

Legacies of the Past and the American Family: Sam Shepard's *True West* and Suzan-Lori Parks's *Topdog /Underdog*¹

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Isolation from societal and historical continuity ingrained in American thought and culture has resulted in an unprecedented economic growth, creativity, and flexibility in all facets of American life. Paradoxically, a constant search for an American past—generated by the lack of a common history—also prevails in American culture and these mutually exclusive trends lead to a sense of “rootlessness, loss of connections, and anxiety about identity” (Menides 607). American literary expressiveness appears to reflect these opposing views on history as well as the impact these attitudes exert on the (in)stability of the American character. Viewed from the “classic” period of American literature a variety of responses were generated by the literary culture. American writers’ approaches to history range from evident separation from the constraints and restraints of history and tradition (Emerson, Thoreau) through creating romanticized versions of the American past (Cooper, Longfellow) to the search of a “usable past”² (Eliot, Pound) that would explain the causes and impinge on the way how Americans exist in the present (Menides 607).

Theatrical performances are particularly suited to raising searching questions about how the dimensions of the past—individual and collective—occur to us and shape our present. The lack of a valid and available past—personal, cultural, and historical—as well as the distorting effects of this absence on the individual and family level have featured as a central theme in modern American drama since its long-awaited advent at the beginning of the twentieth century. The themes of the aborted legacies of the Cabots in the New England regions (O’Neill, *Desire Under the Elms*, 1921), the misused and abused Dixie inheritance of the DuBois family (Tennessee Williams, *A Streetcar Named Desire*, 1947), Joe Keller’s and Willie Loman’s thwarted dreams because of the personal and communal sins committed in the past (Arthur Miller, *All My Sons*, 1947 and *Death of Salesman*, 1949, respectively) continue to refigure in postmodern American drama, however, in new ways. As Sanja Bahun-Radunović maintains, “history becomes ‘humanized’ and workable by/in the very act of performance” as history is understood as “the chronotopic point at which our personal and social being is excited, ex-centered, and . . . brought to awareness of its historical condition” (446).

1 This essay is dedicated to Professor Mária Kurdi, distinguished scholar, teacher, mentor, and colleague, for her unceasing encouragement and support in my scholarly career and research.

2 The term is introduced by Van Wyck Brooks in his essay “On Creating a Usable Past” published in *Dial*, 1918.

Preoccupation with the absence of a shared and authentic past of the American nation has found compelling expression in two plays selected here for study: Sam Shepard's *True West* (1980) and Suzan-Lori Parks's *Topdog/Underdog* (2002). Produced more than two decades apart, both plays revolve around sibling rivalries echoing the biblical tale of Cain and Abel, only to deal with disturbing segments and aspects of American history and culture. Shepard's drama laments the loss of paradigm-generating myths—the frontier, the West, the American dream—, essential shaping factors of the American character and identity, while Parks's play is haunted by the erasure of African American history and her people's invisibility in the iconography of American history and culture. In fact, Shepard and Parks dramatize how the loss and/or the erasure of an authentic past history impacts upon the American family and provide highly similar diagnoses of the maladies of American society at around the new millennium: the crisis of manhood and masculinity, the failed father-son relationship, the disintegration of the family, and the misuse of parental heritage. The immense success of a Broadway revival of *True West* at the Circle on the Square in 2000 demonstrates the topicality and the freshness of the play by which Shepard himself was somewhat astonished as he confided in an interview with Matthew Roudané: "the amazing thing to me is that, now, in this time, for some reason or another, the disaster inherent in this thing called the American Family is very resonant now with audiences" ("Shepard" 68).

The comparative analysis of the two plays I am going to offer here rests upon the assumption that the lack of a valuable and functional past leads to the disruption of family manifest in the family members' constant role-playing, which functions as an evasive strategy to confront their own reality. Both playwrights use metadramatic dramaturgical devices to portray their characters as performers with constantly shifting identities.

