

BANG, BANG, MR. PRESIDENT:  
RE-VISIONING PRESIDENTIAL ASSASSINATION ON THE AMERICAN STAGE

by

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Bang, Bang, Mr. President:

Re-Visioning Presidential Assassination on the American Stage

Thesis directed by Assistant Professor Beth Osnes

Four sitting American Presidents have met their end at the hands of an assassin, and many unsuccessful attempts have been made on others. Our continuing fascination with these macabre public events is consistently reflected in contemporary art and popular culture. Arguably, the dramatic lure of presenting events such as assassination revolves around a cultural need to continue reenacting and witnessing these violent moments in our history, juxtaposing our own personal histories with our national histories.

My research specifically focuses on plays that depict what I call a re-visioning of presidential assassination. These plays, Wendy MacLeod's *The House of Yes* (1990), and Suzan-Lori Parks's *The America Play* (1994) and *Topdog/Underdog* (2001), revolve around characters who compulsively re-enact, and in doing so re-vision these assassinations, reflecting their own personal struggle. In *The House of Yes*, the assassination of John F. Kennedy is ritualized as sexual foreplay, while in both *The America Play* and *Topdog/Underdog*, the plot involves an African American man who earns a living as an Abraham Lincoln impersonator, specifically in a reenactment of Lincoln's assassination.

I posit that in each of these plays the assassination in question is re-visioned as an attempted assassination of a dominant narrative that excludes certain sectors of the American population, specifically women, African Americans, and socio-economically challenged populations. Directly tied to this exploration is an investigation of the failure of the materialization of the American Dream for marginalized populations. This exploration directly focuses on the metatheatricality inherent in the assassination reenactment, including the importance of ritualistic elements. Further, questions of race, class and gender as represented in each play

are viewed through the lenses of Marxist theory, feminist theory, and post-colonial and race theory. This exploration is tied to personal trauma as juxtaposed with national tragedy as well as a fundamental question of belonging, providing clear insight into how tragedies such as assassinations of political figures have lasting repercussions that continue to affect the people and dreams of a nation for generations to come.

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## INTRODUCTION

“Some people find me wrong to attend the theatre, but it serves me well to have a good laugh with a crowd of people.”

– Abraham Lincoln (Good 3)

In the comparatively short history of the United States of America, four sitting American Presidents have met their mortal end at the hands of an assassin. Each of these assassinations has been represented theatrically in some way on the American stage. The first of these assassinations was Abraham Lincoln who, in 1865, was assassinated by John Wilkes Booth as he sat in the Presidential Box at the Ford’s Theatre enjoying a performance of a popular comedy, Tom Taylor’s *Our American Cousin*. Lincoln’s assassination, which followed closely on the heels of the devastating American Civil War, threw an already mourning and divided nation into further disarray. However, Lincoln’s assassination by an actor in a theatre was perhaps a prophetic first in a string of Presidential Assassinations which would play out over the course of the following century, the final successful assassination to date being that of President John F. Kennedy in 1963. Kennedy’s assassin, Lee Harvey Oswald, was captured and arrested at the Texas Theater in Dallas shortly after he fired the shot that in effect instantly killed Kennedy as he rode in a convertible through Dealey Plaza in a very public motorcade. Arguably, the motorcade itself was a theatrical event, a staged production the unintended climax of which was, of course, Kennedy’s assassination. Just two days after his arrest, Oswald was himself shot and killed as he was being transported to the Dallas County Jail. His assassination was broadcast for the entire world to see via the most modern of “theatrical” modes: live television.

Though two other American Presidents, James A. Garfield and William McKinley, respectively, were also assassinated while in office, the assassinations of Lincoln and Kennedy, in particular, continue overwhelmingly to capture the interest and imagination of the American



people. The assassinations of Lincoln and Kennedy, much more so than those of Garfield and McKinley, continue to be the topic of much discussion, debate and speculation. There are those who dedicate their lives to studying these two assassinations, as well as the complicated and abundant conspiracy theories associated with them. While it is true that there is perhaps less interest and speculation surrounding the assassination of Lincoln, in part “because the public at that earlier time had little difficulty understanding why a Southern partisan would wish to kill the leader of the Union cause” (Piereson ix), the Lincoln assassination continues to generate interest into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. While Lincoln’s assassination remains one of the most important American events of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and continues to provoke interest and speculation, Kennedy’s assassination arguably carries a more immediate weight in the psyches of contemporary Americans. Arguably, this reality is due in part to the fact that there are still many Americans alive today who remember Kennedy’s assassination, easily one of the most historic events of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. But as James Pierson points out, there are other reasons for this seemingly greater interest:

For many reasons, Kennedy’s assassination proved more confusing and less intelligible to the American people [than Lincoln’s], so much so that despite compelling evidence showing that Lee Harvey Oswald was the lone assassin, more than two-thirds of Americans still believe that President Kennedy was the victim of an organized conspiracy. (ix)

The American public time and again finds itself spellbound by the echoes of the Lincoln and Kennedy assassinations. Our continuing fascination with these macabre public events, events that played an important role in shaping our nation’s collective mythology, in addition to reflecting a great deal about a shared sense of grief and mourning, are repeatedly reflected in contemporary art and popular culture.

For instance, 2010 saw the release of Robert Redford’s *The Conspirator*, a film about the trial and execution of Mary Surratt, who, along with eight men who frequented the boarding

house she owned and operated, was charged with conspiracy in the murder of Abraham Lincoln. Surratt, who is treated sympathetically in Redford's film, was subsequently found guilty and became the first woman ever executed by the United States government. In some ways, the film speaks to our culture's need to scapegoat individuals who are likely innocent of any wrong-doing, and mirrors many current situations, perhaps most notably the United States questionable treatment of detainees thought to be "potential terrorists" at Guantanamo Bay following the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. It could be said that such actions are a reflection of national grieving which is rooted in anger and fear. This anger spurs an overwhelming desire for revenge, which is then achieved by attaching a face and name with a crime and punishing any potentially guilty party. Likewise, in an early episode of the critically acclaimed but short-lived 1994 television series *My So-Called Life* titled "Guns and Gossip," the lead character Angela Chase narrates over the opening scene in which her high school social studies class watches footage of President John F. Kennedy's historic 1963 speech in Berlin, saying:

Grownups like to tell you where they were when President Kennedy was shot, which they all know to the exact second. Which makes me almost jealous. Like I should have something important enough to know where I was when it happened. But I don't yet. And the fact that it was a better time then, and people knew what they were supposed to do and how to make the world better. Now nobody knows anything.

In many ways, this sentiment speaks to our culture's inability to commune except under extreme, tragic circumstances, and as the episode was written and filmed in 1994, it is worth noting that this sentiment was expressed before tragedies like the Oklahoma City bombing, the Columbine High School shootings and perhaps more notably, the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. In the same episode which centers, in part, on the discovery of a gun at Angela's high school, Angela's mother laments, "I'm not asking for a bubble. How about just a place they can

live and walk to school and become grownups without having to worry about guns and AIDS and serial murders? That didn't used to be exotic, that wasn't the province of the rich, we all had that. Why can't they have that?" ("Guns"). This sentiment seems to lament not only the failures of the American Dream in contemporary society, but also the tarnished innocence and continually deteriorating values of our nation. Perhaps ironically, the episode ends with a scene in which Angela and her friends are confronted with metal detectors that they must pass through to enter their high school, a scenario that has become all too familiar in our post-Columbine, post-9/11 world.

While Presidential assassination has been represented in many different ways on the American stage, from musicals to experimental plays, the primary questions that arise in an examination of these events revolve around our need as a culture to continue reenacting and witnessing these violent moments in our history, as well as exploring and juxtaposing our own personal histories in relation to our national histories. From popular historical reenactment to all facets of the performing arts, this act of "remembering" has played a prominent cultural role for centuries. Further, this "remembering," used both as a coping device and a device for maintaining a record of history is at the core of human behavior, and highlights what scholar Rebecca Schneider in her study *Performing Remains* points out is a uniquely American phenomenon, which speaks to "a particular US relationship to memory" (3). Often, our attempts to "remember" these violent historical moments through reenactment and juxtaposition speak to "a relationship that can be as much about forgetting (bypassing) as commemorating (monumentalizing)" (7). And of course, it stands to reason that any account of "history," especially as it pertains to events such as assassinations, is entirely remembered, and further, emotionally remembered. Consequently, these accounts are highly subjective. This reality throws the very notion of history itself into question: even "the history of History is in question" (Parks, *America* 4). According to Saddick, since "History is a malleable fiction, a performance

that can be manipulated,” it stands to reason that “dramatic replication of the past is fraught with difficulties” (qtd. in Pearson and Shanks 117).

### **Presidential Assassination on the American Stage**

There are several works in the American theatre that deal directly with the assassination of an American president. Probably the most well-known among them is the popular, award-winning musical *Assassins* (1991) by Stephen Sondheim and John Weidman which features the assassins (or would-be assassins) themselves, telling their stories. *Assassins*, which opened in 1991 “in the middle of the Persian Gulf War” (Bishop vii), tells the story of the assassinations of Lincoln, Garfield, McKinley, and Kennedy, as well as the attempted assassinations of Franklin D. Roosevelt, Richard Nixon, Gerald Ford, and Ronald Reagan. Though the premiere of the musical received primarily negative critical response and had a short run, it was met with “enthusiasm” by its audience and has continued to be produced around the world into the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Bishop vii). It highlights a dark vision of American freedom and the American Dream, telling the story of “an America whose extraordinary freedom has created a land where accidents of all kinds can happen. Any kid can grow up to be President; any kid can grow up to be his killer” (viii). Another example of a play focusing on presidential assassination, specifically the less immediate aftermath of assassination, is Robert Patrick’s *Kennedy’s Children* (1974), in which several characters who never interact with each other reminisce about their experiences in 1960s America. A more recent example is Eric Schlosser’s *Americans* (2003), a theatrical account of the assassination of President McKinley by anarchist Leon Czolgosz. Incidentally, though Schlosser himself is an American (and author of very popular books, including *Fast Food Nation*), his straightforward period play has never been produced in the United States. Other American plays that feature presidential assassinations or assassination themes include Terrence McNally’s one act play *Witness* (1969), James Prideaux’s *The Last of Mrs. Lincoln*

(1973), and Anna Deavere Smith's *House Arrest* (2004). While these works play an important role in the general study of the representation of presidential assassination on the American stage and the aftermath of said assassinations, I am more interested in an exploration of American plays that depict what I call a re-visioning of presidential assassinations. Therefore, I am looking specifically at plays in which characters re-enact, and in doing so, purposely re-vision these assassinations to suit their own personal needs in the context of the world of the play.

The plays included in this study are Wendy MacLeod's *The House of Yes*, first produced in 1990, and Suzan-Lori Parks's *The America Play* and *Topdog/Underdog*, first produced in 1994 and 2001, respectively. In each of these plays, we see actors playing characters who, within the context of the play, take on the role of another character involved in assassination as a reenactment. Further, unlike the other assassination plays mentioned, *The House of Yes*, *The America Play*, and *Topdog/Underdog* each feature members of an immediate family and highlights an assassination reenactment that is revised in some way, both initially and in repetition. In this way, the assassination is re-visioned as an assassination of the dominant narrative, be it cultural or personal. These three plays, to the best of my knowledge, are the only plays which re-vision presidential assassination in this way. In *The House of Yes*, the plot revolves around fraternal twins Jackie O. and Marty, who ritualize the assassination of John F. Kennedy as sexual foreplay. We learn over the course of the play that this is a game the two have been playing since they were in their very early teens. In both *The America Play* and *Topdog/Underdog*, the plot involves an African American man who earns a living as an Abraham Lincoln impersonator, specifically in a reenactment of Lincoln's assassination.

Repetition of the assassination reenactment plays a crucial role in each play. For instance, in Parks's *The America Play*, we see several different versions of The Foundling Father as Abraham Lincoln being assassinated. The initial reenactment is re-visioned in several ways, perhaps the most obvious being the fact that The Foundling Father is an African

American man taking on the role of the Great Emancipator in a carnival-esque act in which customers pay a penny to assassinate Lincoln. The assassination is further re-visioned through repetition, with each paying customer, or “assassin,” adapting the act to his or her own personal taste and liking. Likewise, The Foundling Father takes liberties with each reenactment, including but not limited to wearing a different beard depending on his daily whim. In this way, the assassination is not only re-visioned, but the accuracy of history itself is questioned. As Deborah Gies, author of *Suzan-Lori Parks* (a book of critical essays on Parks’s works), points out, by employing this device of both repeating and revising the event, Parks “keeps the spectator/reader ever vigilant, looking for something missed in the last repetition while scrutinizing the upcoming revision” (“Introduction” 15). But Parks does more than merely repeat and revise the assassination; by theatricalizing the various and conflicting accounts, she questions historical accuracy and truly re-visions the assassination. This is true in some respect for each of the plays in this study in part because “Reenactment as an activity ...nets us all (reenacted, reenactor, original, copy, event, re-event, bypassed and passer-by) in a knotty and porous relationship to time” (Schneider 9-10).

Essentially, this study explores why and how these characters imitate historical figures in a reenactment and re-visioning of public, national tragedies, and how these reenactments challenge or disrupt the dominant narrative. Within the context of each play, I will investigate how these national tragedies shaped/affected behavior and inevitably, how this influences the theatrical reenactment/re-visioning the characters take part in. I believe the reenactment/re-visionings in these plays speak directly to the desire to disrupt the dominant narrative. As Michel Foucault asserts in his 1970 lecture “A Discourse on Language,” which serves as the Appendix in his seminal work *The Archaeology of Knowledge*:

[I]n every society the production of discourse is at once controlled, selected, organised and redistributed according to a certain number of procedures, whose role is to avert its powers and its dangers, to cope with chance events, to evade

its ponderous, awesome materiality[...]In appearance, speech may well be of little account, but the prohibitions surrounding it soon reveal its links with desire and power. (216)

It could be said that the ultimate goal of assassination in any context is to gain control by altering the status of the person in power. Foucault called for mankind “to question our will to truth; to restore to discourse its character as an event; to abolish the sovereignty of the signifier” (229). Symbolically, assassination is an act that has the potential to do just that; it is a reaction against the dominant narrative, a call to arms against those in positions of power who control it. The assassin, therefore, attempts to change the dominant narrative by violently disrupting the power structure. In the three plays that comprise this study, I believe that the characters intentionally re-vision the assassinations in question in an attempt to change or even “assassinate” the dominant narrative, be it cultural or personal, in an effort to take control of their own histories. Further, their bold and subversive attempts to upend exclusive, historical narratives emphasizes a radical desire to reclaim and assert an authentic identity that is otherwise consistently suppressed through cultural, historical, and political tyranny.

It is perhaps important to note that Jean-Claude van Itallie’s *The Serpent*, developed in collaboration with Joseph Chaikin’s Open Theatre in 1968, serves as something of a precursor to the three plays explored in this study. In *The Serpent*, an experimental play that juxtaposes contemporary American life and values with Biblical stories from the Book of Genesis, a reenactment of the Kennedy assassination sets the stage for the fall from innocence of the literal first family, Adam and Eve. *The Serpent* also highlights the first murder with the story of Cain and Able, a story we see revisited in Parks’s *Topdog/Underdog*. However, while *The House of Yes*, *The America Play* and *Topdog/Underdog* each feature a small cast and deal with members of an immediate family, *The Serpent* features a larger ensemble cast, the members of which take on a variety of roles. Likewise, Robert Patrick’s aforementioned *Kennedy’s Children* also serves as something of a precursor to the plays that constitute the focus of this study.

Patrick's play certainly explores a loss of innocence and descent into disillusionment that we see reflected in MacLeod's and Parks's plays. However, in addition to the isolation of Patrick's characters, who never interact with one another and only speak in monologues, *Kennedy's Children* lacks a key focus of this study: an embodied reenactment of assassination by the characters in the play. In this respect, *The Serpent* is somewhat more relevant; the three plays surveyed in this study echo some of the themes and devices explored in *The Serpent*, including the absence of a father figure, a repetition of the assassination reenactment, and trauma resulting from betrayal. However, *The Serpent* does not include important key elements explored in the context of this study, most notably the ritualistic use of costuming, which proves a crucial element in *The House of Yes*, *The America Play* and *Topdog/Underdog*, as well as a clear commentary on the historical subjugation of African Americans, women and/or people of lower socioeconomic status. Additionally, the fracture in cultural identity and disintegration of the traditional family constellation is not explored in the same way in *The Serpent* as it is in the three plays that comprise this study. It is for these reasons that I have chosen to focus solely on *The House of Yes*, *The America Play* and *Topdog/Underdog* for the purposes of my research.

In the context of this study, it is important to note that American culture is in every respect constructed around the ideology of the American Dream, which "has long since moved beyond the relatively musty domain of print culture into the incandescent glow of the mass media, where it is enshrined as our national motto" (Cullen 5). Further, "The term seems like the most lofty as well as the most immediate component of an American identity, a birthright far more meaningful and compelling than terms like 'democracy,' 'Constitution,' or even 'United States'" (5). Arguably, the American Dream is so ingrained in our collective psyche that most Americans don't even realize how fully our national narrative is rooted in its ideology. This study will explore themes, patterns and critiques of these three plays in particular in a larger investigation of how each play speaks to the failure of the materialization of the American Dream for one or more characters in each play. This exploration directly deals with questions of



race and/or class as represented in each play. In addition to the theme of re-visioning Presidential assassination, there are several striking thematic similarities in these three plays that I am interested in exploring in the larger context of my research. I believe these themes to be directly tied to the need the characters feel to reenact these horrific national tragedies, a reality which is in turn directly connected to the compulsion to consciously or unconsciously challenge their own personal narrative as well as the dominant narrative that shaped said personal narrative. In each play, the assassination reenactment is symbolic of the character's need to assassinate a toxic narrative, therefore erasing it from his or her own personal history and narrative. Much in the way that the tenets of American Dream allow us (or even encourage us) to forget our violent history by focusing on the future, the characters in *The House of Yes*, *The America Play* and *Topdog/Underdog* seek to revise their own histories, to reclaim the past in order to imagine a better future. While in some respects, these characters do succeed in pointing out the fallacies in the dominant narrative through their re-visioning of presidential assassination, their efforts ultimately prove futile. In each play, the characters succeed primarily in reinforcing a cycle of violence, or a cycle of "forgetting," which allows the dominant narrative to retain its place of prominence and power.

### **The American Dream**

The American Dream is an ideology that has represented a variety of meanings to many different people over the course of American history, both in the United States and abroad. It serves simultaneously as a source of inspiration and harsh bitterness, an ethos that has the power to spawn great achievement all the while preserving a very clear, very distinct and divisive class structure in the United States (Caldwell 39). The term "American Dream," however, was not invented, as many would suspect, by the founders of our country, though the tenets of this cultural tool are certainly embedded in one of the most important national

documents in our history, the “Declaration of Independence.” Perhaps the most well-known and oft quoted portion of the “Declaration of Independence” states: “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” (Jefferson). While this bold sentiment certainly laid the foundation of what would become the American Dream, it is important to note that said foundation was flawed from the start, as it ignores and invalidates the rights of Native Americans, women, immigrants, all people of color, and the many men, women and children who would continue to be brought to the United States from Africa and elsewhere to serve as slaves in the homes and on the plantations of white land owners.

Manifest Destiny made it possible to propagate this narrow view of “inalienable rights” as granted by the “Creator,” as pioneers made their way West to seek their fortunes, wiping out entire tribes of native peoples, stripping the land of any and all valuable natural resources, and irreversibly altering delicate eco-systems, all in the name of progress. The subjugation of non-whites is a pervasive and eternal American legacy. In an Introduction printed in a United States Postal Brochure advertising commemorative stamps slated to “be issued to coincide with the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Columbus’s landing,” former President of the United States Gerald Ford states, “I invite you to celebrate with me both Columbus’s dream of a new world and your and my American Dream as well. The connection, I believe, is most appropriate. In a real sense, Columbus was one of the first dreamers of a new world” (reprinted in Hochschild xvi). As Howard Zinn points out in his seminal book *A People’s History of the United States of America*, what Ford and many others neglect to address is the fact that Christopher Columbus was an opportunistic colonizer who paved the way for Native American enslavement, enormous cultural loss, and the literal decimation of Native American tribes at the hands of European colonizers (1-5). In truth, Columbus set a precedent for almost five hundred years of genocide. His

explorer's log entry on the day of his arrival clearly expresses the attitude of Europeans regarding relations with Native Americans:

They willingly traded everything they owned... They were well built, with good bodies and handsome features... They do not bear arms, and do not know them, for I showed them a sword, they took it by the edge and cut themselves out of ignorance. They have no iron. Their spears are made of cane... They would make fine servants... With fifty men we could subjugate them all and make them do whatever we want. (qtd. in Zinn 1)

By 1650, less than two hundred years after Columbus's arrival, there were no original or descendent native people remaining of the estimated 250,000 living on the Caribbean islands where Columbus originally landed in 1492 (5). This vicious attitude was not limited to the Spanish conquest of Latin America. A few hundred years later England began its colonization of America and continued the mass genocide that was necessary for European intruders to acquire what they considered to be the appropriate amount of living space for their sophisticated, civilized lifestyle. For instance, one British leader even went so far as to give "the attacking Indian chiefs, with whom he was negotiating, blankets from the smallpox hospital," which "was a pioneering effort at what is now called biological warfare" (87). The smallpox epidemic, which was spread in this way, proved devastating to the Native Americans. However, during the revolutionary war almost every Native American tribe fought on the side of the British, who had set a limit to colonial expansion (87). The Americans, on the other hand, had plans for expanding colonization to the South and West, across the Great Plains. The paradigm of Manifest Destiny was a commonly held ideal among most Americans who felt that it was their God given right, even duty, to expand the borders of the young American nation across the entire continent, from sea to shining sea, as it were. This history, however, is a history that Americans allow themselves - or worse, consciously choose - to forget, because the ideology of the American Dream requires that we look only to the bright possibilities of the future. History,

especially history that would paint any symbol of America (as Columbus has become) in a negative light is easy to forget because what is to come is the only thing that matters. The tenets at the heart of the American Dream justify this need to forget. This notion applies to both our personal and collective American histories. As Hochschild points out, “In effect, Americans believe that they can create a personal mini-state of nature that will allow them to slough off the past and invent a better future” (19).

