she wore. She say 7 so I go boost a size 6 and a half, right? Show it to her and she loves it and I shove it on her finger and its a tight fit right, so she cant just take it off on a whim, like she did the last one I gave her. Smooth, right? (10)

Booth has proposed to Grace once before, but she rejected him. To ensure that she keeps the ring on her finger, he “boosts” a smaller-sized ring. He is under the impression that having a tight ring will be enough to keep Grace engaged to him. At the end of the play, the audience discovers that Booth’s scheme has indeed failed. As mentioned earlier, the actual existence of Grace is in question, for she never arrives on the scene. If Grace does not exist, Booth’s attempts at making a family of his own creation are fictitious. Such a fabrication would further denigrate the character of Booth.

Booth has his dream. The game will bring money. The money will bring his home, his brother, and his girl back to him. He will be able to live his American Dream through hustling cards. Booth becomes sure of himself even before his brother can teach him the entire game. With that overconfidence, he pushes his brother Lincoln to play “for real.” In order to play the game, Lincoln requires that Booth show him the money: “Ok, 3-Card, you know which cards tuh deuce of spades? This is for real now man. You pick wrong Im in yr wad and I keep mines” (102). In this scene, putting up money for stakes makes the game real. He now places all his inheritance on the line. Booth puts down what he does not want to lose, what he does not intend to lose. Booth’s overconfidence leads to disaster. The game is on. And Booth chooses the wrong card. Booth loses his inheritance, his confidence in his ability to play, and his sense of family. According to Achilles, Booth loses considerably more:

But 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. Winning seriously in the decisive game when Booth cannot guess the winning card, Lincoln is not only challenging Booth's skill as a three-card monte player...He is challenging Booth's whole sense of self as it develops out of the familial constellation of his childhood. (118)

Booth attaches his concept of family to that stocking. The stocking represents the family he once knew and longs to keep. Before Lincoln can open the stocking, Booth puts a gun to his brother's neck, and shoots him. The stocking falls to the floor.

## 5 CONCLUSION

Suzan-Lori Parks has composed ten full-length plays: *Betting on the Dust Commander* (1987), *Pickling* (1988), *The Death of the Last Black Man in the Whole Entire World* (1989), *Devotees in the Garden of Love* (1991), *The America Play* (1992), *Imperceptible Mutabilities in the Third Kingdom* (1986), *Venus* (1990), *In the Blood* (1998), *Topdog/Underdog* (1999), and *Fucking A* (2000). In addition, she wrote a play per day for one year, which comprises her collection entitled *365 Days/365 Plays* (2006). *In the Blood* earned a place as a Pulitzer Prize finalist. *Topdog/Underdog* won the Pulitzer Prize for Drama in 2002. Her plays demonstrate complex, stylized dialogue. For the most part, her plays present themselves as non-linear; *Topdog/Underdog* serves as an exception to this rule. Parks seeks to demonstrate the plurality of black experience rather than the singularity of expression of blacks in relation to whites. She seeks to use theater to write, record, and remember the history of Blacks that has not made it into history books.

Part of this resurrection project points towards delineating the flaws in the myth of the American Dream. Beyond its mythic proportions, the dream functions as a guiding light for those of who believe in its promises. As Adams wrote, “The American Dream is that dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for everyone, with opportunity for each according to ability or achievement” (415). It is no wonder that so many of us are drawn to the dream. Since the myth of the dream is a dominant theme in our everyday lives, it also surfaces in the stories that we tell. In an interview conducted by Matthew C. Roudané, Arthur Miller elaborates on the extent this myth infuses our literature:

The American Dream is the largely unacknowledged screen in front of which all American writing plays itself out—the screen of the perfectibility of man.

Whoever is writing in the United States is using the American Dream as an ironical pole of his story. Early on we all drink up certain claims to self-perfection that are absent in a large part of the world. People elsewhere tend to accept, to a far greater degree anyway, that the conditions of life are hostile to man's pretensions. The American idea is different in the sense that we think that if we could only touch it, and live by it, there's a natural order in favor of us; and that the object of a good life is to get connected with that live and abundant order. And this forms a context of irony for the kind of stories we generally tell each other. After all, the stories of most significant literary works are of one or another kind of failure. And it's a failure *in relation* to that screen, that backdrop. I think it pervades American writing, including my own. It's there in *The Crucible*, in *All My Sons*, in *After the Fall*—an aspiration to an innocence that when defeated or frustrated can turn quite murderous, and we don't know what to do with this perversity; it never seems to "fit" us. (374-375)

Whether consciously or unconsciously, American writers compose with the idea of the American Dream as a backdrop. The presence of the dream, whether you believe in it or not, infiltrates our literature. In Miller's *Death of a Salesman*, Willy Loman believes in the promises of the American Dream. To be precise, he has faith that superficial qualities, like one's appearance, will lead one to succeeding in the dream. In Edward Albee's *The American Dream*, the play opens in household that embodies elements of the American Dream. However, the parents of this household only concern themselves with the superficial qualities of the dream. True substance does not figure in the play. In Sam Shepard's *Buried Child*, the idea of the American Dream surfaces once again. The drama centers on a typical family farm. From the exterior, the farm



looks like it came from a magazine cover. Upon closer inspection, the house bears signs of deterioration, and the family that lives there is dysfunctional. The children are handicapped--one emotionally, the other physically. And the mother carries on an affair while the father resides on the sofa. Again, the dream is not realized; nevertheless, the shadows of broken promises linger. In Suzan-Lori Parks's *The America Play*, the black father who resembles Abraham Lincoln abandons his family so that he can fulfill his dream of success by moving out west.