On first consideration, the late white male dramatist Shepard (1943-2017) and African American female playwright Parks (1963-) seem to be an unlikely pair to compare because of their dissimilarities in gender, background, color, and race. A canonical father of American drama with more than a fifty-year successful dramatic career, Shepard established himself on the theatrical scene in the 1960s avant-garde movement, while Parks shares the sensibilities of the post-civil rights generation and belongs to the postethnic era of the American literary culture. Shepard and Parks come from markedly dissimilar landscapes and rely on different cultural backgrounds. "Shepard speaks from an automatic and safe 'center,'" the Mid-West and the West, as Jeanette Malkin maintains (155), whereas Parks's geographical position cannot be determined with that extent of preciseness not only because she was born into a military family and moved often from place to place in her childhood—like Shepard in his youth—but because she shares the collective history of the geographically displaced black people constantly in search for their own space, home, and identity. Affiliating himself with the vagabond life style of the beat generation, always on the move, Shepard is a "drifter" who "drifted across the continent from California to New York (Bigsby 7).

Despite the differences evident in their socio-cultural and racial background, Shepard and Parks share numerous profound affinities in their dramatic vision, their

language—often drawing on the improvisational structure of jazz and the hard beat of rock—, and in their use of space and spatiality. Parks’s own words of admiration in her tribute to Sam Shepard in *American Theatre* touch upon some deep-seated proximity in their understanding of drama: “for me he was always the icon, the beacon, the guiding light of contemporary writers . . . Shepard was one of the greats I wanted to emulate. And yep, he was a white guy—yep” [sic] and she continues that “Sam Shepard was a writer who could trace and track the epic mythic raw American thrum that runs underneath and vibrates throughout so much of this country” (“Sam Shepard”). They both fully exploit the *theatricality* of the theatre—a conscious use of image, space, voice, and rhythm—by deploying dramaturgies that subvert theatrical conventions.

Though Shepard and Parks belong to the postmodern era of American drama, I would suggest that their dramatic vision about the *sine qua non* of a lasting theatrical experience parallels with that of Horace from ancient Rome. In his *Ars Poetica* (c. 19 BC), written in the form of an epistle Horace articulates: “less vividly is the mind stirred by what finds entrance through ears than by what is brought before the trusty eyes, and what the spectator sees for himself” (qtd. in Marshall 683). The poet in ancient Rome and the postmodern playwrights selected here share the necessity of creating haunting images on stage. There are numerous examples from both dramatists’ works to this claim; suffice here to cite only a few: in Shepard’s *Buried Child* (1978) the visual image in the last scene when “Tilden, in his dripping muddy shoes and trousers, ascends the stairs to his mother, carrying in his arms the remains—bones wrapped in shredded rags—of her dead child” (Morse 260); “*Ages of the Moon* (2009) has another arresting image of someone carrying death” (261). Similarly, reading Parks’s plays “in the context of historical spectacle” Heidi J. Holder points out that *The Death of the Last Black Man in the Whole Entire World* (1989-1992), *The America Play* (1993), and *Venus* (1996) begin with the announcement and/or acting out the ‘deaths’ of the main characters, which are repeated verbally as well as visually throughout these plays (19).

In the two plays selected for study here Shepard and Parks confront their audiences with the effects and consequences of the absence of the American people’s collective past. *True West* and *Topdog/Underdog* have not been examined comparatively so far (to my knowledge); nevertheless, in her book *Memory-Theater and Postmodern Drama* (1999) Malkin addresses Shepard’s and Parks’ treatment of memory and past histories in their respective dramatic oeuvres up to the closing decade of the twentieth century. She highlights their common feature: “what they do share . . . is a grievous sense of rupture from grounded past—albeit ruptures very differently inflicted” (155). Though Parks’s *Topdog/Underdog* was produced after Malkin’s book had appeared, her observation pertaining to Parks’s treatment of the past is applicable to *Topdog/Underdog*. Shepard wishes to reconstruct the “true” west, whereas Parks intends to rewrite the African Americans’ history within the framework of the narrative history of the US. For this aim, theatre is an ideal place. Parks confides, “since history is a recorded or remembered event, theatre, for me, is the perfect place to ‘make’ history” (qtd. in Schmidt 173-74). Parks’s “theater is a conscious effort to make history in the sense of simulating it, transforming it, and going through its undiscovered possibilities” (208). Parks and Shepard both attempt to re-constitute history in their plays by

reclaiming components through rich imagery, performative acts, and paradigmatic shifts. Thus it can safely be claimed that our two selected authors share an essential kinship: both create a metahistorical and self-reflexive level of past histories.