While the Founding Fathers of our country certainly laid out the principles of what would eventually be labeled the American Dream, the term was not coined until 1931, by writer John Truslow Adams. Just two short years after the devastating stock market crash of 1929 and in the midst of the Great Depression, Adams, in his book *The Epic of America*, asserted that the American Dream is “that dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for every man, *with opportunity for each according to his ability or achievement*” (404, emphasis mine). Directly tied to the ideology of the American Dream is the vision of bounty inherently tied to the idea of America: land, freedom, and opportunity is there for the taking for those who have the drive and/or ability to attain it. Adams went on to say of the American Dream:

It is a difficult dream for the European upper classes to interpret adequately, and too many of us ourselves have grown weary and mistrustful of it. It is not a dream of motor cars and high wages merely, but *a dream of social order* in which each man and each woman shall be able to attain to the fullest stature of which they are *innately capable*, and be recognized by others for what they are, regardless of the fortuitous circumstances of birth or position. (404, emphasis mine)

We see here a clear assertion that the American Dream is up for grabs, but only by those rugged individuals who are “innately capable.” It is this important distinction that lays the groundwork for 20<sup>th</sup> Century class divisions and the further subjugation of Americans who aren’t members of the dominant culture, meaning virtually anyone who is not white, male, able-bodied, and heterosexual. Accordingly, “Those who do not fit the model disappear from the collective

self-portrait” (Hochschild 26). This distinction is alive and well in the minds and hearts of contemporary Americans, and is perpetuated by politicians who offer a promise of a better tomorrow for those who are willing and able to work for it (Tyson, *Psychological* 6). In an October 2011 interview with the *Wall Street Journal*, 2012 Presidential hopeful Herman Cain had some terse words for the multitudes of people involved in and supporting the historic 2011 Occupy Wall Street protests, saying, “Don’t blame Wall Street! Don’t blame the big banks! If you don’t have a job and you’re not rich, blame yourself!” Cain, a Republican candidate, former CEO of Godfather’s Pizza and an African American, notes on his campaign website that he:

[G]rew up in Atlanta, Georgia with loving parents and little else. His father worked three jobs—as a janitor, a barber and a chauffeur—and his mother was a domestic worker. Even though these jobs required hard work and little glamour, his parents knew this life was better than the dirt farms upon which they grew up. They also knew that this hard work was the key to achieving their American Dreams.

Herman’s parents had two dreams. First, they wanted to own their own house. Secondly, they wanted both of their children to graduate from college. During the segregation era in the Deep South, these aspirations might have seemed lofty, but they knew that if they kept their faith in God, faith in themselves and faith in the greatest country on the Earth, they could achieve. (Cain “Meet Herman”)

What Cain doesn’t address is the fact that his parents’ efforts to provide a better life for themselves and their children likely left them little time to actually enjoy said life, as is the case for many immigrants and minorities who toil endlessly to avoid poverty in a country where they don’t fall into the category of “innately capable” because of the color of their skin. Cain ascribes the success of his parents as well as his own success to “hard work,” and his website is conspicuously devoid of any accounts of struggle he or his parents may have faced due to racial discrimination. Cain’s remarks on both his campaign website and with regard to the Wall Street

protests further illustrate the popularly held belief that the American Dream is available to anyone and everyone who has the gumption to attain it, and that any failure to achieve the American Dream is rooted in laziness or a lack of natural ability. This belief is firmly planted in the psyche of each and every American: the American Dream remains “the most pervasive ideological site upon which the American psyche has projected itself” (Tyson, *Psychological* 4-5). Further, it stands to reason that “In the psychologic, if one may claim responsibility for success, one must accept responsibility for failure” (Hochschild 30).

The American Dream boils down to achieving “success” through whatever means possible. “One’s ‘stature’ in America is usually judged as a function of one’s socioeconomic status,” and therefore, the simple fact remains that in order to attain the American Dream, one must be willing and able to participate in the American capitalist economy and lifestyle (Tyson, *Psychological* 5). This reality is a difficult, if not impossible, dream for every American because capitalism requires the perpetuation of a very clear class structure, which out of necessity keeps some Americans at the bottom of the totem pole while others enjoy the benefits of privilege and, for a select few, the benefits of hard work (Cohen 178). The reality is that “Members of a capitalist society must believe, among other things, that private enterprise, individual ownership of property, and competition for wages and markets is right or natural or in their best interest” (Tyson, *Psychological* 1). Hochschild notes that the American Dream is “not merely the right to get rich, but rather the promise that all Americans have a reasonable chance to achieve success as they define it – material or otherwise – through their own efforts, and to attain virtue and fulfillment through success” (xi). In this way, “America has always been a land of dreams, the ‘land of promise’” (Adams 214). Further, as Wilber W. Caldwell asserts in *Cynicism and the Evolution of the American Dream*, the American Dream “began with an optimistic individualism that exuded both an idealistic hunger for liberty and a materialistic thirst for property” (ix). However, in an age in which many Americans define themselves by what they own, the American Dream has morphed into a glorification of the worst factors of the capitalist lifestyle:

buy, own, bigger, better, and all at the expense of those who work three jobs to try to make a better life for themselves and their families. As Caldwell points out:

The story of the ongoing struggle between the idealistic side and the materialistic side of the American Dream chronicles the history of our nation...With the watchdogs of the American Dream of liberty nipping at its heels, the American Dream of property has stumbled through a series of increasingly materialistic and often disappointing landscapes, until today, for many, it has finally come to manifest little more than a faint, shallow, selfish, unfocused longing for celebrity and easy money. (ix)

Additionally, this success is more often competitive rather than relative and is therefore attained only at the expense and failure of another (Hochschild 17). In this respect, “the success of the American dream – the acquisition of a wealthy lifestyle for a few – rests on the misery of the many” (Tyson, *Critical* 58). Of course, most “Americans prefer the self-image of universal achievement to that of a few stalwarts triumphing over weaker contenders” (Hochschild 25). But the fact remains that the American Dream has become “a dream of the commodity, and the implied premise is that one’s spiritual worth and well-being are directly proportional to the value of the commodities one owns” (Tyson, *Psychological* 5).

In his April 16, 1963 “Letter from a Birmingham Jail,” penned just a few months before the assassination of President John F. Kennedy, Civil Rights leader Martin Luther King, Jr. pointed out that African Americans had “waited for more than 340 years for our constitutional and God given rights.” Further, he illustrated an optimistic view of the future for people of color in the United states, asserting “We will win our freedom because the sacred heritage of our nation and the eternal will of God are embodied in our echoing demands,” noting further that those participating in the movement for Civil Rights “were in reality standing up for what is best in the American dream and for the most sacred values in our Judeo-Christian heritage, thereby bringing our nation back to those great wells of democracy which were dug deep by the

founding fathers in their formulation of the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence" (King, Jr.). While the Civil Rights movement did a great deal to further equality for all people in the United States, the fact remains that "too often whites and blacks see a barrier if not an enemy when they look at each other," the former struggling to maintain unearned privilege based solely on the color of their skin, and the latter struggling to prove their capabilities (Hochschild xi). Because race and class are inextricably intertwined in American culture, a much larger portion of wealthy Americans are white, with people of color struggling to climb the ladder of economic success (Wise, *Between* 37). Further, "racism is in the financial interest of upper-class whites who exploit black laborers by paying them less than their white counterparts, and it's in the psychological interest of working-class whites whose own experience of being underpaid and exploited by wealthy whites makes them need to feel superior to someone else" (Tyson, *Critical* 371). Jonathan Bean echoes this sentiment in his Introduction to *Race and Liberty in America* (2009), stating "Left-wing liberals, Marxists and black radicals have long held that capitalism is inherently racist" (6). He further points out that "Many labor historians argue that capitalist employers used racism to 'divide and conquer' the working class, thus preventing development of an interracial labor movement" (6). Further, Hochschild notes:

Millions of immigrants and internal migrants have moved to America, and around within it, to fulfill their version of the American dream. By objective measures and their own accounts, many have achieved success. Probably just as many have been defeated and disillusioned. Millions of other immigrants – predominately but not exclusively from Africa – were moved to America despite their preferences and have been forced to come to terms with a dream that was not originally theirs. (15)

Therefore, it seems that the American Dream serves as much more than an ideology: as Marxist theorists assert, it continues to exist as a powerful tool used by those at the top of the food chain to keep members of the working class in their place. According to the basic tenets of



Marxist theory, “getting and keeping economic power is the motive behind all social and political activities,” including activities which continue to benefit and serve those in power, and often at the expense of those who aren’t (Tyson, *Critical* 53). In this respect, it could be argued that the American Dream is the promise of a better life made over and over again to keep the hounds at bay and the pockets of the wealthy very well lined.

The divisive nature of socioeconomic imbalances remains one of the hallmarks of Marxist thought, which posits that:

[T]he real battle lines are drawn...between the “haves” and the “have-nots,” between the *bourgeoisie* – those who control the world’s natural, economic, and human resources – and the *proletariat*, the majority of the global population who live in substandard conditions and who have always performed the manual labor – the mining, the factory work, the ditch digging, the railroad building – that fills the coffers of the rich. (Tyson, *Critical* 54)

As Tyson points out, “the role of ideology in maintaining those in power” is tantamount to the tenets of Marxist thought (*Critical* 59). In this respect, it could be argued that the American Dream is an ideology that continues to be manipulated to keep these schismatic socioeconomic structures in place, ensuring the continued output of the laborer, which contributes to the continued success of the bourgeoisie. Tyson remarks, “In large part, the middle class is blinded by their belief in the *American Dream*, which tells them that financial success is simply the product of initiative and hard work. Therefore, if some people are poor, it is because they are shiftless and lazy” (*Critical* 57). The fact remains that “Today the distribution of hope in America is far from equitable, and the appetites of the material side of the American Dream are far more ravenous than anyone could have predicted” (Caldwell 40).

Caldwell asserts that “The American Dream was built on the rough foundation of American individualism, a revolutionary substance unlike anything the world had seen before” (37). At the core of the American Dream is the vision of the rugged individual, who armed with

his or her “innate abilities,” strikes out and makes something of him or herself. As defined in *Webster’s Third New International Dictionary of the English Language Unabridged*, “rugged individualism” is “the practice or advocacy of individualism in social and economic relations emphasizing personal liberty and independence, self-reliance, resourcefulness, self-direction of the individual, and free competition in enterprise” (Gove 1986). We clearly see in this definition that a philosophy of rugged individualism supports not only the social and cultural values inherent in the American Dream, but also the United States’ adopted economic system of capitalism, a system which allows for the success of some only through the failure of others.

The rugged individual has not only the will and determination to succeed, but also the willingness to face hardship head-on to achieve his or her version of the American Dream. The rugged individual is the “self-made man” (or woman), and is embodied in American culture in many ways (Caldwell 41). He or she is the pioneer, striking out to settle the vast and bountiful West, protected and guided by Manifest Destiny, or embraces the belief that he or she has the God-given right to take what he or she can and wants. He or she is the cowboy, the lawman and the outlaw, the railroad tycoon, the mogul, the 49er, the oilman, the CEO. The rugged individuals’ “every man for himself” style is mimicked by the small business owner and is reflected in an ever-splintering culture, which places an emphasis on the success of the individual rather than the success and strength of the community. The philosophy of “rugged individualism” in the United States propagates the needs of the individual over those of the community. This cultural individuation in America is directly tied to the ideology of the American Dream and greatly contrasts most other world cultures:

The thrust for individualism and the emphasis on the individual is uniquely American...Individuals in non-Western cultures develop with a different set of expectations for the self in relation to the group or society. Maturity is defined as the ability to sublimate individual desires and impulses for the ultimate good of the group. (Coy and Kovacs-Long 141)

Instead of being asked to withhold and purify desires, Americans are encouraged to chase them in pursuit of the American Dream, or namely, material and economic prosperity that is purportedly equally available to anyone with the aforementioned “innate capabilities.” Maturity in this context is judged by how well an individual is able to achieve success in meeting his or her own personal needs and desires first and foremost. Further, As Hochschild points out:

Achievers mark their success by moving away from the tenement, ghetto, or holler of their impoverished and impotent youth, thus speeding the breakup of their ethnic community. This is a bittersweet phenomenon. The freedom to move up and out is desirable, or at least desired. But certainly those left behind, probably those who leave, and arguably the nation as a whole lose when groups of people with close cultural and personal ties break those ties in pursuit of or after attaining “[...]success.” The line between autonomy and atomism is hard to draw. (35)

This rugged individualism typically takes precedence over community and family, making for a fractured collective and a feeling of rootlessness, often relabeled and sold as “freedom.” It allows one to “focus on people’s behaviors rather than on economic processes, environmental constraints, or political structures as the causal explanation for social orderings” (Hochschild 36). However, it remains that each person is born into a unique set of socio-economic circumstances which directly affects the level at which her or she must engage in order to attain the American Dream. As Marxist theorists would argue, “the real forces that create human experience” are “the economic systems that that structure human societies” (Tyson, *Critical* 53). Further, each person is born with a unique set of hereditary circumstance including but not limited to race, mental and physical capabilities, psychological makeup, and gender, which also directly affects the pursuit of the American Dream.

Thus, it would seem that the American Dream is an ideology predicated on deception.

Further:

the American dream blinds us to the enormities of its own failure, past and present: the genocide of Native Americans, the enslavement of Africans, the virtual enslavement of indentured servants, the abuses suffered by immigrant populations, the widening economic gulf between America's rich and poor, the growing ranks of the homeless and hungry, the enduring socioeconomic barriers against women and people of color. (Tyson, *Critical* 58)

The American Dream allows for individual success or failure based solely on "innate ability" and hard work and functions as a psychological tool that continues to allow the dominant culture to control the narrative and wield ultimate control. The American Dream simultaneously serves as a beacon to the lower and middle classes, who find it increasingly difficult if not impossible to attain, but whose work makes the American economic system feasible. The American Dream, whether Americans are aware of it or not, defines the values of our nation and is an ideology in which we are all active, if unwitting participants. It is at the very core of who we are collectively and individually, despite the bitter disillusionment it often sparks (Caldwell ix-x). As Tyson points out:

Ideology, however, isn't present only when we perceive it. In fact, the less we are aware of it the freer it is to operate. This is why members of both major political parties in this country can get elected to office by promising us a return to something that never existed: the American dream in its pristine form. Americans who believe that the American dream has *become* corrupt perhaps assume that the dream's corruption is as recent as their awareness of it. (*Psychological* 6 emphasis original)

As Americans, we all participate in "a dominant ideology in which the American dream is a central component" (Hochschild xviii). Further, "Most Americans celebrate it unthinkingly, along with apple pie and motherhood" (25). However, the fact remains that "no one promises that

dreams will be fulfilled, but the distinction between the right to dream and the right to succeed is psychologically hard to maintain and politically always blurred” (27).

Ultimately, “What makes the American Dream so powerful is the fact that it is always greater than the sum of its parts” (Caldwell 36). This reality creates a great deal of conflict with regard to pursuit of the American Dream and is reflected over and over again in the literature of our nation. The American Dream plays a prominent role in the arts and literature of the United States of America, and in fact some scholars would argue that every great work of American literature vividly features some aspect of the American Dream (Tyson, *Psychological* 6). The pursuit of the American Dream is something we see consistently represented in the works of America’s greatest modern and contemporary writers, from the novels and short stories of F. Scott Fitzgerald, William Faulkner, Flannery O’Connor, Zora Neale Hurston and David Foster Wallace, to the stage plays of Eugene O’Neill, Tennessee Williams, Arthur Miller, Clifford Odets, Lillian Hellman, Edward Albee, Sam Shepherd, and Paula Vogel, to name just a few. Some works glorify the American Dream; others condemn it; and many present a conflicted chronicle of the failures and successes of characters affected by the pursuit of the American Dream. The fact remains that “in America today success is rarely a measure of achievement; it is rather more often a measure of material wealth” (Caldwell 43). Though in many ways, the three plays examined in this study are wildly different texts, each condemns what the American Dream has become, illustrating the ways in which the slow devastation of an individual or family is simultaneously witnessed and ignored by the dominant culture and subsequently erased from our history to keep the vision of the American Dream alive.

### **The Plays**

The first chapter will examine Wendy MacLeod’s *The House of Yes*. Of particular interest in this play is the dynamic use of both comedy and tragedy. MacLeod’s witty and

depraved Pascal family is deeply traumatized for reasons that are not altogether immediately clear, and for fraternal twins Jackie O. and Marty, this trauma manifests itself in a re-visioning of the Kennedy assassination, followed by an incestuous coupling. This re-visioning is truly both horrific and darkly funny. The details of the re-visioning itself, however, force us to examine what tragedy the twins are reenacting: is it the tragedy of the Kennedy assassination, or is it a tragedy that lies hidden, its remains buried in the backyard as well as the memories of a broken family, the members of which have never been told “no”? While the play is most certainly a dark comedy, it treads a fascinating line between the disturbing and hilarious, the profound and the absurd. The Pascals prove to be an immensely dysfunctional family whose world is permeated with secrets and mind games, and the play itself does an excellent job of exploring their very American, pointedly entitled existence in a way that is both critical and sympathetic. Through its exploration of American celebrity and tragedy on simultaneously intimate and national scales, *The House of Yes* successfully represents a version of an American family that is both completely outrageous and yet eerily relative.

Chapter Two will include a close analysis of Suzan-Lori Parks’s *The America Play*, easily the least traditional of the plays that constitute the investigation of assassination re-visioning. Of particular importance in an examination of this play are some of Parks’s own essays included as supplemental materials in the Theatre Communications Group’s edition of *The America Play and Other Works*. While this play does contain some moments of humor, perhaps because of its structure, in some respects it feels like the most serious of the three plays. Perhaps ironically, it also feels like the most optimistic. According to Havis, “If this sardonic play had been written at the end of the 1960s, its dramatic statement might have struck the audience as the literal mourning for the Kennedys and Martin Luther King. Today, however, its puns and distillations maintain a healthy distance from any one event” (xvi). Historical accuracy plays a very important role in this play, especially as it pertains to the reenactment of the assassination itself, an observation which will beg a comparison with the assassination we see in *The House of Yes*.

Within the context of *The America Play*, the re-visioning of assassination is less tied to immediate personal trauma and points more to a fundamental question of belonging and a search for identity. Likewise, the play speaks to the failures of the American Dream when it comes to prioritizing the needs of the individual over those of the greater community, and represents a splintered family destroyed by the pursuit of singular success.

Chapter Three will include a thorough analysis of Suzan-Lori Parks's Pulitzer Prize-winning play *Topdog/Underdog*. Like *The House of Yes*, this play is striking in its display of both hilarious and heartbreaking moments; it is a tragicomedy in every sense of the word. This is also the play with the fewest characters – it has only two as opposed to five in *The House of Yes* and three in *The America Play* (not counting the “customers”). What this reality means in some respects is that the relationships and characters are more tensely and tightly drawn. The play, which features two brothers named Lincoln and Booth, clearly juxtaposes and re-visions not only Presidential assassination but also the first murder: the murder of Abel by his brother Cain, as told in the book of Genesis in the Bible. Like the examination of the other plays, the most important inquiry is directly tied to the characters' need to reenact a tragic moment from our nation's history and to revise it in such a way that it allows them to alter history in some respect, or to change the dominant narrative. In this play, however, we see that this desire to change history fails, as history is doomed to repeat itself when a society chooses to or is unable to learn anything from the original event.

Each of these plays makes startlingly acute statements with regard to the personal investment the American public consistently takes in political celebrity and any tragedy surrounding political figures. Each play speaks not only to our need to remember these events, but to remember them within the context of our own personal narratives. Further, the plays reveal a desire to change the dominant narrative by attempting to control said narrative and thus history by re-visioning and personalizing events such as Presidential assassination. As such,

several key themes appear across two or more of the plays in this study; these themes will be addressed in the chapters for each play.

### Common Themes

One of the most important and central themes seen in all four plays is that of the absent father figure. “While fatherhood has been traditionally associated with patriarchal authority, one should thus begin to acknowledge the plurality as well as the irreducible complexity of fathers in American culture and literature,” especially the absence therein (Armengol-Carrera 224). In *The House of Yes*, the fate of the patriarch, Mr. Pascal, is unclear. We are told that Mr. Pascal abandoned the family on the day that Kennedy was shot, some twenty years ago, but it is also suggested that the reality is much more gruesome: that in his attempt to leave, he was gunned down by his wife and most likely with the help of his young children, buried in the backyard. Likewise, in *The America Play*, the Foundling Father has left his wife and young son to seek success “out West.” We are told by his wife Lucy that he left “In the middle of dinnertime. The Son was eating his peas” (Parks, *America* 182). The Foundling Father (whose name itself suggests a cycle of abandonment) leaves his family to seek fame and fortune by digging a replica of The Great Hole of History. It is interesting to note, especially in relation to the Foundling Father, that “The American literary hero has often been portrayed as a self-willed orphan, an individualistic character who breaks with his origins and begins a new life by himself, alone and unencumbered by the responsibilities of family life” (Armengol-Carrera 211). In some respects, this trait also holds true for brothers Lincoln and Booth in *Topdog/Underdog* whose parents abandoned them, leaving them to fend for themselves at a young age. In Act II of *The America Play*, the Foundling Father’s family heads “out West” to dig for his bones. The most striking contrast in respect to *The House of Yes* and *Topdog/Underdog* is that the absent father in *The America Play* is actually present within the context of the play; he is, therefore, the only



“absent” father we literally see onstage across all three plays. We see quite a lot of him, actually – the entire first act of the play is the Foundling Father’s monologue.

*Topdog/Underdog* is more like *The House of Yes* as regards the echo of an absent father. We learn that the father of the two central characters, Lincoln and Booth, left them long ago. We also learn that it was he who gifted them with their ironic and iconic names, names that immediately indicate to us what the end of the play will be. It could be argued that by giving his sons the names Lincoln and Booth, he doomed them to the ends they eventually meet, therefore making this gift a curse and both reinventing and re-inflicting the national implications and trauma of the original assassination. This situation differs slightly from *The House of Yes*, in which we learn that Jackie-O is so called because she dressed up as Jackie Kennedy for a party she and her brother attended when they were teenagers, and the name stuck. We never learn her given name: she is always referred to as Jackie or Jackie-O. The anachronistic nature of her name, however, reveals the ways in which MacLeod, like Parks, stretches the boundaries of time and history.