In *Topdog/Underdog* Suzan-Lori Parks creates a drama that questions the accessibility of the American Dream for all. In the first half of the play, the concept of the American dream dominates Booth's thoughts. He dreams of rising above his scant existence by playing a street scam called three-card monte. Even though he is a novice at this card game, he sees this street game as the cure to his economic condition. More importantly, the game will allow him to turn his family life into what he longs for it to be. On the other hand, Lincoln is a retired expert of the game: he dreams of staying out of the criminal realm and working a legitimate job for a living. For all intents and purposes, Lincoln lives his dream, to a degree. However, he does not make enough money to make himself independent of his brother. Furthermore, he lives with the fear of losing his job to a wax dummy. From the onset, these brothers have dreams, but economics, society, and family prevent them from living their dreams.

Booth incorporates his brother into his dream world, for Lincoln serves as Booth's key to success on every level. Even though Booth greatly needs Lincoln's assistance, Lincoln does not want to be a part of it. After having lost a friend to the game, Lincoln does what he can to avoid cards. Lincoln's desire to stay card-free upsets his brother because Booth knows that he needs his brother if he is to find success in this venture. While Booth dreams of criminal activity, Lincoln

dreams of maintaining his ordinary job of working at an arcade. These brothers have opposing goals; unfortunately, each brother's dream will evaporate as the plot unravels.

In the second half of the play, we discover the results of the brothers' dreams. We discover what happens when dreams die. Sadly, Lincoln's fears turn into reality: he loses his arcade job. For Booth, practice does not make perfect. He still has not mastered the game, but he believes that his rare efforts at practicing will turn him into a top-notch player. As such, he challenges his brother to a game; he forces him out of retirement. With Lincoln having lost his source of employment, he acquiesces to his brother's demand to play. In order to make the game more real, Booth recovers a long-hidden possession, the money-filled nylon stocking, to use for betting purposes. In the first round, Booth wins, and he flaunts his victory. In the final round, Lincoln wins, and he claims his prize. Unbeknownst to Booth, the first round was intended to create false sense of confidence in him, and that is what happens. Booth feels superior as a result of his win, so he bets all of his inheritance on the final round. And Lincoln claims his prize without knowing that such an action would shatter this family.

When Booth realizes that Lincoln has scammed him from the very beginning of the card duel, he becomes alienated. He abandons his American dream and disconnects himself from his brotherly relation. His brother is no longer his brother but a dehumanized enemy, an object. What happens in this moment is what Marx and Engels predicted would happen to the family under capitalism: "The bourgeoisie has torn away from the family its sentimental veil, and has reduced the family relation to a mere money relation" (771). This family has endured this shifting from a relation of blood to a relation of money. As a result of this capitalist re-design of family bonds, Booth finds it appropriate to do something vicious to his sibling. Booth whips out his gun and shoots Lincoln. The dissolution of Booth's dream was enough to drive him to killing

the man—the brother—who scammed him in a performance of his name. The re-possession of his money takes precedence over the possession of a brother. When the money-filled stocking falls away, Booth re-humanizes his brother. He now feels the effects of extinguishing his brother's life—the loss of a money source, the loss of identity, the loss of familial relation.

As a whole, this play reveals how devastating not obtaining your dream can be, but Parks does more than just critique the dream. She attempts to increase awareness of the impact of man-made institutions on consciousness, and she shows us a family that is unified by money, not emotion. In the end, Parks warns her audience of the consequences of allowing money to dominate the way we perceive the world. By examining the complicated nature of Booth's and Lincoln's troubled relationship and their respective visions of the American Dream, Parks challenges her audience to reflect on who are excluded from the dream and why they are excluded. Booth and Lincoln's circumstances and inability to achieve the dream may come from the dream's unstated racial exclusion of Black Americans. In effect, these brothers pursue what is not possible for them. When the hope of becoming the men of their dreams dissipates for these brothers, Lincoln treats Booth as a mark and Booth marks Lincoln for death. For these brothers, the pursuit of the American dream destroys what is really their sole possession—their relationship. The audience knows how the play will end at the play's opening; however, only on viewing the personal history and relationship of these brothers do we understand why Booth shoots Lincoln.

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