Arguably, the dramaturgy of Shepard and Parks “summons the past(s) and seeks identity, through an appeal to memory and its erasure” (Malkin 155), yet their strategies to recall past(s) markedly differ from modernist practice. In modernist drama the existence of a unified subjectivity ensures that “we can find paradigms of an essentially unified (personal or group) consciousness, employing coherent dramatic enunciations in order that a segment of the past be illuminated and a present explained” (Malkin 21). Accordingly, the protagonists of O’Neill, Miller and Williams recall past histories “in the form of remembered pasts, flashbacks and conjured up moments” (20), which are suitable conventions “to see into the mind, to reconstruct a life, and thus to find an interpretative framework for personal and social failure” (21).

However, in postmodern drama—and in the two plays under scrutiny here—“narrative devices (flashbacks and realistic frames) are abandoned, as are appeals to a teleological understanding of the past” (21). Thus, in *True West* and *Topdog/Underdog*, past history, or rather fragments and elements of past histories appear in the accumulation of multiple spaces and times on stage with each plane/level, evoking—as well as challenging—images, myths, and histories. This theatrical tendency reflects the postmodern impulse to deconstruct inherited “master narratives” as well as reassesses the concept of historiography, which advances a “revised, activist history of events, a continuously re-transcribed history which would . . . examine historical events—recorded and unrecorded—in their complexity” (Bahun-Radunović 447). The multiplicity of times and spaces necessitates fluidity evident in the characters’ assuming various roles with constant shifts between them. Accordingly, the postmodern subject is denied remembering the past through teleological stories, linear patterns, and subjective remembrances. Many of Parks’s plays invoke the past, “but reading them through the rubrics of a naturalist or mimetic theater obscures their radical character and their focus on the inscriptive act as an event in its own right” (Reed 150). Parks’s treatment of history is likened to jazz-like compositional strategy by Attilio Favorini: “Suzan-Lori Parks writes memory riffs,” and adds that “embracing fragmentation, Parks practices remembering as a species of dismembering” (10).

The suggestive title of Shepard’s play foregrounds and encapsulates its main thematic drive, namely an attempt at a definition of a true West, an iconic element of the American past and a central shaping force of the American character. Embedded in the incessant fight and quarrel between Austin, the civilized Ivy League playwright from Los Angeles and his elder brother Lee, living in the desert, the existence of a “true West” is questioned in terms of geography, characteristic iconic traits, and visions of the west. Lee’s life in the desert calls for the image of the self-reliant and resourceful “free agent” (Shepard 8), whereas the urban dweller evokes the image of a successful family man in the city making his living by writing (“true”) western stories for Hollywood. Encoded in the spaces relegated to Austin, the city dweller and his elder brother, Lee, the nomad living in the desert, they inhabit two markedly different versions of what constitutes “true west.” Nevertheless, as David Krasner claims,

“Austin and Lee represent America’s twin paradigms of wealth and individualism” (110) and also “share a characteristically American optimism: for them, success is always within reach” (111). Taking care of their mother’s house while she is staying on vacation in Alaska, through feud and dispute the estranged brothers begin to covet each other’s vastly differing lives and go through a total role-reversal, whereby the authenticity of each version of “true west” vision is questioned. Gabriella Varró explains: “Austin, the settled man and Lee, the lone ranger, the nomad just back from the Mojave Desert use, and eventually dismantle their mother’s place in their contest to acquire each other’s position, and along with it also the other’s personal characters traits” (64-65).