Within each of the three plays, the role of the absent father is juxtaposed and subsequently filled with that of the image of national patriarch: the President of the United States. This patriarchal figure is in some ways an embodiment of the ideals of The American Dream. It is important to note that in this respect, the absent father figure “seems to be intimately connected with the specificities of American cultural history” (Armengol-Carrera 215). For instance, “During the American Revolution in the eighteenth century, the rebels, tired of being treated like unruly children with few of the rights of other Englishmen, achieved a victory which constituted, metaphorically speaking, a rejection of the Fatherland, in general, and of the father-figure of King George III, in particular” (215). In this respect, the American Revolution could be viewed “as a symbolic battle between Father-England and his unruly American sons” (215-16). Further,

Freedom for these sons implied that, as individuals and as a nation, they could build a new life independent of the culture, the traditions, the class system and the institutions of England. In short, from boyhood and dependence they could grow up to be independent and autonomous men. The Declaration of Independence was seen by the American colonists of the day as a revolt of the Sons of Liberty against Father England. In the terms of the dominant metaphor of the day, the Declaration...freed the sons from the despotic authority of the English father. (216)

However, this vision of freedom was soon tainted as “Conflict, envy, corruption, and the thirst for privilege and power” quickly prevailed, and “The dissolution of paternal authority simply freed the brothers to fight among themselves” (217). Land disputes “set friend against friend, brother against brother” and “The leading American families...had greater social standing than their aristocratic counterparts in Europe” (217). As a result, “The founding fathers thus changed from a discredited republican virtue to a strengthened paternal rule. In the symbolism of the founding fathers, patriarchal authority returned” (217). Elected officials, in particular the President of the United States, “as representatives of the people and the laws of the nation, became the most visible symbols and embodiments of the paternal authority exercised by the American constitution over their ‘sons’” (218). Americans rely on this patriarchal embodiment to maintain a “fantasy of social and national stability,” deeming it “socially necessary,” despite its drawbacks (218). The fact that each of the plays examined in this study, represents the father figure as an *assassinated* President, and even more so, an assassinated *martyred* President, has implications that will be further investigated in the scope of the research. Both Lincoln and Kennedy, despite their imperfections, live in the minds of many Americans as great men who were murdered because of their ideals and beliefs. Both men are typically remembered for the good they did and lamented for the further good they could have done were their lives not cut short by an assassin’s bullet. In each of these plays, the re-visioning of the assassination of the

President of the United States speaks to a need to disrupt the dominant narrative with a violent act. As the American Dream plays a prominent role in the dominant narrative, it can therefore be argued that in some respects, the re-visioning of the assassination in each of the plays is in itself an attempt at the assassination of the narrative power of the American Dream as constructed and espoused by the dominant culture.

Likewise, the repetition and re-visioning of the assassination reenactments plays a key role in each of the plays. In *The America Play* we see the reenactment of the Lincoln assassination no less than seven times, and we hear the echo of the reenactment close to a dozen times. In each instance of the reenactment, some element is revised, based both on historical accounts of the actual assassination as well as on conjecture. In the case of *The House of Yes* and *Topdog/Underdog*, the reenactment is ultimately re-visioned as the literal slaying of one sibling by another. In *The House of Yes*, a crazed Jackie's sexual and emotional jealousy prompts her to fatally shoot her brother when he tentatively agrees to play the game "one more time," while in *Topdog/Underdog* a jealous, defeated and humiliated Booth angrily lashes out at his brother Lincoln by gunning him down in their shabby one-room apartment.

Another striking similarity that we see in a preliminary examination of the plays is that of a distinction in race, gender and/or class, a distinction that clearly labels one or more characters in each play as "other." As previously outlined, the vision of the American Dream is mediated by these factors. In *The House of Yes*, Lesly's blue collar background separates her from the members of the Pascal family in a way that she will never be able to overcome. In both *The America Play* and *Topdog/Underdog*, the class distinction is clearly tied to race. The implications of an African American man earning a living as an Abraham Lincoln impersonator will be fully explored from a postcolonial perspective as well as a materialist feminist perspective. This scenario, which appears in both of Parks's plays, is an interesting commentary on both race and capitalism, factors which are inevitably tied to class distinction. It also provides an interesting insight into violence on both national and personal levels. According to Philip C.

Kolin, editor of a book of essays on Parks's work, "Suzan-Lori Parks has transformed the American theatre with her mythic plays about black history and identity in contemporary America" (1). An analysis of Parks's plays will explore these ideas as a way to link the action of the plays to larger social concepts related to race and class, as well as gender. This includes an exploration of the ways in which access to opportunities plays a role in the lives of these characters and the ways in which the repetition of violence reflects a cultural struggle and a perpetuation of a cycle of violence.

Another theme we see in each of the plays is that of the use of specific costuming in the assassination reenactments. The characters in *The House of Yes*, *The America Play* and *Topdog/Underdog* are for the most part insistent on the specificity of the costumes they wear, if not for their own need for historical accuracy, then for that of their patrons, as in the case of *The America Play*. For the characters, this use of costume helps "ritualize" the reenactment, and therefore makes it seem more authentic and valid. This use of costume will be discussed primarily in the context of the ritualization of the assassination reenactments and the distinct need for historical accuracy to as closely as possible replicate the original event. We see clearly in each play that the characters themselves re-vision the assassinations in order to manipulate the outcome to meet their own needs, but the historically accurate costumes play a crucial role in the mimetic representation they are enacting. Peggy Phelan's states in her book *Unmarked*:

Representation follows two laws: it always conveys more than it intends; and it is never totalizing. The "excess" meaning conveyed by representation creates a supplement that makes multiple and resistant readings possible. Despite this excess, representation produces ruptures and gaps; it fails to reproduce the real exactly. (2)

The slight but fundamentally significant deviations with regard to historical accuracy in costuming within the context of these plays ultimately serve the characters and shape the re-visioning of Presidential assassination. The "ruptures and gaps" created in the plays when the

characters “fail to reproduce the real exactly” serve to point out the fallacies of history and question the validity of the dominant narrative (2). The use of historically accurate costuming, and in particular the small deviations from complete and total accuracy, is directly tied to each character’s own need to usurp the dominant narrative in the play by injecting pieces of his or her own personal narratives. The characters in each play struggle to disrupt the dominant narrative in part because they refuse or are unable to completely accurately reproduce the original event. In some respects, their efforts to reshape history, both personal and public, by re-visioning national tragedies are ultimately futile, as they succeed primarily in repeating a violent moment in our national history that parallels a piece of their own, personal histories.

Another critical theme that directly emerges in both *The House of Yes* and *The America Play* is that of literal digging. In *The House of Yes* the lines between fact and fiction are blurred as they relate to the fate of Mr. Pascal. In a moment that could be deemed a psychotic break, Jackie asserts that her father was shot to death by Mrs. Pascal and lies buried in a hole in the backyard. Marty, however, immediately attempts to refute this story and assure Lesly that Jackie is mistaken, that in reality, the day their father left coincided with the day Kennedy was shot as well as the process of the installation of a new air conditioner for the Pascal home. “[T]here was a hole in the ground, but not for him, for the air conditioner,” he explains, “she’s confused, you’re confused, Jackie” (MacLeod, *House* 57). The fact remains, however, that Jackie’s story is completely plausible, and Marty’s responses, which could be argued are frantic and insistent, are in reality an attempt to keep a long-held family secret intact. This theme of holes and digging plays a more outwardly prominent role in *The America Play*, as the entirety of the play itself is set in “an exact replica” of what Parks calls The Great Hole of History: “He digged the hole and the whole held him” (*America* 158-9). The fact that the hole (which The Foundling Father digs) is merely a “replica of the Great Hole of History” speaks volumes about the African American experience. In Act II, The Foundling Father’s son Brazil has come with his mother Lucy to the replica to dig for the remains of his father. Brazil is a good digger; we learn

this trait runs in the family. “Dig on, Brazil,” Lucy says. “Cant stop diggin till you dig up something. Your Daddy was uh Digger” (174). In fact, in Act I The Foundling Father states that in his lifetime, he dug “over 7 hundred and 23 graves” (169). Lucy and Brazil have come to search for the remains of The Foundling Father in part because Lucy feels he needs a “proper burial” (175). This ties in to another similarity between *The House of Yes* and *The America Play*: if we believe Jackie’s version of the story, the father figure in both plays were not given what Western culture deems a proper burial; their spirits were never officially laid to rest, and therefore, they haunt their families just as the violent moments these characters reenact haunt the collective memories of all Americans. The characters in *Topdog/Underdog* arguably “dig” as well, though their efforts are less literal and serve to highlight the ways in which we each mine for our own histories in order to assert a tangible identity.

Another theme that appears in each of the plays includes one or more instances of life-changing betrayal or deception, including but not limited to abandonment. In some respects, each play parallels these betrayals with presidential assassinations, highlighting situations in which the American public was betrayed by one of their own. In both *The House of Yes* and *Topdog/Underdog*, infidelity as betrayal plays an important role. In the *House of Yes*, this betrayal is seen within the context of the action: Marty betrays Lesly by engaging in sexual intercourse with Jackie-O, and Lesly betrays Marty by sleeping with his brother. Additionally, Anthony’s seduction of his brother’s fiancé is also a significant betrayal. We see this betrayal paralleled in *Topdog/Underdog*, learning over the course of the play that Booth slept with his older brother’s wife. But in both *The House of Yes* and *Topdog/Underdog*, another significant betrayal in the form of historical infidelity on the part of the mother creates a circumstance that may appear unimportant at first glance, but in reality plays a crucial role in character analysis in both plays. Questions of parentage and legitimacy – the cornerstone of the patriarchy - are discussed in both plays, and it is difficult to ascertain from a surface reading of the text how these characters truly feel about these doubts. For some characters, the assuredness of who

their mothers are is solid, but the question of who fathered them remains uncertain. Likewise, this sort of infidelity is something that the characters themselves clearly replicate in their own lives and relationships, and as such, in some ways constitutes learned, repeated behavior.

### **Methodology**

An exploration of the three plays will include an examination of the dramatic objective and the impact of the assassination reenactments. Within this exploration, the race, gender and economic status of the individuals involved in or affected by the reenactment will play a key role. Additionally, the ways in which these factors relate to and/or inform the re-visioning of each assassination will be addressed. This study includes an exploration of the characters' relationship to the actual historical events they are reenacting, as well as any personal trauma, directly or indirectly felt, that may be associated with these assassinations. In some cases, this personal trauma is inherited, an echo handed down from one generation to the next. This personal trauma as it parallels national tragedy will also be examined in relation to the pursuit of the American Dream, as well as the ways in which these plays reflect larger socio-cultural feelings. An exploration of our cultural relationship with the American Dream, which is very much an ideology that fuels the dominant narrative as it pertains to success and failure, will provide a basis for examining the political and personal arena of the re-visioning of Presidential assassination on the American stage. This includes an investigation of the ways in which our social perceptions of personal experience related to national tragedies are processed psychologically, as well as how they are enacted both publicly and privately. As Tyson notes, "the American dream is, inherently, a commodified dream, and it promotes commodification as a psychological stance" (*Psychological* 6). The manifestation of this synthesis is different in each play, but there are common denominators that clearly emerge in all three.

Close attention will be paid to race, class, and gender in the analysis of each play, where applicable. Using the basic tenets of materialist feminism and Marxist theory, an analysis of each play will address the ways in which traditional gender roles are presented and questioned in each play, as well as the ways in which socio-economic oppression plays a role in the lives of these characters. Further, with regard to *The America Play* and *Topdog/Underdog*, the principles of postcolonial theory will be applied in an exploration of the ways in which centuries of racial oppression and discrimination affect the characters. Often these factors are interconnected. It is important to note that most theorists firmly believe that both gender and race are nothing more than social constructs that aid in the oppression of women and people of color (Tyson, *Critical* 336, 369). For instance, as Tyson points out, "Given that so many Americans belong to more than one racial category, the government's insistence, for more than two hundred years, on a single racial category for each person provides another illustration of how race is socially rather than biologically produced" (373). Further, the examination of the roles of women in each play is relative to the attempt to disrupt (or assassinate) the dominant narrative by placing the nation's supreme symbol of patriarchal oppression directly in the crosshairs of the assassin's bullet. In each play, an analysis of how the female characters have been relegated to "the inferior position...in patriarchal society" will be linked directly to the attempted paradigm shift brought on by assassination reenactment (Tyson, *Critical* 86). This exploration includes an analysis of "the social and economic oppression of women" in the world of each play, especially as it pertains to larger socio-cultural realities.

While gender and the oppression of women certainly plays a role in *The America Play* and *Topdog/Underdog*, the desire to disrupt the dominant narrative in these two works is more firmly rooted in the subjugation of people of color within a historically hegemonic, patriarchal American landscape. As Philip Kolin notes, "Parks has produced provocative dramas that capture the nightmares of African Americans endangered by a white establishment determined to erase their history and eradicate their dreams" (1). She does so, however, in a way that



clearly subverts the dominate narrative. After all, “*The America Play* gives its audience an ersatz Lincoln...who occupies a demented carnival attraction and a repetitive event not dissimilar to the archival Zapruder 8mm film playing endlessly on JFK’s assassination. Such treatment neatly inverts the offensive minstrel show that features whites as blacks” (Havis xvi).

This exploration of the historic subjugation of people of color in the United States is directly tied to Postcolonial and race theory, particularly African American scholar W.E.B. DuBois’s postulation of “double consciousness...or a way of perceiving the world that is divided between two antagonistic cultures,” in this case, African American culture and white, patriarchal American culture (Tyson, *Critical* 421). Further, this “double-consciousness” is often reflected in African American literature:

...African American literature has its own unique qualities, its own politics and poetics, that cannot be fully explained by or contained within the larger framework of European American literature. Some theorists believe that this uniqueness derives from the African American oral tradition of storytelling, folklore and oral history, which has its roots in African culture and, according to some critics, relates to an essential, or inborn, “blackness,” a way of thinking, feeling, and creating shared by all peoples of African descent. Others argue that there is no such thing as an essential blackness, that the qualities African American texts have in common result from the shared history and culture of their authors. For some of these critics, the distinctive quality of African American literature follows from its unique blending of both African and European American cultural traditions. (Tyson, *Critical* 366)

Despite strides toward equality and a cultural recognition of “double-consciousness,” it is an irrefutable fact that “irrespective of one’s particular history, all whites were placed above all persons of color when it came to the economic, social and political hierarchies that were to form the United States, without exception” and that prior to the progress made by the Civil Rights

Movement, “we didn’t even pretend to be a nation based on equality” (Wise, *White Like Me* 3). Further, as scholar and activist Cornel West points out in *Race Matters*, in a society where “the implication is that only certain Americans can define what it means to be American – and the rest must simply ‘fit it’... people, especially degraded and oppressed people, are...hungry for identity, meaning, and self-worth” (7, 20). This reality clearly plays a role in the ways in which the American Dream is perceived for different groups, particularly those who are marginalized, and for this reason is clearly reflected in the works of African American artists such as Parks.

It is important to note that both *The America Play* and *Topdog/Underdog* feature an African American man who, out of economic necessity, takes on the role of Abraham Lincoln, a white President. However, “Lincoln’s role within African American history is replete with paradoxes,” as he was both a vocal advocate of the elimination of slavery as well as a documented proponent of white supremacy (Carpenter 16-17). It is further important to note that both plays were written and produced several years before the election of Barack Obama, the first African American ever elected President of the United States. It’s safe to say that at the time the plays were written, most Americans, especially African Americans, would be skeptical that just a few years later, the notion of a black President would be a reality. The reality remains that the election of a person of color “at this level was unthinkable merely a generation ago” (Wise, *Between* 8). The implications of this shift are important to note, because while many argue that the election of Barack Obama was a racial milestone for our nation, there are many who posit that this reality merely serves to highlight the emergence of new, more subversive forms of racism and racial oppression. For instance, Tim Wise in his book *Between Barack and a Hard Place: Racism and White Denial in the Age of Obama*, posits:

[C]ontrary to the belief of many, the evidence is clear: systematic racial discrimination and profound inequity of opportunity continue to mark the lives of persons of color, Obama’s own successes notwithstanding. Furthermore, not only does the success of Barack Obama not signify the death of white racism as

a personal or institutional phenomenon, if anything, it may well signal the emergence of an altogether new kind of racism. Consider this, for lack of a better term, Racism 2.0, or enlightened exceptionalism, a form that allows for and even celebrates the achievements of individual persons of color, but only because those individuals generally are seen as different from a less appealing, even pathologically black or brown rule. If whites come to like, respect, and even vote for persons of color like Barack Obama, but only because they view them as having “transcended” their blackness in some way, to claim that the success of such candidates proves the demise of racism makes no sense at all. If anything, success on these terms confirms the salience of race and the machinations of white hegemony. (Wise, *Between* 8-9)

This claim is interesting when applied to ideas and characters in Parks’s plays. For instance, in *The America Play*, the Foundling Father in many ways desperately tries to “transcend his blackness” in much the same way that Wise names, whereas in *Topdog/Underdog*, the opposite could be said to be true. Regardless, “Whites have sustained racial oppression for generations, either by direct actions aimed at this purpose, or by silence and complicity, but either way with the same abominable result” (Wise, *Between* 117). An exploration of these two plays in the age of Obama is especially relevant, and in fact many comparisons between Abraham Lincoln and Barack Obama continue to be drawn in the media, perhaps most notably culture jammer Ron English’s Abraham Obama project, which during the 2008 Presidential election sought to “liberate” billboards with what has now become an iconic image of a Barack Obama/Abraham Lincoln hybrid man.

Aside from the play texts themselves and the tenets of the theoretical lenses through which I have chosen to examine these plays, viewings of the plays, where possible, personal experience, production reviews, interviews with the playwrights, and other scholarly books and articles about the plays will be used to analyze data. Each play will be given equal attention, and

it is perhaps important to note that race and gender play an important role when considering the circumstances of each playwright: all three of the plays that comprise this study were written by women, and two of the three were written by an African American woman, Suzan-Lori Parks. Of Parks (who is the most lauded of the two playwrights, and subsequently the playwright whose work is most studied by scholars) it has been said: “Her innovative scripts have created a new black theatre/stage, breaking conventions and establishing a provocative epistemology of performance. Excluding Tennessee Williams, Parks may also be the most prolific and diverse playwright American has ever produced” (Kolin 1). “But mixed with praise,” as critic Don Shewey contends, “have always come complaints that her plays are obscure, impenetrable, pretentious, even infuriating” (4). Arguably, MacLeod’s more linear, traditional work makes just as strong a commentary on a desire to disrupt the dominant narrative as Parks’s. However, there is very little scholarly research to draw from with respect to MacLeod’s work, and *The House of Yes* in particular. It is difficult to understand why *The House of Yes* continues to be neglected by scholars, as it provides a frightening and compelling commentary on contemporary American life. It could be due to the popularity of the play; arguably, for whatever reason plays with popular appeal are often ignored by scholars. It could also be due to the fact that the play premiered on the West rather than the East coast, New York arguably being a bigger draw for theatre scholars who regularly attend theatre. Perhaps the play is disregarded because it’s labeled a comedy. Regardless, because of the lack of scholarly resources dedicated to an exploration of *The House of Yes*, much of my writing on the play will come from my own in-depth analysis of the play based on several facets of critical theory, including a psychological exploration, and an examination of the role of women in the play, as well as socio-economic dynamics in the play. It is important to note, in this respect, that *The House of Yes* is the play with which I have the most direct experience in the context of this study, as I have seen two separate productions of the play and worked as an actor in yet another production.

Through an examination of the common themes present in each of the texts that comprise this study, specifically through the lenses of materialist feminism, Marxist theory, race and postcolonial theory, the need to disrupt – or assassinate - the dominant narrative clearly emerges. This need clearly speaks to the flawed ideology inherent in the American Dream, which privileges those who are “innately capable” and promotes a strictly forward-looking philosophy, as well as the success of the individual over the needs of the community. The disruption of the dominant narrative manifests in the reenactment and re-visioning of Presidential assassination we see take place in each of the plays: Wendy MacLeod’s *The House of Yes*, and Suzan-Lori Parks’s *The America Play* and *Topdog/Underdog*.

## CHAPTER ONE

### Wendy MacLeod's *The House of Yes*

"You be him and I'll be her." (MacLeod, *House* 44)

Wendy MacLeod's dynamic and terrifying play *The House of Yes* first burst onto the scene in 1990, with a premiere in San Francisco at the Magic Theatre (MacLeod, *House* 4). MacLeod labels the darkly comic piece "A Suburban Jacobean Play," a very telling description that evokes images of depravity on a multitude of levels, harkening back to the works of playwrights such as Thomas Middleton (1580-1627), John Webster (1580-1634), and particularly John Ford (1586-1637). In an interview with Caridad Svich in 2003, MacLeod stated:

My inspiration was the Jacobean play *'Tis Pity She's a Whore*, which is why I call it "a suburban Jacobean play." *'Tis Pity* ends with the brother holding his beloved sister's still-beating heart. When I saw that final, literally heart-wrenching image, I thought, "This is great." I wanted to capture that sense of the mythic in Marty and Jackie. I want Jackie to be the villain you sympathize with because she's more interesting than the moral characters, of which there are admittedly very few. I want you to find yourself rooting for the incestuous lovers. Marty is the part of us who wants to be good, to live like other people. Jackie wants to liberate him from all that. Jackie just wants what she wants. I began the play disapproving of my characters – their insularity, their privilege, their feelings of superiority – but let's face it, they're the party. (Svich)

Arguably, MacLeod's update on classic Jacobean themes – including prominent instances of incest, corruption, adultery, revenge, and a claustrophobic sense of confinement – proves all the more unsettling because of the play's contemporary suburban, American setting. The idea that

depravity of this nature could easily be taking place on a regular basis behind the closed doors of our neighbors' homes is both fascinating and horrifying to many Americans.