Geographically, the visions of the true West encompass mosaics of multiple places that all summon up images of various modes of living, past historical events, stories, and fragments from a bygone era and life. The multiplicity of spaces and times evoking different facets of a true West is intricately present in the un-abating verbal and physical fight between the siblings. In a structural arrangement reminiscent of contrapuntal music, their verbal encounters conjure up opposite, yet equally valid and typical aspects of a true West. Lee’s direct comparison of Austin writing on his typewriter about the true West with the Forefathers’ writing by candlelight juxtaposes different times, spaces, and acts: “Isn’t that what the old guys did? ... The Forefathers ... You know ... Candlelight burning into the night? Cabins in the wilderness? (6). His reference to the ancestors calls back a legendary and even heroic past, a mythical West, and the frontier moving forward. J. Chris Westgate states that Shepard “implicitly endorses Frederick Jackson Turner’s romantic conviction that the frontier, even if mediated by more than a century of urbanization, cultivates the individuality, self-reliance, and morality, that are essential to the ‘American character’” (726).

The romantic and even nostalgic visions of the West, however, gradually collapse since Lee’s inventiveness and self-sufficiency—traditionally inherent traits of the western hero—are degraded to his “making a little tour” for electric devices in his neighborhood, which proves to be an ideal site for him to steal: “This is a great neighborhood, Lush. Good class a’ people. Not many dogs” (Shepard 7-8). Alternately, the educated and refined Austin turns violent and a drunkard in his attempt to transform into a nomad like Lee.

The spatial positioning of the mother’s house on the border, between the vast spaces and the urban world may indicate women’s exclusion from true west as well as their marginalization from a patriarchal society. The brothers meet in their mother’s house situated on the edge of the desert and the city, in a luxurious suburb in South California, forty miles east of Los Angeles. Located in-between two geographical spaces, the mother seems to be banished to the outside, a nowhere land, a liminal position that apparently does not belong to anyone. Austin is equally perplexed and baffled by his mother’s living in the “great neighborhood”: well, our uh— Our mother just happens to live here” (Shepard 8). The brothers’ struggle to restore the “true west” while surrounded temporarily with the comfort of their mother’s suburban house is acutely ironic since it is implied that a woman’s presence is needed to re-assert their masculinity. In fact, her haunting presence in the environment manifest in the objects in the house—her furniture, pots and pans, and flowers—also in her instructions she

has given to Austin about taking care of the house illuminates women's significance in contributing to the traditionally male-centered frontier myth. Lesley Ferris argues that during the Westward expansion women shared all the jobs and hardships with men: "in reality of frontier life women pioneered their way west on an equal footing with the men, often, out of sheer necessity, discarding any pretense of 'femininity'" (134).

The inclusion of Hollywood as an actual place—the workplace of Austin and Saul Kimmer, the producer—as well as the site of myths and legends through its movies and film stars completes the (re)construction and the evocation of "true west." With its lure of big money, fame and glamour Hollywood functions as a focal point in the play in the sense that the brothers' penchant for winning Kimmer's approval for their own scripts of a Western movie aggravates the tension between them, and propels them to take on each other's place and profession. The West is evoked in its popular cultural form, the western in Austin's movie script; however, Kimmer drops Austin's project in favor of Lee's story, claiming that "[it] was the first authentic Western to come along in a decade" (Shepard 30).

The authenticity of the western hero as rendered in western movies is refuted by Austin when criticizing Lee's script: "those aren't characters ... Those are illusions of characters. . . . those are fantasies of a long lost boyhood" (40). The figure of the western hero is degraded to dumb riders chasing each other in Lee's script, whereas the heroic deeds are degraded to disgraceful business. The closing scene in Act 2 with the dumb riders chasing each other in the prairie in Lee's script faithfully and ironically imitates the psychological struggle between the two brothers: "what they don't know is that each one of 'em is afraid, see. Each one separately thinks that he's the only one that's afraid" (Shepard 27). Devastated by the news that, according to Kimmer Lee's script, "has the ring of truth," (35) Austin retorts: "There's no such thing as the West anymore. It's a dead issue" (35). Austin's embittered reply refers to the paradox that if true west does not exist, it cannot have a "true" story, either. The realization of the constructedness of a "true West" dawns on Austin: "[W]hat Austin begins to realize during the play, . . . , is that the West, and perhaps even America, exists only in an economy of continually circulated images" (Westgate 738). Shepard's play suggests a direct connection between the violence erupting in Austin and the suspicion that "the vision of the West that underlies American destiny might have, paradoxically, only ever been 'real' in movies, stories, and myths" thus resulting "in a profound ontological uncertainty" (739). In James A. Crank's formulation, "the fantasy of the American West made popular by television and film" explodes in the play (87).