While many of the events that take place in the course of the play are not emblematic of the lifestyle and experiences of the typical American family, it could be argued that they are just relative enough to prove a very dark point about human nature and our fascination with public tragedy, in this case, the assassination of President John F. Kennedy. In *The House of Yes*, the public tragedy is so deeply intertwined with personal tragedy that it has become virtually impossible for MacLeod's suburban family to differentiate between the two. As MacLeod states, "Like the country, the twins in *The House of Yes* were traumatized by the Kennedy assassination and the way it dovetailed with the loss of their father. *They found solace in each other by reenacting the ritual of the assassination*" (Svich, emphasis mine). Scholar Peggy Phelan points out in her book *Mourning Sex: Performing Public Memories*, "We are currently ensnared by what D.A. Miller has called 'morbidity culture,' and theatre and performance have especially potent lessons for those interested in reassessing our relations to mourning, grief, and loss (Miller 1990)" (3). We see this "cultural morbidity" shine through in the assassination reenactment in *The House of Yes*, and it can be argued that the reenactment itself is re-visioned by the twins in an attempt to process profound grief and loss. In *The House of Yes*, the ritual reenactment of a violent moment in history is tied not only to a compulsive attempt to process trauma by reliving it, but also, arguably, to a need to assassinate a dominant narrative that continues to deny the gruesome reality of the circumstances.

### **Synopsis and Preliminary Analysis**

*The House of Yes*, which takes place on "Thanksgiving, during a hurricane, some 20 years after JFK's assassination" (MacLeod, *House* 7), centers around the wealthy Pascal family, whose long buried secrets are exhumed, both literally and figuratively, due to the appearance of

an outsider. This exposure destroys an already desperately fragile façade of smug, American happiness, while at the same time reinscribing a cycle of violence that the family is doomed to repeat. As the play opens, a hurricane rages outside. Jackie-O and her younger brother Anthony prepare for the return of their brother Marty who is coming home from New York to celebrate Thanksgiving with the family. Marty and Jackie-O are fraternal twins, and we soon see Jackie-O's possessive nature emerge as it relates to her twin when Anthony mentions that Marty is bringing a friend home for Thanksgiving. Marty soon arrives with this "friend," Lesly, whom he introduces to his family as his fiancée, sending an already anxious Jackie-O into barely contained hysterics. Jackie-O's fragile emotional and psychological state is soon addressed directly by Mrs. Pascal who asks Marty why he has brought a fiancée home, saying: "Your sister has been out of the hospital less than six months. Last week she nearly lost it because the seltzer water was flat and you bring a woman home. Not just a woman, a fiancée, an anti-Jackie. Are you trying to push your sister over the edge?" (15). It is in this same exchange that we are given our first decisive clue about the true nature of Jackie-O and Marty's relationship. Marty insists that he brought Lesly home because he's "trying to follow procedure," and "be normal," to which his mother replies, "Well it's a little late for that, young man" (15). Mrs. Pascal also encourages Marty to tell Lesly "the truth," only moments later insisting that "if there is anyone present who knows why this marriage should not take place it is me" (15). When Marty presses her to clarify her mysterious assertions that he should not marry Lesly, she responds only with "You know why" (15). When he presses her again, she pauses before changing the subject entirely and exiting.

The play's focus then shifts to Lesly, with three consecutive scenes set in the guest room of the Pascal home where Lesly is expected to sleep for the duration of her stay. In the second scene, we see the magnitude of Anthony's awkward nature emerge as he tries to make Lesly feel at home, finally revealing a telling truth: that the family has "never had a guest before" (18). This scene gives way to a scene between Marty and Lesly in which Marty, anxious after



the confrontation with his mother about the possibilities of what could happen if they stay, tries to convince his fiancée that they should return to New York for Thanksgiving. Lesly immediately assumes that her fiancé's family dislikes her, though her beliefs as to the reasons have to do with largely superficial fears. This legitimate apprehension on the part of Lesly, coupled with her utter ignorance as to the truly terrifying nature of the secrets buried by the family she so hopes to join, sets the tone for the darkly hilarious and ultimately disastrous interactions that follow. This scene is followed by a short meeting between Lesly and Jackie-O, and it is in this scene that we first see the greatly honed manipulative skills of Jackie-O at work. Jackie-O easily manages to get the information she wants, while at the same time intentionally leaving Lesly with a pointed feeling of apprehension and discomfort. Jackie-O's deft and specific use of vague information about Marty's "other girlfriends" reveals her to be a powerful and adept manipulator, an adversary against whom Jackie-O herself fully believes Lesly will ultimately prove powerless (21).

Scene five returns us to the Pascal's living room where the machinations of Jackie-O are seen in full force. In this short scene, Jackie-O manages to accomplish several key tasks. She first plants the seed for Anthony's later seduction of Lesly, confiding in him that Lesly "doesn't seem like Marty's type...Now you and she would make a cute couple. Why, I'll bet you're just the same age" (25). Shortly thereafter, in a show of biting cruelty and humiliation, Jackie-O successfully drives Lesly out of the immediate picture by forcing her to flee to the shelter of the guest room, the only place she can escape her would be sister-in-law's ruthless remarks. Jackie-O then reveals to Anthony the full nature of the relationship between his older siblings, thus forcing him to flee. These strategic moves leave Jackie-O alone with Marty, where she begins her seduction. MacLeod manages to squeeze a great deal of important dramatic action into this scene, all the while maintaining a dialogue that is adroitly crafted and quick witted in the darkest, most cutting of ways. We see the power of Jackie-O's cruelty, as she deftly unleashes her vehemence on an unsuspecting and thoroughly unprepared Lesly, who is ridiculed for her

lack of refinement and ancestry. Ironically, we also learn a great deal about Jackie-O's weakness in this scene. Her manic behavior, of which we see only carefully controlled hints in the play's opening scene, is more clearly drawn in scene five. This behavior is patently indicative of someone on the verge of a psychotic break, and Jackie-O's family seems well aware of the danger.

The details of Jackie-O's last major psychotic episode are revealed at the top of scene five, as Anthony privately recounts for Marty the circumstances surrounding the flat bottle of seltzer water that propelled her into hysterics. Upon Jackie-O's entrance, we learn that she is on medication, clearly for psychological purposes, and that due to this medication, she is strictly forbidden from consuming alcohol. This restriction doesn't prevent her from taking a glass of wine, to the dismay of Anthony who, we learned earlier in the play, gave up his college career by dropping out and moving back home to help his mother care for Jackie-O. We also see the first hints of a history of violence between the twins, with Jackie-O asking Marty to show her his scar, saying, "Let me guess. You had your appendix out" (24). We later learn that what Marty passes off as an appendix scar, is indicative of a much more sinister reality. Jackie-O and Marty then recount the story of a hurricane they lived through years before when Anthony was not yet born and their parents were happily married. This memory has the power to bring the twins closer together, and Jackie-O jumps at the opportunity to get Anthony alone for a moment in order to put the wheels in motion for the wedge she intends to drive between Marty and Lesly, saying to Anthony, "Now you and she would make a cute couple. Why, I'll bet you're the same age...I think she has a sneak for you" (25). This exchange is interrupted by Marty, who returns from the kitchen where he went to fetch a piece of ice for Jackie-O. As Marty and Jackie-O engage in witty banter over the ice cube, Lesly enters, dressed for dinner. Her attire leads the way to ridicule that becomes increasingly personal, and it is in the midst of this taunting that we first learn of Jackie-O and Marty's obsession with the Kennedy assassination. As a means of deflecting the mockery aimed at her, Lesly asks Jackie-O, "Why do they call you Jackie-O?"

(27). This query immediately brings about a state of manic reverie in which Jackie-O explains this history of her nickname, further illustrating and strengthening her immediate connection with Marty:

JACKIE-O: We went to an Ides of March party. I went as Jackie Onassis. In a pink Chanel Suit and a pillbox hat. And blood...on my dress."

LESLY: Blood?

JACKIE-O: And other stuff too. Like macaroni. Kind of glued on. Like brains.

*(Pause)*

LESLY: I don't think that's funny.

JACKIE-O: Nobody else did either. Nobody talked to me all night.

MARTY: I talked to you.

JACKIE-O: Yes. You talked to me. Marty. (27)

This exchange marks the dawn of Lesly's horror, clearly illustrating Jackie-O and Marty's love for one another, but the reverie is shattered by a near psychotic break when Jackie insists on having something she can't have: ice. We learn that Mrs. Pascal neglected to refill the ice trays and that Marty brought her the last piece. This knowledge is momentarily devastating for Jackie-O, as it prevents her from accurately reenacting a moment she shared with Marty and her parents in her childhood: riding out the last hurricane. When Anthony insists that the Pepsi is cold, Jackie-O lashes out at him saying: "It's not the same. I'm not talking about ice, I'm talking about texture! I'm talking about texture! In the last hurricane we had ice. Mama and Daddy had a bucket of ice and a cooler down the hall. We just marched down the hall whenever we had a yen for ice" (28). The script indicates that "There is a trace of hysteria in Jackie-O's voice. Marty crosses to her and soothes her like a child. Anthony hovers nervously. Lesly watches" (28). For Jackie-O, the reenactment of this event would successfully alienate Anthony, but more importantly Lesly. However, without the ice, this reenactment would be inexact in a way that is clearly unacceptable to Jackie-O, and her plans are somewhat thwarted. It is at this moment

that we see Lesly's strength begin to emerge. When a proud but embarrassed Jackie-O turns to Lesly after being calmed by Marty, asserting that she's sure Lesly must think she's insane (and most likely only fashionably so) for the behavior she displays, Lesly finally retorts with, "I don't think you're insane. I think you're spoiled" (28). Jackie-O immediately has a witty response, saying, "Oh, please. If people are going to start telling the truth around here, I'm going to bed" (28). This banter is followed by a power failure brought about by the hurricane. Mrs. Pascal enters and it soon dawns on her that the family will not be able to have Thanksgiving dinner without electricity, as the turkey now sits in an electric oven, not fully cooked. Mrs. Pascal, noticing that Jackie-O has a glass of wine, instructs Anthony to take it from her, and goes upstairs to bed, encouraging everyone else to do the same. Lesly takes the opportunity to escape the hell of the living room just moments later, hoping that Marty will soon take his leave to spend the evening with her.

With her mother and Lesly out of the room, Jackie-O has only one further obstacle: Anthony. Marty turns the tables of manipulation on Jackie-O, revealing for the first time his knowledge of an affair Jackie-O had with an actor named Peter. Marty's ploy to get information about this affair from his younger brother is successful, and the discussion clearly makes Jackie-O uncomfortable. She immediately turns the tables on Marty by indicating that she plans to reveal their incestuous secret with Anthony, saying, "Peter and I have nothing in common. Now you and I Marty, have a great deal in common. Parents, DNA, bone structure" (31). Marty deftly turns the attention to Anthony, who is smart enough to realize that the conversation isn't actually about him, and Jackie-O uses the opportunity to reveal the secret of her long-term incestuous relationship with Marty. A horrified Anthony flees, giving Jackie-O exactly she's been waiting for: time alone with Marty. A torn Marty rejects her advances, but Jackie-O is not easily rebuffed, and the scene fades out on the two as they prepare to engage in a drinking game with a bottle of rum and Styrofoam cups, reminiscent of a scene they recall from the hurricane of their childhood.

Anthony's horror at the news of Marty and Jackie-O's sexual history sends him straight to Lesly's room, where we see the younger brother who always "felt left out" seek vengeance on his siblings, especially the older brother whom he always admired. Anthony wheedles his way into Lesly's bed through a series of awkward manipulations that culminate in the revelation that her fiancé engages in a sexual relationship with his own sister. A shocked and heartbroken Lesly falls victim to Anthony's revenge, and the two have sex as Mrs. Pascal, "a cocktail glass in her hand," looks on, unnoticed by the couple (39). As a remorseful Lesly prepares to seek out Marty, Anthony reveals that the last time Marty tried to leave, Jackie-O shot him. This is our first legitimate indication of the violence inherent in the relationship between the twins, more solidly indicating the confused juxtaposition of national and personal tragedy with which the twins struggle.

The scene shifts to Marty and Jackie-O in the living room, where a weakened Marty struggles to resist his sister's advances. We see his resistance crumble as the two begin to describe the costume Jackie-O wore on the day they went to the Ides of March Party, the day they first began "the game." As Jackie-O reveals she has the costume and the gun, Marty, unable to resist the temptation any longer, gives in, agreeing to Jackie-O's demand: "You be him and I'll be her" (44). With Lesly secretly looking on in much the same way Mrs. Pascal watched as she and Anthony had sex, we see the pair reenact a skewed version of President John F. Kennedy's assassination, a game they've played since they were young teenagers. In this game, Jackie-O, dressed in a pink Chanel suit complete with a pill box hat, "shoots" Marty, who feigns death (45). Jackie-O then rushes to Marty's side, reenacting Jacqueline Kennedy's horror at the assassination of her husband. However, in this re-visioned version, she ultimately "revives" him in a sort of sexual foreplay that subsequently leads to sexual intercourse between the twins.

In the two scenes that follow, we see a distraught Lesly frantically attempting to come to terms with what she has just witnessed, and what she now knows to be true about the family

she so desperately wanted to be a part of. Her immediate response is to escape, Marty in tow, to somehow save the man she loves from his own family. She faces the immediate challenge of Mrs. Pascal, who is waiting for her in the guest room. It soon becomes clear that Mrs. Pascal knows about Lesly's indiscretion with Anthony, and she threatens to reveal the goings on of the evening to Marty if Lesly doesn't agree to vanish, as it were, into the night. Lesly pushes back, stating, "So what if I slept with his brother! He slept with his sister!" (46). Mrs. Pascal simply replies "I'm sure I don't know what you're talking about" (47), further asserting the denial of a reality, which keeps the family seemingly afloat. We then witness a short and darkly comic scene in which Anthony tries to convince Lesly to take him with her as she frantically packs her belongings. Finally exhausted by her interactions with the members of the Pascal Family, Lesly is clearly in no mood to humor Anthony, dropping the polite demeanor she so overtly displayed in her earlier interactions with Anthony to reveal her exasperation with his meddling.

As Lesly tries desperately to extricate herself from Anthony's grasp, our focus shifts back to the living room, where we see Mrs. Pascal cleaning up after Marty and Jackie-O, who still bear the markers of the activities of the previous evening. But it isn't until Mrs. Pascal comes across the gun that she becomes fully aware of the scale to which the twins have returned. Her discomfort at the presence of the gun is clear, and she orders Marty to get rid of it, prompting Jackie-O to comment, "Mother, you're white as a ghost. You look positively Ibsenesque" (51). Mrs. Pascal does not mince words in her retort: "If it happens again, they'll put you away. They'll just put you away" (51). Jackie-O believes that her mother is referencing the previous attempt on her brother's life, but we soon become aware that Mrs. Pascal, in fact, fears that Jackie-O will turn the gun on Lesly, eliminating her competition in an effort to seal her bond with Marty. Attempting to assuage Jackie-O's concerns about Lesly, Mrs. Pascal informs her that Lesly is taking her leave, without Marty. The need to fully erase Lesly from their lives in order to restore balance is illustrated in Mrs. Pascal's assertion that if Lesly leaves anything behind, they'll burn it. This sentiment seems to relieve Jackie-O, who has become more and more frantic in her line

of questioning surrounding Lesly's departure. It is at this point that Marty reenters, assuring his mother that he has successfully hidden the gun, prompting Jackie-O to make wry observations about her mother's primary concern: permanently staining the carpets. Mrs. Pascal exits just as Lesly enters, packed and ready to leave. The three make very forced small talk, Marty and Lesly each afraid that the other will discover the events of the previous evening, and Lesly and Jackie-O each attempting to stake a primary claim on Marty. Mrs. Pascal reenters, and is surprised to learn that Lesly believes that Marty is coming with her, again threatening to reveal Lesly's secret if she doesn't cooperate. Anthony then enters the scene, making for an awkward and sometimes comic confrontation in which it is finally revealed that Lesly was unfaithful to Marty. This news, of course, delights Jackie-O, prompting Mrs. Pascal to escort her from the room, leaving Lesly with Anthony and Marty. After a mini explosion in which Anthony exclaims, "If you really cared about her, you wouldn't a brought her here" (54), Marty and Lesly are left alone to face the reality of their situation. Marty immediately attacks Lesly, projecting his own infidelity on her and belittling her for her naivete. Lesly, no longer willing to play polite refuses to legitimately apologize for trusting people and turns the tables on Marty, making it clear to him that she knows about the true nature of his relationship with his sister. Marty, unsure of the extent of Lesly's knowledge, tries to play it off as masturbation, equating his sister with himself. It isn't until Lesly reveals that she saw the two engaged in the reenactment and resulting coitus that Marty gives in, begging Lesly to save him. Lesly attempts to "talk him back," to remind him of their life together and in effect save him from the unnatural grip of his family by recounting what the two of them would do on a Sunday. She does so, and the memory of this life together is enough to prompt Marty to agree to leave with her. But Jackie-O has other plans and thwarts the departure of the couple by flushing their car keys down the toilet. Lesly frantically brainstorms other ways to make an escape and, no longer afraid of the impression she will make on the family, unleashes her frustration on Jackie-O, revealing to her that she knows her secrets and postulating on the reality of the future if Marty stays. She asserts that Marty, too, will

begin to slip into insanity and that the twins will “be left alone,” and “have babies with webbed feet that you have to bury out back in the yard” (57). This reference to burial causes Jackie-O to snap in some way, and assert (or perhaps reveal) a grim and terrifying reality, stating, “The backyard is getting very crowded, I think. Positively littered with corpses. First Daddy’s and now duck babies” (57). A horrified Lesly doesn’t know what to make of this statement, and the more rational Marty tries to correct his sister’s mistake by assuring Lesly (and convincing Jackie-O) that their father left their mother and that Jackie-O is confusing his departure with President John F. Kennedy being shot because he left the day Kennedy was assassinated. He concedes that there was a large hole in the backyard, but that it was because the family was having a new air conditioner installed, not because their mother had shot and killed their father and buried him in the backyard. Jackie-O very clearly associates this time in her life with the Kennedy assassination, making it somewhat evident why the twins ritualize the Kennedy assassination as sexual foreplay: they associate it with their parents’ relationship and the demise of that relationship. Marty, recognizing that something has snapped in Jackie-O, instructs Lesly to get her suitcase while he and Anthony scramble to find Jackie-O’s pills. In the meantime, Jackie-O pulls the gun, begging Marty to play the game “one more time...for old time’s sake” (58). Anthony, confused and terrified by Jackie-O’s behavior, exits to find Mrs. Pascal. Meanwhile, Marty, in an attempt to appease Jackie-O, acquiesces to her request. Jackie-O raises the gun and fires, finally killing Marty in an attempt to prevent him from leaving, to prevent anyone else from having him: to keep him with her forever. The play ends with Jackie-O cradling a bloodied Marty, “their positions echo(ing) the position of the Kennedys the moment after assassination” (58).



### Critical Response, Personal Experience, and Impact on the Audience

While *The House of Yes* is easily the most produced of the three plays on which this study focuses, having been staged regularly around the United States and abroad by professional, amateur and University groups since its premiere in 1990, in addition to being made into an independent film with a cult following, it remains completely ignored by scholars. As earlier noted, to the best of my knowledge, as well as the best of MacLeod's knowledge, not a single scholarly article about the play has been published, nor has it ever been examined in a longer scholarly study, such as this one (MacLeod, Personal Interview). As such, the examination of the play in this study is unprecedented, and as MacLeod points out, explores uncharted, "virgin territory" (Personal Interview). Further, although the play is popular, productions of *The House of Yes* consistently receive mixed reviews. Perhaps the most common complaint on the part of critics is what they feel to be the unavoidable conclusion of the play: we know as soon as we learn of the "game" Marty and Jackie-O play, that it will likely ultimately end in the "assassination" of Marty. As examined in Chapter Three, this is one of the most consistent critical complaints with regard to the conclusion of Suzan-Lori Parks' *Topdog/Underdog*: we know from the moment we learn Lincoln and Booth's names that the play will likely conclude in the murder of Lincoln by Booth. Arguably, it is their inescapable, historical legacy. Additionally, in both *The House of Yes* and *Topdog/Underdog*, a gun which is destined to go off is introduced relatively early into the action, proving the old adage that if we see a gun in the first act, it's bound to be put to use in the play's final moments, as asserted by Chekov (Rayfield 203).

I would argue on both accounts that the inevitability of these endings is not a weakness of the plays themselves, but rather an astute observation by the playwrights regarding the cyclical nature of these sorts of acts of public violence, the inevitability of our own participation in them from both a literal and a figurative standpoint, and a desire to rewrite history by re-visioning it. Further, I would argue that these endings indicate an inability to escape the

repetition of our histories, as well as a desire to assassinate a narrative that rejects and even erases the experiences of some, while exalting and validating the experiences of others.

A review of the first production of *The House of Yes*, which was mounted at San Francisco's Magic Theatre in early 1990, were glowing and praised MacLeod's "sparkling dialogue," calling the play "wickedly funny, disturbing and vividly written" (Winn). Steven Winn, a critic for *The San Francisco Chronicle*, gave the play a very high rating, noting that it was "a fascinating blend of frivolous family politics and menacing political allegory." Winn went on to note that the play is a commentary on "our vicarious and cozily incestuous fascination with assassinations and other forms of public violence," an observation which is certainly accurate in some respects, but only scratches the surface of the vast implications of the play, which point to a much larger and much more deep-seated and personalized obsession with national tragedy.

*The House of Yes* was next produced in 1993 at the Gate Theatre in London, where it received a lukewarm review in *The Guardian*. While the production was hailed as "intriguing" and "thought-provoking," and noted for strong staging, the reviewer complained that "The weakness is the inevitability of the outcome, and the consequent lack of plotting tension" (Armitstead). Likewise, Ben Brantley's *New York Times* review of the New York premiere in early 1995 at the SoHo Repertory Theatre, stated that "the plot is so predetermined that it lacks urgency and menace..." (Brantley, *Family* 16). Brantley went on to comment that the "social allegory" of the use of the Kennedy assassination wasn't "very interesting," dismissing the play as a simple exploration of the fatherless family juxtaposed with a fatherless nation (16). While this observation is certainly an obvious theme of the play, it only hints at the deeper implications made by MacLeod's re-visioning of assassination within the context of the American family. Brantley also complains that MacLeod's exploration of dysfunction within the American family is "pretty familiar stuff," and that the play itself makes "old observations," though he does give her points "for finding the universal in the extreme," in addition to noting that she "has a knack for acerbic, frothy dialogue" (16).