In *Topdog/Underdog* a simultaneity of multiple spaces and times is achieved with the inclusion of characters from various historical times and locations. Parks's technique to recall the past includes "the intertextual inclusion of archival material; ... the presentation of historical events as fragmented, compressed, and disjunctive units; and the compulsive repetition of events and quasi-events in the performative present" (Bahun-Radunović 447). Parks's treatment of history involves evoking and repeating an actual historical event, the assassination of Abraham Lincoln, the sixteenth president of the US by John Wilkes Booth (1865). For Parks, "theatre is an incubator for the creation of historical events" and about her dramatic vision and

themes she admits: “I’m obsessed with now. Like memory and family and history and the past” (qtd. in Jiggetts 1). Parks portrays the gritty life of two black brothers called Lincoln, “the topdog” and Booth “(aka 3-Card), the underdog” (3) in “a seedily furnished rooming house room” (7) “here” and “now” in New York. Destined to enact the deeds associated with their names, they repeat the fratricide as well as the historical tragedy: Booth kills Lincoln at the end.

In both plays the characters’ constant role-playing disguises their acute sense of rootlessness closely linked to the absence of a valuable and functional past. The compulsive role-playing reinforces that the only possible way of survival in America appears to be by disguising oneself, mimicry, cheating, and conning, which both pairs of brothers in the two plays excel in. With reference to Shepard’s characters Marc Robinson emphasizes that the role and the mask they wear may merge and become inseparable: “Shepard’s characters succumb to role-playing, not able to know themselves apart from the disguises they’ve inherited” (81).

Brotherly rivalry in both plays is dramatized through performative acts. Austin and Lee, as well as Linc and Booth, are constant performers. Enacting the archetypal anger and envy induced by the other brother’s possessions, skills, and lifestyles, the brothers in each play intend to own and usurp what the other has. The pattern of the inept, uncivilized, and unsuccessful brother constantly trying to imitate the personal traits, talents of the successful one prevails in both dramas, which, by definition, entails a transgressive performative act that crosses borders and lines set by societal, cultural, and historical conventions. In *True West* the complete role reversal between the brothers is achieved through a series of performative acts. Varró describes this process as follows: “[W]hile the playwright Austin annexes the social and emotional territory of his savage and petty thief brother in stages, . . . his good-for-nothing brother, Lee, is avenging himself for his failed opportunities by intruding upon the territory of Austin, imitating the latter’s status as established playwright” (66-67).

The masks and roles Austin and Lee assume originate in the images and icons of the west and American urban culture, whereas Lincoln and Booth draw their roles from African American and American culture and history. A former successful 3-card monte player, a street hustler, Lincoln now works as an Abraham Lincoln impersonator enacting the president’s death in an arcade. Role-play as a kind of survival is deeply ingrained in African American culture. As Deborah Geis notes, “African-American identity almost inevitably involves disguise and role-playing as part of the effort to function in a hostile culture” (114). The jobless Booth’s performances are conspicuously varied. Being eager to imitate his brother, he keeps on practicing his brother’s moves and patter at 3-card monte, though his moves are awkward; wearing stolen pieces of clothing he poses like in a fashion show and produces a purely entertaining one-man show; he arranges a candle-lit dinner for his girlfriend Grace, a fantasy woman, who never arrives.

In both plays the characters’ masks indicate a deepening gap between the interior self and the cultural representation of the self. After the initial hostility towards each other’s life styles, Austin and Lee admit that they have desired the other’s position:

LEE. I always wondered what'd be like to be you.

AUSTIN. You did?

LEE. I used to picture you walking' round some campus with your arms full' books. Blondes chasin' after ya'.