The play was adapted for the screen and released in 1997, also under the title *The House of Yes*, and proved an independent film hit, winning a Special Recognition Sundance Award for star Parker Posey for her turn as Jackie-O (*House*, Waters). In addition to indie film darling Posey, the film also stars Freddie Prinze, Jr. as Anthony and Tori Spelling as Lesly and has developed quite a cult following (Horowitz). Though MacLeod was tapped to pen the screenplay by director Mark Waters, in a 2010 interview published in the Denver Theater section of the *Examiner*, she explained that because she was pregnant, she decided against doing the adaptation herself (Flomberg). Waters penned the adaptation himself, and it is important to note that an overwhelming amount of the text in the screenplay was lifted directly from the play (Flomberg). MacLeod's original, precise dialogue proved film worthy, and the only major alteration to the original play was the inclusion of grainy family videos showing a young Jackie-O, complete with pink Chanel suit and pillbox hat, giving a tour of the Pascal family home in an imitation of Jackie Kennedy's 1962 televised tour of the White House (*House*, Waters). MacLeod was "included...in the casting process," but was not involved in "the filming," stating, "I worried that my notes would hinder rather than help the play's transfer to the screen" (qtd. in Flomberg). MacLeod was "completely delighted" upon "seeing the rough cut [Waters] submitted to Sundance," noting that the director "had found the tone, and the perfect Jackie O. in Parker Posey" (qtd. in Flomberg).

Since its east and west coast premieres, subsequent productions of *The House of Yes* have been presented across the country by a variety of theatre groups. In the Denver/Boulder area alone, there were three productions of the play within a span of just two years. Regardless of the reception of each of these three productions, it is important to note how often and at what levels the play is produced; it is "a popular favorite," and continues to appeal to a variety of theatre groups, including professional, amateur, and student groups because of the social commentary it makes and the audience it has the potential to draw in (Williamson 36).

Boulder-based **square product theatre**, a professional theatre company, presented the play to critical acclaim in the spring of 2008, eventually garnering a *Denver Post* Reader's Choice Award for Best Comedy of the year, and an Ovation Award nomination, also for Best Comedy. Critic Kurt Brighton's review in *The Denver Post* gave the production 3.5 out of 4 stars, and primarily focused on the performances and the production rather than the play itself, though Brighton did draw an astute correlation regarding the role the Pascal home plays in the behavior of its inhabitants, likening it to "Poe's *The Fall of the House of Usher*, in which another pair of twins struggle with sanity." This correlation in some ways points us clearly in the direction of Jacobean drama, as desired by MacLeod, as many of the plays written in that period were set within the confines of a home, giving them a claustrophobic feel that feeds the madness of its inhabitants.

The play was produced just less than two years later by a Denver-based community theatre called Equinox Theatre Company, and was panned by *The Denver Post's* then primary theatre critic John Moore, who gave the production 2 out of 4 stars. Moore's primary complaints had to do with the production; it was not, in his opinion, "confidently directed." He deemed the cast "likeable," but too "green," and panned the design elements as "hit or miss," particularly from a sound and lighting perspective (Moore, *Review*). Moore comments early on in his review that, "This is a convivially creepy family yarn that adds up to a whole lot of nothing...and yet I still kind of liked it, a perverse little bit." This likeability, however, proves flexible for Moore, as just a few more sentences into the review, he scathingly dismisses not only the production, but the play itself, commenting that "playwright Wendy MacLeod dives us head-first into the downright icky. She abides no bounds of taste or plausibility, so, where she ultimately takes us carries no believability, significance or consequence worth much caring about."

Finally, the play was produced again, just weeks after the Equinox production by students at the University of Colorado at Boulder as part of the Department of Theatre and Dance's Fringe Festival, an annual event held each spring over the course of one of the last

weekends of the semester. It was directed by an undergraduate student and featured an all student cast. This production was not reviewed in any way and was certainly the least “produced” of the three stagings, no doubt due in large part to the nature of a Fringe Festival, which requires minimal use of set, properties and lights in order to accommodate a large number of groups who share a single space.

While I did not see the production at Equinox Theater Company, I did interact directly with the other two productions; I played the role of Jackie-O in the square product theatre staging, and attended the later staging at the University of Colorado. Because of this direct experience with the play (including seeing yet another production of the play presented as part of the Lab Season at the Savannah College of Art & Design in 2003), I have spent a great deal of time studying the play and evaluating the relevant themes and ideas explored in the text. I find the play to be rife with striking and relevant social commentary and believe that due to the blending of comic and tragic elements, *The House of Yes* is a rare play that has the power to encourage an audience or reader to examine the nature of our relationship with trauma, celebrity, and the American Dream on a large, national scale, as well as a more intimate, personal level. In my experience, productions of the play often leave an audience shocked, despite the inevitability of the ending – we can’t help but walk away with unanswered questions that gnaw at us for days. Why do the twins reenact the Kennedy assassination? Why the minor but important adjustments in the reenactment? What really happened to the family’s patriarch, Mr. Pascal? Ultimately, *The House of Yes* shows us what the American Dream has become under the influence of privilege, demonstrating a very personal need to eliminate a dominant narrative that serves to mask a gruesome and bloody reality, all the while reinscribing a cycle of violence that not only reflects cultural trauma, but also implies deeply personal ramifications.

### **Analysis: Structure and Language**

A close look at the structure and language of *The House of Yes* tells us a great deal about the characters and the heightened sense of inevitability surrounding the conclusion of the play. In many ways, *The House of Yes* is what would be referred to as a traditional, “well-made” play: it contains very few characters, and the action unfolds over the course of just a few hours. It is set in a single locale, the Pascal home, though the action does take place in more than one room of the house, a situation which is not necessarily a standard associated with the “well-made” play, which typically involves setting the action in a single space, such as the drawing room. Because the play requires us to jump back and forth between rooms in the Pascal home, there is somewhat of an episodic feel to the play, but each “episode” occurs in chronological order within the context of our understanding of “real time,” though at times, we get the sense that the action in the play overlaps. The play follows a very basic format of cause and effect sequencing, making it easy to follow in most respects.

As is the case with the other two plays examined in this study, there are important metatheatrical elements in *The House of Yes* that play a crucial role in our understanding of the trauma being enacted. Jackie-O’s name in and of itself is an important metatheatrical element, as discussed in the introduction; it is not her real name, but the name she’s been called by since dressing up as a blood-stained Jacqueline Kennedy for an Ides of March party (MacLeod, *House* 27). Further, it is anachronistic, arguably revealing the flexibility of time and memory in the lives of the characters. Jackie Kennedy didn’t become known as Jackie O. until she married Aristotle Onassis several years after her first husband’s assassination. Therefore, the naming of the character as “Jackie-O” implies Marty’s inevitable demise.

As Kevin Williamson points out in his review of a production of the play staged in 2009, “The genius of *The House of Yes* is that Jackie-O is, in effect, the star of her own play within a play. Her character’s life is a comedy of Wildean abandon performed for her personal amusement” (36). Arguably, MacLeod even inserts a clever commentary on metatheatricality

and the flexible nature of identity early in the play, when Anthony responds to Marty's query as to what Jackie-O does with her time. Anthony reveals that in addition to reading assassination books, "she watches soap operas," further elucidating, "She likes it especially when they have a character and that actress leaves the show and a new actress steps in and becomes the character. And nobody on the show notices any difference, they treat that character exactly the same as before" (MacLeod, *House* 22-23). Likewise, as we will see in the other plays in this study, the assassination reenactment itself is highly metatheatrical. As Phelan points out, "it may well be that theatre and performance respond to a psychic need to rehearse for loss, and especially for death" (*Mourning* 3). Arguably, the metatheatrical reenactment of the Kennedy assassination in *The House of Yes* speaks to this "psychic need," as it clearly reflects a struggle with both loss and death, as well as a desire to rewrite history in some respect. Additionally, it could be said that the reenactment reveals the depths to which the characters struggle with the confused and layered remembrances of traumatic events, ultimately re-visioning the assassination in a way that highlights a desire to assassinate a dominant narrative that in some way hinders their personal growth and development or, as is arguably ultimately the case for Jackie-O, keeps them from getting what they want.

While the structure essentially provides us with a safe, easily navigable way through the play, the language, as a contrast, provides us with a great many open ends for which there are no definite answers. I will explore this idea more thoroughly in a discussion of themes later in this chapter. It is important to note that much of the intrigue in the play is created by what is *not* said, by what is *almost* said, by what may never be said in the Pascal home. Mrs. Pascal is a perfect example of this idea and is herself, the queen of evasion. She seems incapable of answering a direct question, not because she doesn't know the answer, but because of the repercussions that might result from a truthful answer. Arguably, Mrs. Pascal has successfully woven a familial narrative that conceals the truth, the threads of which become weaker and weaker as the play progresses, the family struggling to maintain composure in the aftermath of

the unwelcome arrival of an outsider who threatens to disrupt their lives. A good example of Mrs. Pascal's desperate need to maintain the narrative she has created happens early in the play when she quizzes Marty as to his intentions in bringing Lesly home to meet the family:

MRS. PASCAL: Are you trying to push your sister over the edge?

MARTY: No.

MRS. PASCAL: Just what then are you trying to do?

MARTY: Be normal.

MRS. PASCAL: Well it's a little late for that, young man.

MARTY: Do you want us to leave?

MRS. PASCAL: Yes I want you to leave, at once, without further ado. As soon as the storm lets up. If you don't, I'll take away your sheets, your towels, everything.

MARTY: What do I tell Lesly?

MRS. PASCAL: Tell her the truth.

MARTY: The truth?

MRS. PASCAL: That your sister's insane. She'll understand.

MARTY: Don't say insane. She's...ill.

MRS. PASCAL: If she were ill, I could give her an aspirin and put her to bed. I could make her that soup you're supposed to make.

MARTY: Chicken noodle.

MRS. PASCAL: That. Alas. I cannot. I mean, I can make the soup for heaven's sake, it comes in a can, but I cannot make her well. I have tried but to no avail.

MARTY: "To no avail." What was that?

MRS. PASCAL: I'm getting dramatic.

MARTY: Well stop it. I thought it was better that I come and tell her myself.



MRS. PASCAL: It would be better if you didn't tell her at all, it would be better if there was nothing to tell, if there is anyone present who knows why this marriage should not take place it is me.

MARTY: Why?

MRS. PASCAL: Why what?

MARTY: Why shouldn't the marriage take place?

MRS. PASCAL: You know why.

MARTY: Tell me. (*pause*)

MRS. PASCAL: Excuse me. I'm going to go baste the turkey and hide the sharp objects. (*she exits*) (15-16)

This is the first moment in which we get a definite clue as to the true nature of Marty and Jackie-O's relationship, and in this single, brief exchange, Mrs. Pascal avoids a direct accusation of incest not once, not twice, but a total of three times. She makes it clear to her son that she knows the truth, and when he presses her to say it, she changes the topic entirely and exits the room, leaving him to make a difficult decision. We also see in this exchange a heightening of language, particularly on the part of Mrs. Pascal. We can assume that this heightened language is the norm to some extent until Marty calls it out, and she admits that she's "getting dramatic." However, her heightened use of language continues throughout the play, arguably leading us to draw one of two conclusions: either this is the manner in which she normally communicates, and Marty's time away has caused him to notice that other people do not communicate in such a lofty way, or the situation is more serious than it seems on the surface and Mrs. Pascal is preparing for the "dramatic" events she fears will inevitably take place.

Another important thing to notice regarding language in the play is the difference in linguistics and syntax as used by the members of the Pascal family versus that of Lesly. The Pascals are quick and witty; they are well-educated and well-bred, and their deftness with

language makes this notion clear. Likewise, given that language is a symbolic representation of reality, their own use of language arguably further removes them from reality. The Pascals often employ language as a weapon, as a tool for destruction, especially Jackie-O, who sees Lesly as easy prey in this regard. As we see throughout the play, Jackie-O verbally “bats around [her brother’s] fiancée like a kitten with a moth” (Williamson 36). As a contrast, Lesly comes from a blue-collar, working-class background. She is not educated; she is not worldly; and her use of more simplistic language, coupled with her consistent lack of comprehension, exposes this truth about her. Lesly is clearly not like the Pascals, and her desire to be accepted into their world is one that can never really be fulfilled due simply to her own hereditary and environmental reality. Arguably, this use of language serves to divide the loyalty of the audience; we are torn between the Pascals and Lesly. It’s difficult not to marvel at Jackie-O’s deft linguistic ability. Her annihilation of Lesly is both cruelly impressive and painfully funny. But it’s also difficult not to sympathize with Lesly, the simple outsider who is clearly in no way prepared to engage in a dialectic battle with the likes of the Pascals.

## **Themes**

### **Ritual and Violence**

There are several pertinent themes in *The House of Yes* that suggest a desire to assassinate a dominant narrative, as well as the continued relevance and inherent psychological impact of the American Dream. These themes include ritual and violence, images that evoke the idea of America, and dysfunction within the American family and the individual. These are themes that we see clearly emerge in the works of Suzan-Lori Parks as well, as discussed in later chapters.

In *The House of Yes*, ritual and violence are so closely tied, that it is virtually impossible to separate the two. We see several family rituals (or attempts at rituals) over the course of the

play, not the least of which is the twins' ritualistic reenactment of the Kennedy assassination as sexual foreplay. But we also know from the first moments of the play that the setting is Thanksgiving, the quintessential American ritual. Americans know what Thanksgiving means: turkey and dressing, cranberry sauce – these are the dishes being prepared in the Pascal household before the hurricane takes out the electricity and the ritual is interrupted, making room for a more sinister ritual (MacLeod, *House* 29).

We also know that celebrating Thanksgiving often means vocalizing our appreciation for what we have been blessed with: our loved ones, our wealth, our health: it is, in most respects, good to be an American. It is perhaps important, however, to note that Thanksgiving is a ritual deeply rooted in deception and violence veiled as generosity and appreciation. Many Americans today would perhaps prefer to ignore the historical facts of our Thanksgiving ritual, and be left to enjoy their turkey in ignorance, but the fact remains that despite the guise of a peaceful coming together of the natives and the colonizers, ultimately, widespread violence and the decimation of the people native to the land now known as the United States of America followed swiftly on the heels of the first American Thanksgiving. As Linda Coombs, an Aquinnah Wampanoag and Native Advisor to the Boston Children's Museum states, "Thanksgiving is celebrated at the expense of Native People who had to give up their lands and culture for America to become what it is today" (Pilgrim Hall Museum). In some respects, the same is true of *The House of Yes*. Lesly, the outsider, arrives in a foreign land – the Pascal home – hoping to win over the natives. She is, in this instance, akin to the colonizers, an unwitting bearer of a dominant narrative of "normalcy," a narrative that Jackie-O arguably succeeds in assassinating at her own expense. Perhaps ironically, however, Lesly bears the burden of "otherness" in much the same way as Native Americans and is continually oppressed in the play due primarily to her socio-economic situation. In this version of Thanksgiving, however, nobody truly wins, and a devastating cycle of violence is maintained.

One of the key elements in the rituals enacted in *The House of Yes*, most importantly the assassination ritual, is the use of repetition. Repetition is used elsewhere as well: for instance, Marty and Jackie-O reenact a moment from the last hurricane they lived through, this time, taking on the roles of their father and mother, respectively. In the midst of sibling revelry including all three of the Pascal children, Jackie-O recalls that in that hurricane, Mr. and Mrs. Pascal drank rum and coke with ice out of Styrofoam cups, an event she attempts to recreate later in the evening when Lesly sets her into a reverie about the Ides of March party that began the ritual so dear to her by asking her, "Why do they call you Jackie-O?" (MacLeod, *House* 27). When it is revealed that there is no more ice, an element crucial to a precise reenactment, Jackie-O cracks, revealing just how sensitive her psyche is. Incidentally, this moment is one of the first times we see Lesly stand up for herself and speak her mind, calling Jackie-O "spoiled," as noted in the synopsis (28). Finally, when everyone retires for the evening, Marty and Jackie-O reenact the previous hurricane to the best of their abilities: the two repeat the actions of their parents years before, in addition to repeating the action of imbibing the alcohol by taking shots in repetition, as implied by the text (34).

This repetition of what we can deem "adult hurricane behavior" as it is perceived by Marty and Jackie-O – after all, they are merely repeating the prior actions of their parents, witnessed in a hurricane years before – is followed by the most important and most ritualized repetition in the play: the reenactment of Kennedy's assassination, followed by the incestuous coupling of Jackie-O and Marty. Marty tries to resist his sister's advances, but arguably, the drinking has downed his defenses in some respect. It is also safe to say that the connection and love between the two, a bond forged in trauma, is much too strong for Marty to either deny or resist. MacLeod indicates in her Author's Notes that "It is a great mistake to imagine the play as 'camp' because the characters pretend to be Jack and Jackie Kennedy," further stating that "the twins love each other deeply, tragically" (5). This clear directive from the playwright, as well as

the love between the two implicit in the text provides us with a tragic set-up that is undeniably fascinating and arguably, paradoxical.

Though Marty tries to “be normal” (15), it is impossible for him to escape his destiny, just as it is impossible for him to deny the love he feels for his sister. It is important to note that the use of costuming is what sways Marty into participating in the ritual: he is able to resist until he sees his sister in the pink Chanel suit and pillbox hat. Arguably, Jackie-O knows that Marty’s resolve will crumble when he is faced with the costume, that he will find it impossible to resist their ritual performance, and she has it handy and ready to wear. The costume in this instance has ultimate power. We see a similar use of costuming in both *The America Play* and *Topdog/Underdog*. However, in those plays, we see the costume somewhat as a representation of the tatters of the white, patriarchal American Dream, whereas in *The House of Yes*, the costume more clearly represents the spoiled innocence of the American Dream. It is mentioned early in the play that the pink Chanel suit Jackie-O is so fond of wearing was originally decorated with bloodstains and “macaroni...glued on...like brains” (27), to replicate Jackie Kennedy’s suit after her husband was assassinated in the Presidential Motorcade in Dallas. It was so decorated for an Ides of March party the twins attended. Most productions, it would seem, do not include the gruesome decoration, presumably because it is not in line with the reenactment, which begins *before* the assassination. The costume in some ways also symbolizes the spoiled innocence of Jackie-O and Marty, who it is likely were forced to grow up much too soon due to their mother’s actions, which will be discussed later in this chapter. While it is important that Jackie-O dons the well-known pink Chanel suit for the ritual reenactment, it is perhaps important to note that there is no attention whatsoever paid to Marty’s costume. In many ways, this aspect mirrors reality: it’s safe to say that few people remember what suit John F. Kennedy was wearing when he was assassinated, but the image of Jackie Kennedy’s pink Chanel suit and pillbox hat is burned into the American psyche in a very powerful and inexplicable way.

The metatheatrical ritual reenactment that is such an important part of Marty and Jackie-O's lives is truly at the heart of the play. Arguably, the twins' reenactment of the Kennedy assassination is more than a compulsion; it's an obsession, an addiction that seems in many ways to fuel not only their relationship, but their very existence. Arguably, it has become a necessary part of their lives, and any attempt on the part of either sibling to put an end to the ritual is ultimately and necessarily futile. The question, then, becomes why? Why is this reenactment so deeply intertwined with the very core of who the twins are in relationship to each other and as individuals? How and why has the reenactment of such a brutal, violent, public event become such an important part of the lives of these two people? I believe that the answer to these questions lies within the text and has everything to do with the Pascal's own family tragedy, one that is more than once hinted at and little by little is revealed both in speech and action. As Phelan points out, "The imitation and mimicry at the heart of repetition is motivated by the desire to retouch, revise, re-interpret how one has lost, is lost" (Phelan, *Mourning* 150). Arguably, this is certainly the case in *The House of Yes*. It is often said that actions speak louder than words, and it for this very reason that the details surrounding the reenactment the twins participate in is so important; they are the keys that unlock a shadowy secret kept by the family, revealing that the tragic event reenacted by the twins may be much closer to home than the historical motorcade in Dallas, Texas.

There are several good clues as to this possibility in the text itself. The first clue comes early in the play, in an exchange between Mrs. Pascal and Marty, in which she seemingly blames the twins for any familial tension that may have existed:

MRS. PASCAL: Now don't get snippy Marty, you've been in this house exactly 37 seconds and you're already snippy. It's no wonder your father died young, he'd simply had it with all the snippiness, a person can die a slow death from being snipped at year after year, the way he said *solid* when he meant salad, the two of you would not let it go, like a puppy with a rag doll. Or the time he missed the exit

on 495, those things *happen* on interstates, mistakes are made, that's what those No U-Turn places are for...

MARTY: Daddy didn't die a slow death.

MRS. PASCAL: Let's stick to the subject

MARTY: I have no idea what the subject is. (MacLeod, *House* 14, emphasis original)

Mrs. Pascal's emerging penchant for laying blame elsewhere aside, we learn extremely valuable information in this exchange: Mr. Pascal's absence has not to do with his leaving the family, but that he is, in fact, deceased. Mrs. Pascal says it: "It's no wonder your father died young." Marty reiterates this fact when he states, "Daddy didn't die a slow death." However, the truth in this respect becomes muddled later in the play, in an exchange among Jackie-O, Marty, and Lesly:

LESLY: If you really love Marty, think about what his life would be like here in this house, your mother will die, you'll be left alone, you'll have babies with webbed feet that you bury out back in the yard...

JACKIE-O: Where in the yard?

LESLY: What?

JACKIE-O: Where exactly in the yard? On the croquet lawn? By the bird bath? Marty, where do you think we should bury these babies with webbed feet? The back yard is getting very crowded I think. Positively littered with corpses. First daddy's and now duck babies.

LESLY: You killed your father?

JACKIE-O: Not me. Mama. (57)

This shocking revelation on the part of Jackie-O seems a clear indicator of the true nature of the circumstances surrounding the absence of Mr. Pascal. When coupled with Mrs. Pascal's earlier statement, which seems to confirm that Mr. Pascal is no longer living, it would seem that the

truth begins to finally emerge. However, Marty immediately knocks us off balance and muddies the waters just as they are becoming clear, responding to Jackie-O's claim and eliminating the emerging clarity by attempting to convince Lesly that his mother did not, in fact, kill his father. Further, Marty uses his sister's history of psychological instability to do so, as we see on the following exchange:

MARTY: My father left my mother. Years ago. The day Kennedy was shot.