AUSTIN. Blondes? That's funny ... Because I always used to picture you somewhere ... You were always on some adventure. ... I used to say to myself, "Lee's got the right idea, He's out there in the world and here I am. What am I doing?" (Shepard 26)

Austin is attracted to Lee's "self-contained individualism, frankness, a sense of rootedness in the land" that represent basic American values the country is built on (Bottoms 194). Contrariwise, disguising and conning appear to be survival techniques in America. Lincoln used to work as a street hustler, Booth desires to be one; Austin attaches the label to Kimmer, the Hollywood producer: "He's a hustler! He's a bigger hustler than you are!" (Shepard 33).

Emulating and assuming each other's roles, however, is doomed to get aborted in both plays. When Lee starts to write the script supported by the Hollywood producer, Austin's self-destructive instinct surfaces: he drinks, steals, and turns aggressive. "Austin demonstrates typically ambivalent behavior, at once fiercely protective of his world," yet when he is challenged by Lee he turns into a "macho-man capable of hard drinking, stealing, and murder" (Kane 145). The tension between the brothers is further aggravated when Lee realizes he lacks the skills to write the script. Lee's refusal to take Austin to the desert and teach him survival skills is perceived by Austin as "a lifetime betrayal" (146) and will "open the floodgates of Austin's rage" (146).

In the final tableau Austin chokes Lee with the telephone wire until Lee is motionless. However, suddenly Lee springs to his feet—another instance of betrayal from Lee—and blocks Austin's exit. Stephen Bottoms compares this scene to a maelstrom: "the descent of both men from controlled, ordered ego opposition into undifferentiated chaos is completed in the final scene when . . . Austin erupts in a fit of frantic rage and tries to kill Lee by wrapping the telephone cord around his neck" (195). He adds that in this moment the personalities of both "prove to be highly unstable compositions of shifting, conflicting desire, devoid of any reliable sense of self and thus capable of extreme volatility" (195). Leslie Kane's interpretation of this last scene places it in a broader perspective by stressing humans' inability to learn from the past: it "conveys an enduring 'truth,' namely, that we are largely unsuccessful in affixing meaning to the past, in understanding its connection to the present, in breaking free of its vise-like grip" (146).

Austin seems to cherish the idea that a relationship between brothers should mean something. "Lee argues that familial violence is the most authentic kind" (Crank 98): "You go down to L.A. Police Department there and ask them what kinda' people kill each other the most. What do you think they 'd say? ... Family people. Brothers" (Shepard 23-24).

The role-play pervasive in the two plays evokes and reinforces the notion of a constantly transforming American identity. Similarly, the rivalry between the brothers

entails betrayal in *Topdog/Underdog* and generates violence, anger, and finally murder. With no authentic and functional past available, the American character must be produced through performative acts discursively, which allows for the construction of fluid, unstable identity and race. Enikő Bollobás's conceptualization of the performative illuminates the process of how identity is constructed. She contends that the performative

has provided a pragmatic form whereby certain constitutive processes can be conceptualized in non-essentialist thinking. To take the example of identities, the performative refutes the essentialist position by showcasing gender, sexuality, or race as produced by language. Independent of whether the identities in question are stable or unstable, unproblematic or problematic, intelligible or unintelligible, dominant or non-dominant, the performative establishes the ways they all come about as effects of discourse.

Accordingly, performative subjectivities are “new discursive entities,” as Bollobás claims, and “they come about against or in the absence of existing conventions. Therefore, the subjectivities performed will be multiple, unfixed, unstable, and mobile, and mutable [...] allowing for a new possibility of agency.”

The sibling rivalry endures throughout the two plays. Performativity of identity is manifest in transgressive acts, whereby the subject acquires agency. In his performative act to become as skilled as Lincoln at cards Booth proves to be a failure. “His moves and accompanying patter are, for the most part, studied and awkward” (Parks, *Topdog* 7), and not even by adopting a new name, 3-Card, does he achieve success. So the new moniker fails to change his fate. By contrast, Lincoln's performative act to work as an Abe Lincoln impersonator is not only convincing but also successful. Adopting the signifiers of identity change by whitefacing himself and putting on the Lincoln costume, a stovepipe top hat, the beard and the coat, Lincoln gains agency by crossing the color line between blacks and whites.

Marc Maufort distinguishes “two kinds of performance motifs, which force audiences to question their established assumptions about reality. First, Parks uses the metaphor of the 3-card monte scam as a symbol of the capitalist tendency to cheat human beings out of their ‘inheritance,’ spiritual or otherwise, via performative hustling. Second, she resorts . . . to a parodic reinterpretation of blackface minstrelsy, a notoriously racist form of performance in nineteenth century America” (*Labyrinth* 93). This move illustrates the constructed nature of concepts like blackness, whiteness, and race.

The absence of a strong legacy is palpable in the portrayal of dysfunctional parents. Conspicuously, neither pair of brothers has family names, which indicates their disconnection and alienation from their families, irrespective of whether they are white or black. In both plays the brothers have been betrayed by their parents since their youth, thus they are unable to trust anyone, including (and especially) each other. Austin and Lee's father is an alcoholic who abandoned the family long ago to live in the desert. “What the brothers share that supersedes all of their petty differences of personality is a connection to their father and an inability . . . to escape their father's emotional inheritance,” as Crank maintains (94). Their mother—on vacation in Alaska—is just as

debilitated and unreliable as the boys' father. Her insignificance, or just the opposite, her downgraded, unappreciated significance, is effectively underlined by her passing physical and brief textual presence in the play. Her blindness to and unawareness of reality is evident in the closing scene of the play. After returning from Alaska only to see Picasso—whom she conflates with his works, thus blurring the boundaries between art and the artist—in the town she sees her sons fighting in her own house and says: “You boys shouldn’t fight in the house. Go outside and fight” (Shepard 56). She feels completely alienated and emotionally detached in her own house.

Similarly, *Topdog* provides “a bleak, disturbing vision of familial disruption and devastation in black urban America” (Dawkins 90). Parks’s view of the family seems to be even more distressing than that of Shepard. Laura Dawkins maintains that “Parks deploys the metaphor of fratricide to demonstrate that her characters have lost the African American ideal of brotherhood through assimilation into a hierarchical American society—a society based upon capitalistic rather than communal values” (90). Whenever some remnants of familial attention, brotherhood, and communal values surface, they are invariably linked to and tainted with the central role of money, thus stressing the destructive power of money on familial relations.

Booth’s desire to work together with his brother in the three-card-monte scam is a faint attempt to restore the close bond between the brothers they used to have after their parents leaving: “I’m hooked on us working together. If we could work together it would be like old times. They split and we got that room downtown. . . . It was you and me against thuh world, Link” (Parks, *Topdog* 70). According to Maufort “the feud between the brothers takes its roots in the very ruthlessness of capitalism” (93), which signifies the loss of communal values. In the brothers’ past there are “two almost identical financial transactions related to their parents and parental heritage. One day, when the boys were adolescents, their mother gave five hundred dollars to Booth and left forever. Two years later their boys’ father gave five hundred dollars to Lincoln and was never again seen by his sons. She gives Booth the money and leaves him forever: “she had my payoo—my inheritance—she had it all ready for me. 5 hundred dollar bills rolled up and tied tight in one of her nylon stockings” (105). The personal and even sexual nature of the object his mother uses to wrap the money—an object which calls to mind the stocking as emblem of sexual exchange in Miller’s masterpiece *Death of a Salesman*—underscores the close relation between money and sexuality for Booth. Booth has never spent his money, unlike Lincoln, who received the same amount of money from his father in ten fifties in a clean handkerchief and “blew” it immediately. In fact, Booth has never even taken it out of the stockings to count it. Both parents warn their children not to spend the money, essentially denying its function as money. When Booth reveals that he still has the inheritance, Lincoln points out that in effect, his inheritance is not money as long as he refuses to do anything with it: “That’s like saying you don’t got no money cause you aint never gonna do noting with it so its like you don’t got it” (21-22). It is Lincoln’s attempt to cut open the stocking and verify the existence of the five hundred that propels Booth toward his last violent act at the play’s end.