JACKIE-O: He tried to leave but Mama shot him. We buried him by the central air.

MARTY: They were installing central air, there was a hole in the ground, but not for him, for the airconditioner, she's confused, you're confused Jackie, he left Mama, he called a cab...

JACKIE-O: She covered him with her body, she tried to keep him there...

MARTY: Jackie Kennedy, not Mama, Jackie Kennedy...

JACKIE-O: She tried to keep his head on, but it was falling off...

MARTY: Lesly, go get your suitcase. (57-8)

This crucial exchange, which comes in the last two pages of the play, could easily be seen as either a shocking revelation of a long held family secret or a clear indicator of the level of Jackie-O's mental and emotional instability. However, dismissing Jackie-O as merely crazy, or "confused" is arguably reductive, and as Foucault points out:

From the depths of the Middle Ages, a man was mad if his speech could not be said to form part of the common discourse of men. His words were considered null and void, without truth or significance, worthless as evidence, inadmissible in the authentication of acts or contracts, incapable even of bringing about transubstantiation – the transformation of bread into flesh – at Mass. And yet, in contrast to all others, his words were credited with strange powers, of revealing some hidden truth, of predicting the future, of revealing, in all their naivete, what



the wise were unable to perceive. It is curious to note that for centuries, in Europe, the words of a madman were either totally ignored or else were taken as words of truth. (217)

We see the ways in which Marty attempts to make his sister's claims "null and void" by playing up her history of psychological problems, and a very good case could be made of Jackie's speaking the "words of truth" within the context of the play. MacLeod herself indicates in her Author's Notes that either of these things could be true: Mrs. Pascal could have shot her husband, or he could have abandoned the family. She notes simply that it's up to the team working on any given production to decide for themselves, and that her only requirement is that "every actor must present their character's version [of the truth] with absolute conviction" (6).

While one could easily argue that either choice makes for a compelling piece of theatre, I strongly believe that the clues in the text, coupled with the important revisions the twins make in their ritualized assassination reenactment, point to an irresistible argument for the murder of Mr. Pascal and therefore the juxtaposition of national and personal tragedy in the play. Jackie-O's story explains and justifies far more than Marty's version of the events surrounding their father's absence. Therefore, choosing to believe Jackie-O makes for a far more tragic and compelling commentary on the failures of the American Dream and our culture's fascination with celebrity and national tragedy. In this instance, actions truly speak louder than words. We see the assassination reenactment occur twice in the play, and we can deduce from the text and the given circumstances that this is a ritual the twins began when they were around 14 years old, making it a ritual the two have been participating in for more than a decade. It is important to note that the ritual always begins with Jackie-O addressing Marty, saying, "You be him and I'll be her." Marty always agrees, saying, "I'm him," with Jackie-O reiterating, "And I'm her" (44, 58). On the surface, this exchange would appear to be an agreement to take on the roles of Jack and Jackie Kennedy, respectively, but the reality, as exhibited by their actions, is perhaps far closer to home. In the twins' version of the reenactment, the assassin is Jackie-O; the stage

directions in the script indicate the following: “Jackie-O points the gun at him and shoots. He falls. In slow motion they re-enact the moments after Kennedy was assassinated. Jackie-O cradles Marty’s head in her lap. Then she straddles him. Marty slowly sits up as Jackie-O arches her back and moves in for a kiss” (45). We know that in reality, Jackie Kennedy did not shoot her husband. She was in the car next to him when he was shot, and the fatal bullet clearly came from the other direction. So why does the twins’ version of the assassination hinge on such a crucial difference?

It would be easy to write this revision off as being merely practical in nature; in order for two people to reenact the event, one of them has to take on the role of the assassin, despite the fact that such a revision provides one more instance in which the reenactment will fail to be an exact replica of the original event. However, a stronger analysis would suggest that the twins are not only taking on the roles of Jack and Jackie Kennedy in their ritual, but also the roles of their own parents. When explored from this angle, and given the conflicting accounts concerning the events surrounding Mr. Pascal’s disappearance, one can make a clear and strong argument that in the context of the reenactment, Jackie-O is taking on the role of her own mother, who for all intents and purposes assassinated her husband on or around the same day that John F. Kennedy was assassinated. Arguably, the twins, especially Jackie-O, have confused these two events in their minds, intertwining them in such a way that it will be forever impossible to separate the two events. In this way, the juxtaposition of national tragedy and personal tragedy becomes more of an overlapping and interweaving; the Kennedy assassination is re-visioned by Marty and Jackie-O to incorporate the assassination of their father by their mother.

In many respects, the twins’ re-visioning of the assassination reenactment fits the textbook definition for the psychological phenomenon known as “repetition compulsion.” In Freudian terms, the repetition compulsion “describes the pattern whereby people endlessly repeat patterns of behaviour that were difficult or distressing in earlier life” (Grant and Crawley 38). Often, the repetition seeks to replicate a traumatic event from the person’s past, and is

typically an unconscious phenomenon that manifests in engagement with personalities or environments that are similar to the original situation (Carnes 24). Freud's definition of the "traumatic" includes "any excitations from outside which are powerful enough to break through the protective shield" (Freud 33). In this respect, it could also be argued that Lesly's arrival (itself a small trauma in the eyes of Jackie-O) triggers the traumatic memory in a way that the Pascals have never before experienced. Because the repetition compulsion is sometimes associated with repressed memories, it could be argued that the twins' repetition of a violent act highlights what Peggy Phelan points to as a reenactment of "'trauma' as a way to understand injuries both to body and psyche" (*Mourning* 5). One could make a strong case based on the final moments in the play, in which Marty tries desperately to convince both Lesly and Jackie-O that his sister is "confused" about their father's fate, that Jackie-O, in particular, has repressed the memory of her father's murder and unconsciously mimics her mother's crime in the ritual she has created with Marty.

Likewise, it could be argued that the twins are merely engaging in a traumatic repetition in an attempt to "master" the trauma they experienced as children (Freud 15). MacLeod states that:

In *The House of Yes*, Jackie and Marty are role-playing in a Genet sort of way. They are reliving something that traumatized them in their childhood and that they've fetishized. We fetishize violence all the time. We can't help ourselves. We were grimly drawn to the World Trade Center footage, trying to feel it, trying to feel the immensity of the tragedy. (qtd. in Svich)

However, the violent act that Marty and Jackie-O fetishize is arguably birthed from a desire to rewrite history, to alter the outcome; to "master" the original trauma and in doing so, assassinate a narrative that leaves the Pascal children and symbolically, the country at large, fatherless. The twins would then be participating in an active rather than a passive form of the repetition compulsion in which an individual purposefully or unwittingly participates in activities that closely

simulate an earlier trauma, reconstructing the events as closely as possible (Satow). In this respect, we see the genesis of irregular adult behavior (much of it deemed by society to be illicit, abnormal, or even shameful), as incidents that proved frightening or traumatic in childhood, such as spanking, become irresistible endeavors in adulthood (Satow). Further, as Freud asserts, “repetition, the re-experiencing of something identical, is clearly in itself a source of pleasure” (42). In this respect, it could be argued that the twins find a sort of morbid comfort in their repetition of a violent act and are therefore compelled to continue playing “the game.” Further, as psychoanalyst Roberta Satow points out, “The repetition compulsion is acted out through the processes of displacement and projection. Displacement involves experiencing and treating one person as *if* he were someone else...Projection involves experiencing another person as if she feels what *you* feel” (Satow, emphasis original). We see clear examples of displacement and projection in “the game” Marty and Jackie-O play: clearly they each “experience...and treat” each other “as if they were someone else,” and arguably, their re-visioning of the event is a projection of their own desires.

As Phelan notes, “What psychoanalysis makes clear is that the experience of loss is one of the central repetitions of subjectivity” (*Mourning* 5). Freudian psychoanalysis may be passé to some, but according to Dr. Patrick J. Carnes, a highly respected expert in sexual addiction and author of *The Betrayal Bond: Breaking Free of Exploitative Relationships* (1997), the sort of subjective trauma repetition we see in *The House of Yes* is “in part...an effort by the victim to bring resolution to the traumatic memory. By repeating the experiences, the victim tries anew to figure out a way to respond in order to eliminate the fear” (26). This explanation could be the case with Jackie-O and Marty, who have in some respects re-visioned their own traumatic history in an effort to rewrite it, to alter the result of a violent act by manifesting love rather than death, as well as to recover what they have lost. It is safe to say that as young children, Marty and Jackie-O, having witnessed the murder of their own father, were deeply traumatized and terrified. As Carnes points out, in some cases, trauma “survivors repeat not only the same

scenario but also the exact behavioral experience” (25). Arguably, the twins’ re-visioning of assassination is in some respects a paradoxically loving and violent attempt to subvert a familial narrative created by their mother. However, they do so not by “repeat[ing]...the exact behavioral experience,” but rather by altering the outcome.

Typically, the twins’ ritual does not end in the death of the male figure, but rather in lovemaking between the two participants, a situation which one could also argue is a repetition of behavior they may have witnessed their parents engaged in at some point as young children. Further, their re-visioning of the traumatic event to include lovemaking rather than murder indicates what Phelan points to as “a profound incompatibility between the logic of evidence demanded by law, and the logic of sexuality that interprets trauma, abuse, and violence...” (*Mourning* 20). We see here the “the affective force of the sexual and psychic remaking that surviving loss entails” (*Mourning* 5). Therefore, the twins’ attempt to “eliminate the fear” or “master” the original traumatic scenario retroactively has to do with the end result of the assassination, which rejects the original, gruesome narrative in an effort to recover what has been lost.

In many respects, Marty and Jackie-O’s relationship fits the definition of a “trauma bond,” which means that the two “have a certain dysfunctional attachment that occurs in the presence of danger, shame or exploitation,” and is exemplified by “people who stay involved or wish to stay involved with people who betray them” (Carnes 29). Further, “Often trauma is not recognized until well after it has happened, in part because it is a complete, contained event. Trauma’s potency comes in part from how well it is contained” (Phelan, *Mourning* 5). It is important to remember that the twins have formed a bond as witnesses of a violent, traumatic event as children, an event which, with their mother’s help, they’ve struggled to contain and conceal. Further, they have also formed a “trauma bond” based on the fact that the last time they saw each other, Jackie-O did attempt to kill Marty because of his plans to leave the family and move to New York. Arguably, Marty’s challenging of the narrative Jackie-O has created for

the two of them provokes Jackie-O to truly act out violently, for the first time making the reenactment a deadly game. Jackie-O even jokes about the failed attempt early in the play, saying, "I'm sorry about that by the way. I didn't mean to maim you, I only meant to kill you" (MacLeod, *House* 24). Marty's inability to resist his sister's advances later in the play clearly indicates the hallmarks of a traumatic bond. It is important to note that in *The House of Yes*, the ultimate result of the final reenactment is the failure of the original, healing intention of the repetition: Jackie-O follows wholly in her mother's footsteps, eventually gunning down the man she loves in a final attempt to keep him with her. Marty plans to repeat the actions his father tried to enact: to leave. The clue to this reality lies in the text, as earlier indicated, as Jackie-O and Marty prepare to engage in their compulsive incestuous ritual. Just as Mrs. Pascal successfully prevented Mr. Pascal from leaving by shooting him, Jackie-O can only accomplish the same task by fatally shooting Marty. Whereas before, Jackie-O and Marty were "perform[ing] their] mourning," perhaps in an effort to "recover from the trauma of loss," both personal and national, the final assassination reenactment is re-visioned as an actual assassination, which serves to reinscribe a cycle of violence (Phelan, *Mourning* 4). In this respect, it could be argued that Jackie-O kills Marty because he threatens to assassinate the narrative she has created which would keep the twins happily romantically linked. Likewise, it could be said that the attempted assassination is that of a dominant narrative that precludes the couple from being together due to the socially unacceptable circumstances of their relationship, as well as the narrative created by Mrs. Pascal in an effort to conceal the family's horrific and violent history.

### **Imagery**

The thematic imagery in *The House of Yes* correlates with imagery in both of the other plays examined in this study, primarily the image of the national patriarch, and in the case in two of the three plays, the literal image of digging or holes in the earth. As regards the image of the national patriarch, in all three of the plays examined, costuming plays an important role in how

we as audience members engage with the characters who take on these roles. While costuming plays an important role in assassination ritual in *The House of Yes*, as earlier discussed, the play places little to no emphasis on the costume that Marty wears when he takes on the role of John F. Kennedy, arguably further indicating the gaps left by men in the play. In each of the plays in this study, including *The House of Yes*, it could be argued that the image of the national patriarch stands in for the absent father. *The House of Yes*, however, is the only of the three plays featuring members of a family for which a clear case of the murder of the patriarch can be made. In Parks' plays, the patriarch has abandoned his family; but in *The House of Yes*, it is likely that in his attempt to leave his wife and children, Mr. Pascal was murdered by his wife, an event that traumatized the young Pascal children and would later become the basis for the incestuous assassination ritual Marty and Jackie-O create and repeatedly enact.

To classify the image of the national patriarch in each of these plays as merely a representation of the absent father, however, is reductive. As highlighted in the Introduction, in each of the plays, the image of an assassinated president is indicative of the power of the patriarchy as well as the power of the American Dream: a dream that is repeatedly shot down only to rise from the ashes, a dream that is so brightly alive in the consciousness of the world that it can never truly be assassinated and is, instead, constantly re-visioned to serve the needs of contemporary society. In many respects, John F. Kennedy exemplified the American Dream, or at least the potential of the American Dream. Though JFK was born into an affluent political family, was well educated, well traveled and remained overwhelmingly popular during his brief tenure as President of the United States, it is perhaps important to remember that he was initially seen as the underdog in the election which would ultimately catapult him into political stardom. His assassination shocked and unified the nation in a way that few events of the 20<sup>th</sup> century had the power to do (Pierson vii). Arguably, it marked an important loss of innocence in the history of our nation, a loss so severe that a full recovery was virtually impossible. As James Pierson points out in the introduction to his book *Camelot and the Cultural Revolution*:

No other event in the postwar era, not even the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, has cast such a long shadow over our national life. The murder of the handsome and vigorous president shocked the nation to its core and shook the faith of many Americans in their institutions and way of life. The repercussions of the event continue to be felt down to the present day. (vii)

While there are many who would argue that the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, have cast a much more lasting “shadow over our national life,” it is true that the idealism surrounding the modern day Camelot was no more. Further, for many Americans who saw Kennedy as the embodiment of the American Dream, faith and hope in the future of the American Dream was shaken, if not utterly shattered. We know that JFK was by no means a perfect man: there are rumors of extra-marital affairs, hotheadedness and prescription drug abuse due to a back injury (Scott). But the idyllic, American existence the Kennedys managed to display in the early 1960s is the stuff of legend and arguably, represents a narrative of the American Dream that can never be truly recovered. Kennedy’s assassination, followed soon thereafter by the assassinations of other prominent political figures, most notably Civil Rights activists Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X, and Presidential hopeful Robert Kennedy, for all intents and purposes, forced a re-visioning of the American Dream. Following Kennedy’s assassination, Americans were forced to grapple with the tragic void created by this loss: the loss of a beloved leader, a loss of innocence, the loss of a safe, comforting vision of our nation and the American Dream. Arguably, a new American Dream of global democracy, influenced largely by the Vietnam War and the fear of the spread of communism, rose to take the old dream’s place.

As Piereson points out, there are many important images associated with the assassination of John F. Kennedy:

[T]he Zapruder film depicting the assassination in a frame-by-frame sequence; the courageous widow arriving with the coffin at Andrew’s Air Force Base still wearing her bloodstained dress; the throng of mourners, many of high school or



college age, lined up for blocks outside the Capitol to pay their respects to the fallen president; the accused assassin himself gunned down two days later while in police custody, and in full view of a national television audience; the little boy saluting the coffin of his slain father; the somber march to Arlington National Cemetery; the eternal flame affixed to the gravesite. These scenes, repeated endlessly on television at the time and then reproduced in popular magazines and, still later, in documentary films, were marked indelibly on the nation's memory, where they serve as a dark backdrop to the tumultuous decade that followed. (viii)

It could be argued that each of these images, in particular those contained within the Zapruder film, images of Jackie Kennedy in her bloodstained dress and that of young John F. Kennedy, Jr. saluting his father's coffin, are so instantly recognizable by Americans, even those who were not yet born at the time of the assassination, that it is hard to imagine our nation's history without them. Further, each of these morbid images, broadcast on television and made available to hundreds of thousands of Americans, helped solidify Kennedy's status as a martyr, a fallen hero, a legend (Piereson 99-100). As Piereson notes, "While but one in three Americans were able to witness Lincoln's procession, the omnipresent television cameras carried the Kennedy funeral into homes all across the nation" (100). The Zapruder film, in particular, is of special significance in *The House of Yes* because of the fact that its existence and the ease with which it can be acquired make the potential for the assassination reenactment in the play to be incredibly precise. The stage directions indicate that after Jackie-O has "shot" Marty, the two reenact the moments just after Kennedy was assassinated. An exacting replication could only be possible with the existence of the Zapruder film. In the production in which I played the role of Jackie-O, we spent a great deal of time studying the film and attempting to recreate those moments as precisely as possible, before launching into the incestuous coupling. The stage directions indicate that Jackie-O and Marty "reenact the moments after Kennedy was

assassinated...In slow motion” (MacLeod, *House*, 45). Arguably, this manipulation of real-time in the reenactment heightens the moment, in addition to highlighting the ways in which one remembers such horrific events.

Likewise, the image of Jackie Kennedy in her bloodstained dress plays an important role in *The House of Yes*, as it is this image that spurs the action of the play. Jackie Kennedy was an incredibly popular public figure; for example, “Her televised tour of the White House restoration that she had initiated was watched by 56 million people” (Scott). Therefore, her appearance before a stunned public in her bloodstained pink Chanel suit resulted in a powerful and lasting image of American strength and grief in times of crisis. It is in some respects an image of insistence: a command that we remember and acknowledge our history. According to Lady Bird Johnson, the wife of Vice President Lyndon B. Johnson, Jackie Kennedy refused to change out of her bloodstained dress in order to accompany her husband’s body after it was released from the medical examiner’s (Johnson). The young widow told Mrs. Johnson, who would now take on the role of First Lady, “I want them to see what they have done to Jack” (Johnson). This gruesome image of Jackie Kennedy haunted Johnson, who wrote in her diary, “Mrs. Kennedy’s dress was stained with blood. One leg was almost entirely covered with it and her right glove was caked, it was caked with blood - her husband’s blood. Somehow that was one of the most poignant sights - that immaculate woman exquisitely dressed, and caked in blood” (Johnson). Notably, in *The House of Yes* it was while Jackie-O was waiting for the glued on macaroni to dry on her skirt in a replication of Jackie Kennedy’s post-assassination pink Chanel suit, that she and Marty first played “the game,” initiating a ritual that would mimic not only Kennedy’s assassination, but the assassination of their own father, as well, perhaps, as their hopes for a normal, stable future. The description of Jackie-O’s Ides of March party costume has the air of a child’s art project; however, the macabre implications of macaroni “Kind of glued on. Like Brains” clearly indicates that Jackie-O and Marty have graduated from child’s play into much more adult territory (MacLeod, *House* 27). Arguably, images of both John F. and Jackie

Kennedy, both idealistic and gruesome, play an important role in the collective psyche of the United States of America and therefore the world created in *The House of Yes*.

Another important use of imagery in the play is the suggestion of holes and digging, a crucial element in the play that is also symbolic of something much larger than one might initially believe. We will see in later chapters how important these images of holes and digging are in Parks' plays, but in *The House of Yes* they play a more subtle but equally important role. In *The House of Yes*, we never see the hole in question: the hole in the backyard, in which Jackie-O insists their father is buried, but which Marty claims was merely a hole dug for the installation of a new central air conditioning unit. The hole is barely even mentioned, in fact, but when it is mentioned, its role is pivotal. The hole is an important textual element included by MacLeod, perhaps as a metaphor for the digging one has to do to uncover the truth, as well as the inevitable gaps in ever-fallible memory. Arguably, the hole also symbolically represents the shallow grave of the American patriarchy. Even members of the Pascal family must mine the depths of their memories to explain the true significance of the once prominent hole in the backyard. Given the timeline set forth by the playwright, we can guess that Marty and Jackie would have been very young and impressionable children at the time of their father's murder, likely between the ages of 5 and 8. It is possible that the two were forced to help their mother dispose of their father's body, most likely by assisting with the digging of the hole in which he was eventually buried. While it is clear that the Pascal family is wealthy, it isn't safe to assume that Mrs. Pascal would share her crime with more people than necessary as that would very likely jeopardize her reputation and her freedom. It is also clear from the play that the family is incredibly insular. Their preparations for hosting a guest are baffling in some respects because they are unprecedented; as Anthony indicates to Lesly early in the play, they've never had a guest before (MacLeod, *House* 18). For these reasons, we can guess that Jackie-O and Marty, as very young children, helped bury their murdered father in the backyard, arguably burying their own freedom with him.

Symbolically, the hole could also represent the gaps in history and memory, or the grave of a seemingly more innocent and idealistic time. We see these gaps evidenced in the dialogue and action of the play; arguably these “holes” in the story make it difficult for the family process their grief in much the same way that the very carefully concealed “holes” in Kennedy’s legacy make it impossible for a nation to fully comprehend the violent reality and larger cultural and political implications of his assassination. Likewise, it could be said that these gaps represent the ways in which a dominant narrative continues to exclude those whose reality differs from the dominant culture. Arguably, in this respect, the characters in the play seek to fill these holes, to understand the ruptures and gaps that leave them feeling lost, by reenacting and re-visioning the moment in which their idealistic reality was violently and irrevocably changed.