The representation of the strain and tension between the brothers evident in their role-reversal in Shepard’s play is analogous to themes modulating in a carefully composed musical structure as Stephen S. Bottoms suggests:

the opposing brothers [Austin and Lee] effectively act as statement and counterpoint, to be played off against each other with differing degrees of intensity in the play's nine scenes, which thus become akin to nine movements. Indeed, the brothers' 'themes, 'which start off at diametrically opposed extremes, are eventually blended and blurred to the point where they cross over completely, in a role reversal which is as much a musical device as it is character development. (185)

In line with the compositional parallels from music, the concluding scene in *True West* with the brothers pitted against each other creates a sense of immense continuity similar to the endless reiteration of leitmotifs in operas by Wagner. In Shepard the violent antagonism re-occurring between the brothers features as thematic leitmotif:

They square off to each other, keeping a distance between them . . . lights fade softly in to moonlight, the figures of the brothers now appear to be caught in a vast desert-like landscape, they are very still but watchful for the next move, lights go slowly to black as the after-image of the brothers pulses in the dark . . . (59)

Similarly, the changing dynamics between Lincoln and Booth in *Topdog/Underdog* also follows modulating themes in a musical piece, though this is composed of six movements (scenes). The final clash between Lincoln and Booth in *Topdog/Underdog*, however, ends with fratricide, in an enactment of the historical tragedy. Unlike in *True West*, "where the play clearly moves into the archetype" (Morse 260) with the image of the never-ending fight between the brothers, Parks' play finishes with a coda. This emotionally charged part concluding the play provides a glimpse of hope that a sense of community and brotherhood so seriously disrupted within the black families may be restored. On a verbal level Booth still justifies killing Lincoln insisting the money inherited from their mother was his: "It was mines anyhow, even when you stole it from me it was still mines cause she gave it to me" (110). In his gesture and moves, though he truly repents his deed: "*He bends to pick up the money filled stocking. Then he just crumples. As he sits beside Lincolns body, the money-stockings falls away. Booth holds Lincolns body, hugging him close. He sobs*" (110).

The setting in both plays encodes a sense of confinement and restricted space. The vast Western prairies and open spaces evoked in Shepard's play are contrasted with the actual physical space where the acts are located: "all nine scenes take place on the same set: a kitchen and adjoining alcove" (Shepard 3). Crank also highlights the contrast between the externally evoked space and the actual inner physical space: "because escape and freedom are huge themes within *True West*, the fact that we witness the entire play within this small space underscores the frenzied nature of the two characters' interactions" (81-82). Austin and Lee "are caged like animals," which is further reinforced by their actual presence on the stage: "other than one single moment, both brothers appear onstage together for the entirety of the play" (Crank 82). The lack of space, a sense of isolation and segregation so readily evoked by the setting in *Topdog* also accentuates the limits and restrictions the brothers face in their lives as well as in the history of the Americans. "Chaudhuri calls this set 'not just a

room, but an archetypal room, a room with vengeance . . . [and the] very emblem of limits and boundaries” (qtd. in Geis 113).

Lincoln and Booth’s flat is a claustrophobic and suffocating space containing only one bed, one reclining chair and one small wooden chair. The characters not only become closed into a small place, but this space holding them captive gradually narrows down on them, and the isolation of this closed system causes an explosion that leads to the murder. Varró’s claim referring to suffocating sets in several Shepard plays also applies to Parks’s play: “the respective settings in the plays also predetermine the kinds of values that are bound to clash” (64).

Parallels exist in the mode that the passage of time is shown in the plays. *True West* begins at night and concludes “with dusk four days later,” and the passage of time in this play is reflected in the sunrises and sunsets, the accumulating junk, the death of the house-plants, and the growing pile of empty alcohol bottles” (Kane 142). As a consequence of the lack of a functional past and a sense of homelessness pervades both dramas. The house in Southern California Austin and Lee inhabit belongs to their mother, while Lincoln and Booth are merely tenants in the rooming house. They are all nomads, wanderers, in exile, and only temporary settlers, be it the black ghetto of New York or the white exurbia of Los Angeles.

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