### **The Pascals vs. The “Other”**

The Pascal family is a tight-knit, insular family, clearly obsessed with the Kennedy family, to which they constantly compare themselves. The Pascals, perhaps, identify with the Kennedys based in part on what is missing: the patriarch. No matter how we look at it, Mr. Pascal is long gone, and Mrs. Pascal has taken on the role of the head of household in an attempt to fill the void of the father. While in matters of national leadership, there is always another man on deck to fill the shoes of an assassinated president, this reality is not always the case in a family setting. Mrs. Pascal makes it clear early in the play that she wasn’t faithful to her husband, saying to Lesly in the first few pages of the play:

I had one great passion in my life and do you know who that was?...My husband...I didn’t know he was my one great passion until he was gone. Until he was gone, my one great passion was the man I met that night at a party. My one great passion was any man I met that night at a party who could use a new

adjective to describe me. I have no idea who my children belong to. (MacLeod, *House* 13)

This point is important enough to be brought up later by Anthony when Lesly remarks that he looks like Marty. He says “we’re not exactly sure we had the same father. I mean my mother always had the same husband. But she was kind of a free spirit. You know. Like that” (35). In both cases, Lesly is taken aback by this clear departure from traditional family values, and even marvels that this knowledge doesn’t “bother” the members of the family in any way. While Mrs. Pascal certainly had other lovers at the time she was married to her husband, it would seem that none of them was serious enough to fill the role of father and husband. In some respects, Mrs. Pascal seems to still be in mourning for her husband; it is often the case that one doesn’t know what one has until it’s gone; and Mrs. Pascal seems to exemplify this cliché, despite her off-handed admissions of infidelity and the strong likelihood that she is responsible for her husband’s murder. While it is not clear where the Pascal’s wealth comes from, it is clear, based on their behavior, that they believe that their wealth and stature will allow them to get away with most anything, including murder.

As a stark contrast to the Pascal family, Marty’s fiancée Lesly is clearly distinguished as “other.” This aspect has a great deal to do with the fact that she is the only character in the play who is not a member of the immediate family, but her distinction as “other” goes beyond that: Lesly comes from a blue collar, working class background, whereas the Pascal family is mysteriously wealthy and emphatically intent on keeping their blood blue. MacLeod says in her Author’s Note that the play is “about an insularity I see in the upper classes, people who have cut themselves off from the rest of the world and are living by the rules they’ve invented” (5). As for Lesly, MacLeod clearly indicates that “Lesly begins the play wanting in” (5). This reality sets us up from the beginning of the play to see Lesly as an intruder of sorts, as someone who doesn’t belong: she is “other.” Marty’s half-hearted attempts to make her a member of the family are futile from the get go. However, despite the class distinction that makes it easy for Jackie-O

to humiliate Lesly and despite the fact that at the end of the play Jackie-O does, in some respects, “win,” Lesly is arguably the most honorable character in the play. Her generosity, compassion and forgiving nature mark her as “other” just as clearly as her working class background does.

It is important to note that Lesly is by no means perfect; she does, after all, sleep with her fiancé’s brother. But arguably, the horror she experiences upon receiving the news of her fiancé’s incestuous relationship with his twin sister weakens her, and she is easily manipulated by Anthony. It would be fair to say that both Anthony and Lesly are enacting revenge against Marty; Anthony, as the little brother who has always felt “left out” (32), and Lesly, as the betrayed fiancé who wanted nothing more than “in” (5). When Marty, hurt by her infidelity, attacks Lesly, she responds: “Well I’m sorry but when someone says something I tend to think it’s the truth, it’s just the way I am, the way I was brought up, and if somebody forgets to mention something I wouldn’t think to ask for example did you sleep with your sister?!” (55). We see clearly in this exchange just how different the two really are, and Marty’s anger quickly dissolves when he realizes what Lesly witnessed the prior evening.

We see this sharp contrast between the Pascals and Lesly played out in other ways, as well. For example, the Pascals are, in every respect, a family of dreamers; they do not live in reality and represent a distorted realization of the American Dream. They are wealthy; they are educated; they have social standing; but in contrast to the definition of the American Dream, we do not get a sense that they have earned their wealth, education and standing. It is something inherited, something handed down to them; for the most part they have no concept of what hard work is, of what it means to earn the things one possesses. Arguably, they are the epitome of the entitled American, living in a house of yes, and their socio-economic position allows them the privilege of impracticality. By contrast, Lesly is the representation of the complete opposite, a working class girl who grew up going without, more often than not. In scene five, we get a great deal of insight into Lesly’s childhood. When Jackie-O needles her about not visiting the

nation's capital on a fifth grade field trip, Marty steps in and defends Lesly, saying, "They didn't have the money." When Jackie-O presses the issue, Lesly reveals, "My father was unemployed. My father was laid off." Seeing an opportunity to prove to Marty just how unsuitable a mate Lesly truly is, Jackie-O cruelly asks her, "Were you poor? Did you eat chicken pot pies?" to which Lesly responds, "Pancakes. A lot of pancakes" (27). Lesly knows what it means to work for a living, to earn one's keep, and her pursuit of upward mobility as part and parcel of the American Dream has both to do with hard work as well as the possibility of entry into the upper echelon via marriage – she is, after all, engaged to someone who comes from money and very clearly desires to be a part of this world.

Though both the Pascals and Lesly are different representations of the American Dream, the Pascals refuse to accept reality. Arguably, they not only refuse to accept reality, but their culture tacitly permits this refusal. Lesly, on the other hand, is more accepting of her situation, is more pragmatic in nature. A perfect example of this contrast occurs in the short scene between Marty and Lesly in the guest bedroom, in which Marty attempts to convince Lesly to leave his family's Thanksgiving celebration early:

MARTY: We can drive back. We could watch the parade.

LESLY: It's rained out.

MARTY: Says who?

LESLY: The news. They showed Bullwinkle. Blowing. He nearly came undone.

MARTY: Now that would be something to see.

LESLY: Where do you think he'd end up?

MARTY: I don't know. Outer space?

LESLY: Somebody's back yard, probably. (19)

This brief exchange illustrates a key difference between Marty and Lesly and the way they think. Marty, the dreamer, imagines that the huge Thanksgiving Day Parade balloon of Bullwinkle

would end up in outer space, whereas Lesly, the more pragmatic and realistic of the two, counters with the cold, hard, boring reality: “Somebody’s back yard, probably.” Marty, like John F. Kennedy, dreams big, dreams of outer space; Lesly pulls him back down to earth, grounds him in reality. As members of the audience, a small part of us can’t help but dream along with Marty, just as another small part of us can’t help but agree with Lesly. Like Marty and JFK, we like to dream of outer space, but like Lesly (and so many who proclaim the moon landing a hoax), we can’t quite imagine that such a fantastic dream could ever possibly be a reality: it’s just not practical.

An examination of the role of women in the context of *The House of Yes* seems equally vital, especially as the women arguably control the majority of the action in the play. Everyone in the Pascal household caters to Jackie-O: Mrs. Pascal, in her confrontation with Lesly over her infidelity with Anthony even says, “Jackie *can* have everything her way. She always has” (MacLeod, *House* 46, emphasis original). Arguably, this version of a Jackie-O, a powerful woman who wields ultimate control, is in some respects very different from our perception of the real Jackie Kennedy, who in her tenure as First Lady, maintained the image of the gracious, quiet wife and mother. September 2011 saw the release of *Jaqueline Kennedy: Historical Conversations on Life with John F. Kennedy*, a book and 8 CD set of recorded interviews, conducted by Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. in 1964, not long after her husband’s assassination. In a book review for *The New York Times*, Janny Scott refers to Jackie Kennedy as “one of the most enigmatic figures of the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century – the woman who, as much as anyone, helped shape a heroic narrative of the Kennedy years” (Scott). Scott points out that in the interviews,

Any shortcomings on the part of her husband are not mentioned. She speaks of his loyalty, sensitivity, courage – traits consistent with the Camelot template she had been the first to invoke. She presents herself as adoring, eager for his



approval and deeply moved by the man...He was, she says, kind, conciliatory, forgiving, a gentleman, a man of taste in people, furniture, books.

Jackie Kennedy's public, devoted admiration of her husband is in stark contrast to the gender dynamics we see illustrated in *The House of Yes* where Jackie-O and Mrs. Pascal wield ultimate power over Anthony, Marty, and arguably, the legacy of Mr. Pascal. In this respect, it could be argued that MacLeod turns the traditional patriarchal structure upside down, creating instead a world in which the women are more decisive, more powerful, and command ultimate control. However, the tenuous circumstances of the Pascal household, coupled with the gruesome reality of Mr. Pascal's murder and Mrs. Pascal's need to control a narrative that erases that reality, arguably shows us an ideologically conflicted text that upends a patriarchal culture in deference to a matriarchal culture that is in most respects no better.

Notably, Jackie Kennedy's newly released interviews reveal the private sway she believed she had over her husband in political affairs, as well as her clear and strong opinions on political figures and events (Scott). In the interviews, Jackie Kennedy seems to project a loving adoration of and deference to her late husband, but as Scott notes, "Mrs. Kennedy might have been intentionally projecting the image expected of women at the time." Certainly, the "image expected of women" in the 1960s was based on an extremely patriarchal vision. As Tyson points out, "the patriarchal concept of femininity – which is linked to frailty, modesty, and timidity – disempowers women in the real world: it is not feminine to succeed in business, to be extremely intelligent, to earn big bucks, to have strong opinions, to have a healthy appetite (for anything), or to assert one's rights" (*Critical* 88). The interviews arguably reveal the cultural contradictions of what it meant to be a woman in America at the time: Jackie Kennedy not only appears modest and timid, as her culture demanded she be, but also reveals herself to be intelligent, politically savvy, and opinionated. In one moment she candidly divulges that she often discussed her thoughts and opinions in matters of politics with her husband, while in another, she expresses an overall disdain for women who were active in politics, stating of two

in particular, “I wouldn’t be surprised if they were lesbians” (Scott). Arguably, her categorization of publicly political women as potential “lesbians” infers her belief that any woman who would actively involve herself in a sphere reserved for men, such as politics, is abnormally masculine. However, the private political influence she had over her husband is evident to Scott.

Despite the image of feminine submission she often projected to the public, Jackie Kennedy’s strength and fortitude are made evident in the interviews, which reveal that though exhausted, she attended inaugural balls while recovering from a Caesarean section (though not without the help of Dexedrine, a prescription medication referred to as an “upper”) (Scott). Likewise, her refusal to change out of her bloodstained clothes upon leaving the hospital after her husband was assassinated was arguably a bold political maneuver that served to help solidify her husband’s legacy as a tragic, fallen hero. Likewise, as Piereson points out, at the funeral services for her husband, Jackie Kennedy “was the very model of bravery and dignity throughout” (99). Jackie Kennedy’s much-noted stoic public persona in a time of great tragedy is perhaps emblematic of the strength of women throughout history when presented with similar devastating circumstances. Further, Jackie Kennedy’s “introduction of the Camelot image” just days after her husband’s assassination further served to cement in the “public memory” the idealistic glory associated with the Kennedy presidency (Piereson 184). As Piereson notes, “Mrs. Kennedy, in her sentimental idealism and fascination with legends and fairy tales, sought to attach a morally uplifting message to one of the uglier events in American history” (184).

In much the same way that Jackie Kennedy was a woman of many contradictions, the role of women in the world of *The House of Yes* appears contradictory. Christine Delphy, a pioneer of materialist feminist thought, posits that “Just as the lower classes are oppressed by the upper classes in society as a whole...women are the subordinates within families. As such, women constitute a separate oppressed class, based on their oppression as women, regardless of the socioeconomic class to which they belong” (Tyson, *Critical* 97). The Pascal women, however, are not “subordinate” to the men in their lives; in fact, the opposite seems to be true in

most respects. Jackie-O and Mrs. Pascal seemingly control most of what happens in the house, and any attempt on the part of Anthony or Marty to go against their will proves inevitably futile. However, Jackie-O and Mrs. Pascal are arguably relegated to the house, while Marty remains the only member of the family to make a lasting escape by moving to New York to start a new life. Likewise, Anthony was free to choose to drop out of Princeton and come home to help care for his sister. In this respect, it would seem that the male members of the Pascal family are the only members afforded opportunities that might lift them up and out of their bourgeois, suburban existence.

Further, while it is true that each member of the Pascal household caters to Jackie-O's desires, arguably, they do so only to prevent her from hurting herself or others. As Tyson points out, "*Traditional gender roles...cast women as emotional (irrational), weak, nurturing, and submissive*" (85, emphasis original). While Jackie-O does not display outwards signs of nurturing or submissive behavior, she is highly irrational, her comportment at times bordering on hysteria. In this respect, Jackie-O arguably reflects a conflicting view of the cultural role of women in a patriarchal society. Likewise, while Mrs. Pascal keeps a tight reign over the details of her husband's demise, controlling the familial narrative in such a way that even her grown children appear uncertain as to what really happened to their father, it could be argued that the patriarchy continues to rule her from a shallow grave in the backyard. The repercussions of her violent act keep her forever tethered to the home, relegated to the domestic sphere. We also see this conflict with regard to traditional gender roles in Lesly's behavior. At the start of the play, Lesly displays all the outward signs of a young woman fully indoctrinated into a patriarchal state of mind. She is emotional, and her emotions get the better of her when she discovers the truth about her fiancé. She is weak and timid, afraid to stand up to Jackie-O until it's too late. She is arguably nurturing and submissive, caring for Marty when he needs her and submitting to verbal abuse at the hands of his sister. However, at the end of the play, Lesly arguably emerges as the strongest female character in the show, wresting control of the situation from Jackie-O

and successfully convincing Marty to escape his past once and for all to build a future with her. Her strength and wherewithal come too late, however, and Jackie-O ultimately bests her, succeeding in finding a way to keep Marty with her forever. For these reasons, *The House of Yes* is arguably an ideologically conflicted text when it comes to the role of women, in some instances bolstering the female situation while in others, undermining the power of the women in the play.

The female perspective and experience is often ignored in a patriarchal culture. As Scott notes, "In her foreword to the book, Caroline Kennedy says her decision to publish was prompted by the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of her father's presidency. It would be a disservice, she said, to allow her mother's perspective to be absent from the public and scholarly debate" (Scott). Arguably, the assassination reenactment in *The House of Yes* as enacted by both Mrs. Pascal and Jackie-O is re-visioned as an attempted assassination of a patriarchal culture which would deny the inclusion of the perspective of women. However, the assassination attempts ultimately fail, serving primarily to reinscribe a cycle of violence, relegating each of the female characters in the play to a life in the shadows of a patriarchal culture.

### **Is There Room for The American Dream in a House of Yes?**

As explored in the introduction, the American Dream has meant different things to different people over the course of the last century. Primarily, however, it is directly tied to upward mobility, to the potential to rise from humble beginnings to wealth and comfort. Arguably, *The House of Yes* presents a reader or audience with a world in which this dream can never become a reality; in order to maintain their standing, the wealthy need only prevent the working class from achieving beyond a certain mark. This reality is literally enacted in the play: Jackie-O prevents Lesly from taking what she believes is rightfully hers, and further, she does so by the direst and most permanent means possible. In this respect, it could be argued that

Jackie-O literally robs Lesly of her hope for upward mobility by assassinating the man who can help lift her above her current socioeconomic status.

Marty is very much a man trapped between his family's version of the American Dream and his fiancée's version of the American Dream. In a sense, he is trapped between the American Dream and his own American reality. The Pascal family refuses to accept reality, and for the most part, Marty puts up little resistance. They re-vision the reality of Mr. Pascal's situation, Marty and Jackie-O reconstructing the event into a bizarre parallel of the Kennedy Assassination in a subconscious effort to reenact and re-vision a potentially repressed, certainly traumatic experience, and in some respects, thereby attempt to assassinate a narrative that keeps them bound to their mother. In the end, Lesly's pragmatic nature cannot save Marty any more than the Pascals' dreaming can. The American Dream and the American reality cancel each other out, negate each other, just as they compliment each other; in some respects, one cannot survive without the other. Arguably, the endless cycle this situation creates results in the assassination of Marty in a reenactment of the assassination of Kennedy/Mr. Pascal, forcing an ultimate re-visioning of the American Dream for all involved. However, Marty's assassination also arguably reinscribes a very clear class structure within the world of the play in that it denies "ownership" or "possession" to Lesly, relegating her to the working class indefinitely.

It could be argued that the cycle of violence witnessed in *The House of Yes* mirrors a national cycle of violence that must repeat itself for there to be any catharsis, because it reminds us of what we've lost. This notion, of course, is in direct contrast to one of the key tenets of the American Dream: that we forget about the past and look only to the future. Marty's attempts to do just that prove futile; he is inexorably tethered to a past that refuses to allow him to build a "normal" life. Arguably, Lesly's loss is merely unfortunate: she is an interloper whose role as an innocent bystander is of little to no consequence to the Pascal family once the cycle is complete. It is entirely possible that Marty knows when he agrees to play the game one last time, that it will be the ultimate last time. Arguably, he is aware that at some point, the

reenactment of his father's assassination must finally be as accurate a reenactment as possible in order to put an end to the violence that the original act spurred. The continuation of the cycle would only be possible were Jackie-O and Marty to have children to take up the reins, but with Marty dead, the cycle will be complete. In this respect, Marty's willing sacrifice, even as part of a "game" that could arguably be labeled as sacrilege, in some ways mirrors the sacrifice a true leader makes for his or her country. It is interesting to note in this context that "What distinguishes yet also connects sacrifice and sacrilege is how we visualize this charged emptiness, the mark of the sacred. For if with sacrifice it is the emptiness that fulfills, with sacrilege it is the filling of the space with the extremes that not so much fulfills as spills over in proliferating cascades..." (Taussig 192). Marty and Jackie-O's re-visioning of both the Kennedy assassination and the assassination of their father certainly represents an extreme effort to fill the resulting void with something of substance, and Marty's inevitable sacrifice in some respects, creates a void which fulfills the requirements of a historical narrative.

It could be said that the Pascals are a family that ceased to be functional long ago, if there ever was a time that they were functional. In this respect, they are not necessarily atypical of the American Family, a fact which may explain, in part, the continued draw of the play. Even though *The House of Yes* presents a very extreme version of dysfunction in a family structure, as Americans, we are able to relate. The dysfunction in the Pascal household has to do with a great many factors, not the least of which include privilege, addiction, insularity, a confusion of national tragedy with personal trauma, and a lack of accountability. Arguably, each of these factors is interrelated and make for dysfunction so extreme that recovery may truly be impossible. It could be argued that in *The House of Yes*, Jackie-O and Marty's fundamental need to remember a crucial moment in their own history gives way to a tragic re-visioning which ultimately reflects our nation's desperate need to remember, despite the allowance we are given to forget by the ideals of the American Dream. This need to remember is reflected in commemorative memorabilia featuring our tragedies and triumphs, as well as large, public

memorials, like the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, which is eerily reminiscent of a tombstone residing in the shadow of other monuments. Again, this need to remember marks a strong contrast to the tenets of the American Dream, which allow us to forget any history which might tarnish the image of our nation and encourages us to look to the future, as discussed in the Introduction. We see here the ways in which we are encouraged to remember our heroes, to remember instances in which we were victimized and ultimately triumphed, but allowed, and even encouraged to forget instances in which we were responsible for the subjugation and trauma of entire groups of people.

The American Dream as envisioned in *The House of Yes* is complicated. The Pascals, as wealthy, educated people have a skewed sense of reality. We get the sense that they are of the more eccentric breed of wealthy Americans: they don't work, but they don't really play, either. As readers and audience members, we don't get the sense that they leave the house much anymore, save for the occasional run to the grocery store. In fact, it seems as though they prefer to remain insular and only even bother to look out their windows when there might be an actual Kennedy to see. Arguably, this behavior likely has a great deal to do with events that have transpired in their private lives that they fear will be made public if they continue to engage in normal social interaction. One could make the case that for the Pascal family, or for any wealthy American, the American Dream is nothing more than a theoretical and psychological tool used to trick the masses into believing that if they work hard enough and persevere, they will be rewarded. The members of the Pascal family know that those who generally benefit from the hard work of the masses are those who are already wealthy; we can deduce this fact based on the reality that the Pascals themselves don't seem to work, but do seem to have. The true source of their assets is mysterious and seemingly stable. Perhaps the only member of the Pascal family to stray from this view of the American Dream is also the only member of the family to have left home: Marty. In many respects, Marty left home in pursuit of the American Dream: a loving wife, a regular job, maybe a family – in other words, a normal, American life. As

the embodiment of the “rugged individual,” Marty strikes out on his own, leaving his past behind him for the bright future of tomorrow. But we know that because of Marty’s personal history, he can never really lead a “normal” life; his history is not something that can be easily erased. Marty’s dream of ingratiating his fiancé to his family in order to escape his own history, to acquire his unique version of the American Dream, is futile from the start.

Arguably, Lesly is the character most obviously in pursuit of what most of us recognize as the American Dream in *The House of Yes*. She comes from a much more unstable background, financially. We learn that she grew up poor, a circumstance that Jackie-O feels it appropriate to mock, and MacLeod tells us in her Author’s Notes that Lesly desperately wants to be accepted by Marty’s family not only because she loves him, but also because of what they represent: wealth, prestige, social standing (5). Lesly has worked hard to secure a stable life for herself, and she seems to believe that she deserves a better life because she’s worked for it. Lesly’s pursuit of the American Dream is arguably just as futile as Marty’s; the wealthy Pascal family will go to any extremes necessary to keep their family lines devoid of people like Lesly.

The lines between national and personal tragedy are strongly blurred in *The House of Yes*, and MacLeod’s use of the image of John F. and Jackie Kennedy draws us into the world of the play in a way that is extremely powerful. The collective grief inherent in the assassination of such a beloved political figure arguably makes it easy for the audience to feel a kinship with each other as well as the characters in the play, even though we know that their actions are irresponsible and will continue to cause irrevocable damage. To see that beloved figure, that icon gunned down, depletes us all, depletes the power of the American Dream, in part because our collective memory as it relates to John F. Kennedy is so tied to a time of idealism and prosperity. America’s innocence was shattered when John F. Kennedy was assassinated. However, the American Dream, which serves as a powerful ideology potently embedded in the global collective conscious, was not shot down with him. Arguably, it was redirected, as the attention of the nation turned toward an aggressive stance for the global propagation of “liberty,”



as embodied by the increasing presence of American troops in Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia in particular, in an attempt to suppress the spread of communism.

### Conclusion

Of John F. Kennedy's assassination, Piereson remarks, "There remain, of course, many unanswered – and unanswerable – questions which have by now nourished several decades of fruitless speculation about who actually killed the president and what might have happened (or not happened) had he lived" (ix). We see this reality reflected in the lives of the Pascal family in Wendy MacLeod's *The House of Yes*. MacLeod notes that "When [*The House of Yes*] opened in L.A., one review headline read 'MacLeod Deconstructs the American Family,' and I thought, 'That's funny. I thought I'd constructed one'" (qtd. in Svich). The construction of the Pascal family, in some respects, highlights the construction of a very clear class structure in our nation, as well as the expectations of women in a patriarchal culture. As noted in the Introduction, women and the poor continue to struggle against being relegated to lives of submission. While *The House of Yes* may continue to consistently face criticism for its predictable outcome, it is a play that will undoubtedly continue to be produced well into the future, because of the ways in which it explores memory, America's violent history, the taboo topic of incest, and more subversively, the perpetuation of the relegation of women to the domestic sphere and the struggle of the working class.

The juxtaposition and ultimate blurring of lines between national and personal tragedy make the play, as noted in San Francisco Chronicle "A fascinating blend of frivolous family politics and menacing political allegory" (Winn). Additionally, "The Kennedy family is now as prominent as ever and continues to be a subject of keen interest to the American public" (Piereson viii). The fact that we know how the play will end in some respects makes it all the more interesting, because we know that it's not really the end: that the cycle of violence will

inevitably find a way to repeat itself, just as it did for JFK's assassin mere days after his arrest, and arguably, just as it has inexplicably continued to for the Kennedy family. True catharsis for an event like Kennedy's assassination may in fact be impossible, as we are doomed to find ways to repeat it in an effort to understand it. One of the key tenets of the American Dream is directly responsible for this inevitable violent repetition: if the American Dream allows us to forget our violent history of subjugation and oppression by focusing on the future, then we are unable to learn from our mistakes and are doomed, therefore, to repeat them.

Lady Bird Johnson noted in her diary about the hordes who lined the streets outside the Capital where Kennedy lay in state, "I wanted to cry for them and with them, but it was impossible to permit the catharsis of tears. I don't know quite why, except that perhaps continuity of strength demands restraint" (Johnson). This sentiment alone reflects an aversion to participation in collective experience in deference to an outward appearance of strength and power. It could be said that this sentiment directly relates to the American image of the "rugged individual," prioritizing the needs of the individual over those of the community. However, and perhaps ironically, the opposite could also be said: that an outward appearance of strength and stoicism in times of national tragedy helps tighten the bonds of community.

Regardless, the image of the Kennedys in Wendy MacLeod's *The House of Yes* presents a surprising and subversive re-visioning of assassination that disrupts centuries of gender oppression and socioeconomic subjugation. The play challenges an audience to recognize the ways in which women continue to live in the shadow of the patriarchy by relegating them to the domestic sphere and insulating them from activities that would allow them to assert their independence. It could be said that Mrs. Pascal's murder of her husband was an attempt to assassinate a dominant narrative that subjugates women. However, her actions ultimately served only to confine her to the house, where the tenets of a patriarchal culture continue to hold her captive. Further, Mrs. Pascal's attempts to erase this violent moment in her own history ultimately leads to an exact replication of the original event: her children, denied the

reality of their father's departure for years, are unable to learn from Mrs. Pascal's mistake, and are therefore doomed to repeat it. In some respects, Marty and Jackie-O's "game" serves to assassinate a dominant narrative put in place by their mother, a lie told over and over to protect the family from the repercussions of reality. Further, the play highlights the continuation of a distinct and divisive class structure in the United States by presenting a character whose socioeconomic situation is in direct contrast to the characters she tries to win over. Lesly is clearly at a disadvantage from the start, as her socioeconomic status does not allow her the same access to opportunities that the members of the Pascal family enjoy.

Following Kennedy's assassination, James Reston, a Pulitzer Prize winning journalist for *The New York Times* wrote: "America wept tonight, not alone for its dead young president, but for itself. The grief was general, for somehow the worst in the nation had prevailed over the best. The indictment extended beyond the assassin, for something in the nation itself, some strain of madness and violence, had destroyed the highest symbol of law and order" (qtd. in Piereson 89). Wendy MacLeod's re-visioning of John F. Kennedy's assassination in *The House of Yes* reflects this somber sentiment: that as Americans, we are somehow to blame for tragedies such as this. Until we are able, as a nation, to learn from our mistakes - until we take responsibility for our violent history, our subjugation of women, people of color, and people of lower socioeconomic status, until we confront the vibrant, powerful narrative that at its core encourages us to forget - we are doomed to repeat them.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Suzan-Lori Parks' *The America Play*

“A wink to Mr. Lincolns pasteboard cut out. A nod to Mr. Lincolns bust.”

(Parks, *America* 171)

Suzan-Lori Parks' dense and astonishing work *The America Play* premiered at the Yale Repertory Theatre in New Haven, Connecticut, in early 1994, before moving to New York's Public Theater. The play was developed as a collaboration between the Yale Rep, the New York Shakespeare Festival and Theatre for a New Audience. Written over a three year period between 1990-1993, *The America Play* is easily the least traditional and most inventive of the three plays explored in this study. A surprising and creative exploration of history, language, memory, and race in America, *The America Play* is also the least often produced of the three plays in this study. This is likely due in large part to the fact that the play is not an easy one to unravel. It does not provide an audience with tidy answers, and presents complicated topics that may cause discomfort for many people, such as a clear commentary on race in America, in particular the history of subjugation of African Americans, and in some respects, the complicity of African Americans in this subjugation. *The America Play* is also the only play in this study that isn't set in what can truly be deemed a traditional home, and instead is set in a large hole in the ground, a hole known only as “an exact replica of The Great Hole of History” (Parks, *America* 158). The play presents a re-visioning of presidential assassination that speaks not only to the African American experience in the United States but also to the trauma inherent in being considered “lesser than” for generation after generation. It also presents a fascinating commentary on the ways in which capitalism and assigned gender roles are inexplicably tied, as well as the danger inherent in the rugged individualism that is at the very core of the powerful vision of the American Dream. Like the events of Wendy MacLeod's *The House of Yes*, the

events that occur over the course of *The America Play* present an extreme and somewhat stylized and fantastic version of life in America. And just as is the case for *The House of Yes*, the events that occur in *The America Play* are hauntingly relative, enough so to once again present an interesting consideration of a morbid cultural fascination with public tragedy and the ways in which these tragedies affect us personally. In the case of *The America Play*, the public tragedy in question - the assassination of Abraham Lincoln - is intricately woven with generations of historical trauma resulting from subjugation. The resulting trauma manifests itself in a repetition of one of the most infamous crimes in the history of the United States in an attempt to gain understanding and ultimately healing.

### **Synopsis and Preliminary Analysis**

Act One of *The America Play*, which Suzan-Lori Parks has titled “The Lincoln Act,” is set in “A great hole. In the middle of nowhere. The hole is an exact replica of the Great Hole of History” (159). We are immediately introduced to The Foundling Father as Abraham Lincoln, alternatively referred to as the Lesser Known, an African American man whose monologue constitutes the overwhelming majority of the act. The Foundling Father as Abraham Lincoln speaks several seemingly unrelated and unimportant quotes, each separated by a *(Rest)*, and finally interrupted by his own thoughts:

To stop too fearful and too faint to go.

*(Rest)*

He digged the hole and the whole held him.

*(Rest)*

I cannot dig, to beg I am ashamed.

*(Rest)*

He went to the theatre but home she went.

*(Rest)*

Goatee. Goatee. What he sported when he died. Its not my favorite.

*(Rest)*

He digged the hole and the whole held him. Huh.

*(Rest)*. (159)

From here, The Foundling Father as Abraham Lincoln launches into the telling of his own autobiography, which continues to be punctuated by *(Rest)*s as well as quotes, both real and fictional, which are cited in footnotes at the bottom of each page. This story carries the audience through the majority of the first act, and is relayed in the third person past tense. This recounting of life events is periodically interrupted by real time events that occur in the replica of the Great Hole of History, and commentary on those events as well as the life events being recounted. We quickly learn that The Foundling Father as Abraham Lincoln, who we also come to know as The Lesser Known, “bore a strong resemblance to Abraham Lincoln. He was tall and thinly built just like the Great Man. His legs were the longer part just like the Great Mans legs. His hands and feet were large as the Great Mans were large” (159). This natural resemblance prompts The Foundling Father as Abraham Lincoln to collect items which will further likeness, including “several beards,” which he’d made himself using hair he had secretly purchased from his barber. These beards, he argues, “were completely his...Were as authentic as he was, so to speak,” “since the procurement and upkeep of his beards took so much work” (159).

We soon learn that The Foundling Father as Abraham Lincoln worked during his lifetime as a gravedigger, and that he had a solid reputation for digging “his graves quickly and neatly” (160). He laments that he was not summoned to dig the grave of Abraham Lincoln, but concedes that “none of this was meant to be. For the Great Man had been murdered long before the Lesser Known had been born” (161). He goes on to admit that his thoughts pertaining to the burial of Abraham Lincoln and his desire to be the digger of Abraham Lincoln’s grave keeps him “Living regretting he hadn’t arrived sooner,” because he knows that “if he had

been in the slightest vicinity back then, [he] would have had at least a chance at the great honor of digging the Great Mans grave” (160).

The Foundling Father as Abraham Lincoln then tells the audience about his son, “who looked like a nobody” (162). From this short paragraph, the Foundling Father as Abraham Lincoln explains that it’s “Sunday. Always slow on a Sunday” (162), leading us to believe that his monologue is serving to kill time while he waits for a customer. The Foundling Father assures us that customers will come eventually, before returning to his autobiography. He tells us about the influence the Great Hole of History had on him. It was:

A Big Hole. A theme park. With historical parades. The size of the hole itself was enough to impress any Digger, but it was the Historicity of the place the order and beauty of the pageants which marched by them the Greats on parade in front of them. From the sidelines he’d be calling “Ohwayohwhyohwayoh” and “Hello” and waving and saluting. The Hole and its Historicity and the part he played in it all gave a shape to the life and posterity of the Lesser Known that he could never shake. (162)

We soon learn that this “Big Hole,” The Great Hole of History, inspired him to create his own reproduction, the exact replica of The Great Hole of History, from which he relays his story. We learn that in order to dig the replica, The Foundling Father as Abraham Lincoln “left his wife and child and went out West” (163). The Foundling Father as Abraham Lincoln discloses that:

[W]hen someone remarked that he played Lincoln so well that he ought to be shot, it was as if the Great Mans footsteps had been suddenly revealed:

*(Rest)*

The Lesser Known returned to his hole and, instead of speaking, his act would now consist of a single chair, a rocker, in a dark box. The public was invited to pay a penny, choose from the selection of provided pistols, enter the darkened box and “Shoot Mr. Lincoln.” The Lesser Known became famous overnight. (164)

It is at this point in the play that the audience first sees the reenactment of Lincoln's assassination, a reenactment that is repeated six more times over the course of the first act, with each repetition including revisions both slight and significant, including the donning of different beards. At one point, he opts for "the yellow beard," noting that "Some inaccuracies are good for business" (168). Most reenactments include pleasantries exchanged between The Foundling Father as Abraham Lincoln and his customer either before or after the reenactment, as well as an explanation of what the customer chooses to say after he or she "assassinates" Lincoln.

The Foundling Father as Abraham Lincoln makes it clear that for as long as he can remember, he's wanted to be responsible for a legacy as lasting as Lincoln's, saying that "he wanted to grow and have others think of him and remove their hats and touch their hearts and look up into the heavens and say something about the freeing of the slaves. That is, he wanted to make a great impression as he understood Mr. Lincoln to have made" (166). The Foundling Father as Abraham Lincoln further extrapolates on what most fascinated him about Lincoln's life:

Now. What interested our Mr. Lesser Known most was those feet between where the Great *Blonde* Man sat, in his rocker, the stage, the time it took the murderer to cross that expanse, and how the murderer crossed it. He jumped. Broke his leg in the jumping. It was said that the Great Mans wife then began to scream.  
(168)

The Foundling Father as Abraham Lincoln then briefly discusses the side effects of his job, chiefly "a slight deafness in this ear," before revealing that in his days as a gravedigger, he dug "over 7 hundred and 23 graves" (169). He is interrupted by a couple on their honeymoon, who have come to take part in the assassination reenactment. After they leave, The Foundling Father as Abraham Lincoln muses "Theyll have children and theyll bring their children here"



(170), pointing not only to the handing down of history from one generation to another, but a cycle of violence that is not likely to be broken anytime soon.

Before the arrival of the final customer, The Foundling Father as Abraham Lincoln postulates that perhaps the man living in the past, the historical figure, has to catch up with the man living in the present, the impersonator, remarking, “Hhhh. Ridiculous” (171). He then changes his beard again: “Full fringe. The way he appears on the money.” When the final customer enters, The Foundling Father as Abraham Lincoln remarks, “Mmm. Like clockwork.” The customer takes aim, shoots, jumps and shouts, “Thus to the tyrants!” (171), just as the first “customer” had done. We then see what is likely an eighth assassination reenactment, consisting almost entirely of a device Parks calls a “spell:”

LINCOLN

BOOTH

LINCOLN

BOOTH

LINCOLN

BOOTH

LINCOLN

BOOTH

LINCOLN

*(Booth jumps)*

A MAN (Theatrically): The South is avenged!

*(Rest)*

Hhhh.

*(Rest)*

Thank you.

THE FOUNDLING FATHER: Pleasures mine.

A MAN: Next week then. (*Exits*) (172)

These “spells,” or moments in which the names of characters are repeated, will be explored later in the chapter.

In the final moments of the Act, The Foundling Father as Abraham Lincoln goes back to the idea that in walking in the Great Man’s footsteps, he has potentially regressed in some way. The last thing the Foundling Father as Abraham Lincoln says that isn’t a repetition of something he’s said several times before is “The Lesser Known forgets who he is and just crumples. His bones cannot be found. The Greater Man continues on” (172-3), indicating that the legacy he so desperately hoped to build for himself was never to be. He once again puts on the blonde beard and the act ends with “(*A gunshot echoes. Softly. And echoes*)” (173).

Act Two, called “The Hall of Wonders,” is broken into seven distinct sections, each with a title of its own. The act opens with stage directions, some of which will be repeated over the course of the act:

*A gunshot echoes. Loudly. And echoes.*

*They are in a great hole. In the middle of nowhere. The hole is an exact replica of The Great Hole of History.*

*A gunshot echoes. Loudly. And echoes. Lucy with ear trumpet circulates. Brazil digs. (174)*

Thus begins Section A: Big Bang. Lucy and Brazil, the Foundling Father’s wife and son, hearing the echo of the gunshot, stop their work. Lucy sets Brazil back to digging, disclosing that The Foundling Father died lonely and never received a proper burial. She also expresses her need to know what’s what, a fundamental difference between she and her deceased husband, saying “Now me, I need tuh know thuh real thing from thuh echo. Thuh truth from thuh hearsay” (175). We soon learn that Lucy works as a confidant to those close to death, while Brazil was trained as a child by his father to grieve for the dead. With Lucy as a confidence woman, Brazil as a

“wailer” and “gnasher,” and The Foundling Father as a gravedigger, the family made its living in the business of death.

As Lucy and Brazil reminisce over some of their former clients, Brazil then asks his mother if she can hear The Foundling Father’s “whispers.” Lucy remarks that she doesn’t, but points out that “Whispers dont always come up right away. Takes time sometimes. Whispers could travel different out West than they do back East. Maybe slower. Maybe. Whispers are secrets and often shy. We aint seen your Pa in 30 years. That could be part of it” (178). This marks the first clear evidence we have of how much time has passed since the family was together, as well as allowing us an ability to approximate how much time has passed between the first and second acts. Bits of information that the Foundling Father as Abraham Lincoln revealed about his family in the first act soon become more clear, as we learn that he left his wife and son to make a name for himself “Out West.” We learn that Brazil was “only 5” when his father “Left his family behind” (179). Brazil recounts stories he’s heard of his father’s prowess as a gravedigger, as well as stories he’s heard about his parents’ visit to the original Great Hole of History back East. When Brazil’s exuberance causes him to exaggerate somewhat about events at the Great Hole of History by stating that American forefathers literally rose from the dead and paraded in front of visitors, Lucy is quick to gently put him in his place. She urges him to “Keep your story to scale” (179). He agrees and after a (*Rest*) goes back to recounting the stories he’s heard about The Great Hole of History, a place he himself has never visited but has heard colorful stories about all his life, stories that live only in the memories of his parents. These stories naturally lead him to a reflection of his own father, who he indicates also took on the roles of historical figures, both living and dead. His father’s favorite, “of course,” was “Mr. Lincoln,” and “Not only Mr. Lincoln but Mr. Lincolns last show. His last deeds. His last laughs” (180). After explaining that his father had come out West to create an attraction of similar value in an effort to share the joy that the Great Hole of History had brought to him, Brazil (*Rest*s), saying “Mmrestin” (180).

During this rest, we hear the seventh gunshot echo, and Brazil lets out a yelp and “(*Drops dead*)” (180). Lucy immediately calls him out, saying, “Youre fakin Mr. Brazil...I know me uh faker when I see one. Your father was uh faker. Huh. One of thuh best” (180). She goes on to reminisce about her husband, referring to him in the past tense. It is in this moment that it seems to truly dawn on Lucy that her husband is the past; that he is dead, history, as it were. She tries to justify his abandonment of the family to dig a replica of The Great Hole of History, saying, “Ssonly natural that heud come out here tuh dig out one of his own. He loved that Great Hole so” (181). Brazil brings her back to the reality that The Foundling Father is dead, which sends her focus back to his ability as a “faker.” She indicates to Brazil that he is his father’s son, that he is also “Uh greaaaaat biiiiig faker,” before setting him back to the task at hand: digging (181). After another “spell,” Lucy exclaims, prompting Brazil to shout, “Whatchaheard?!” (182). “No telling, son. Cant say” is her response (182). Brazil goes back to digging, while Lucy “circulates.”

Brazil then takes a rest to reminisce about his first five years, recounting how his father taught him to be a mourner. When Brazil was only two, his father taught him “the Wail,” and when he was three, “the Weep’ ‘the Sob’ and ‘the Moan’” (182). He practiced and became quite skilled at the business of mourning, and “The money came pouring in.” When he was five, “the Father taught him ‘the Gnash.’ The day after that the Father left of out West. To seek his fortune. In the middle of dinnertime. The Son was eating his peas” (182). This monologue is important because it marks the first time that Brazil speaks of himself in the third person, and is therefore suggestive of the Foundling Father as Abraham Lincoln’s speech in the first act. Soon after this, Brazil actually “unearths something,” which turns out to be the bust of Abraham Lincoln that was part of The Foundling Father as Abraham Lincoln’s collection. They put it with the other “Wonders,” and Lucy, hearing something urges Brazil to dig on, bringing a close to section A (183).

In Section B, titled Echo, we once again see The Foundling Father as Abraham Lincoln, who introduces Act III, scene 5 of Tom Taylor's *Our American Cousin* (1858), the play that Abraham Lincoln was enjoying at The Ford's Theatre when he was assassinated by John Wilkes Booth. It is important to note that Lincoln himself was assassinated during Act III, scene 2 of the play, and didn't live to see scene 5. However, Act III, scene 5 is the scene alluded to by The Foundling Father in Act I, when he discusses the play, saying, "Suffice it to say that it was thinly comedic and somewhere in the 3<sup>rd</sup> Act a man holds a gun to his head – something about despair –" (167). It is this scene, Act III, scene 5, in which the character of Mr. Trenchard says: "I cannot survive the downfall of my house but choose instead to end my life with a pistol to my head!" (183). A short section of this scene is played out by two of the actors who appeared as customers in Act I, up through Mr. Trenchard's dramatic line.

In Section C, titled Archeology, Lucy explains to Brazil the different categories of echoes she hears emanating from the replica of the Great Hole of History:

Echo of thuh first sort: thuh sound. (E.g. thuh gunplay.)

*(Rest)*

Echo of thuh 2<sup>nd</sup> sort: thuh words. Type A: thuh words from thuh dead. Category: Unrelated.

*(Rest)*

Echo of thuh 2<sup>nd</sup> sort, Type B: words less fortunate; thuh Disembodied Voice.

Also known as "Thuh Whispers." Category: Related. Like your Fathuhs.

*(Rest)*

Echo of thuh 3<sup>rd</sup> sort: thuh body itself. (184)

This leads Brazil to believe that they are close to finding his "faux-father" (184). When Lucy doesn't respond, he goes on to postulate that creating the world must have been much like digging the hole, wondering, "But where did those voids that was here before we was here go off to?" (185). In this manner, Brazil lays claim to the hole, claiming that it is their "inheritance of

sorts" (185). When Lucy prompts him to continue digging, he proclaims that he'd "rather dust and polish," and the script indicates that he "(Puts something on)." Lucy responds that if he wants to dust and polish, he should dust and polish, but notes that "You don't got tuh put on that tuh do it" (185). Brazil replies only "It helps," before launching into a carnival-esque show of the Hall of Wonders, in a vein that is again very reminiscent of The Foundling Father as Abraham Lincoln's monologue in the first act. When he begins to get out of control, his mother warns him once again to "Keep it tuh scale" (185). Brazil continues on his tour of the Hall of Wonders, showing the audience various artifacts, documents, and medals. Lucy warns him a third time to "Keep it tuh scale," and Brazil realizes that everything he touches potentially belonged to his father. This creates an emotional reaction in Brazil, who begins to wail, screaming "waaaaaahhhhhhhhhHHHHHHHHHHHH! HUH HEE HUH HEE HUH HEE HUH" (186). In an effort to comfort her son, Lucy says, "It is an honor to be of his line. He cleared this plot for us...He dug this whole hole" (186). After a *(Rest)*, which is followed by a "spell," Lucy exclaims:

I couldnt never deny him nothin.

I gived intuh him on everything.

Thuh moon. Thuh stars.

Thuh bees knees. Thuh cats pyjamas. (187)

This revelation is followed by another *(Rest)* and a shorter "spell," after which Brazil asks his mother if she hears anything. She replies "Stories too horrible tuh mention" (187). Brazil asks "His stories?" to which Lucy replies "Nope." Brazil then confesses that he misses his father, prompting Lucy to say "Hhh. ((dig.))" (187), and concluding section C.

Section D, also called Echo, once again resurrects The Foundling Father as Abraham Lincoln, who introduces Act III, scene 2 of Tom Taylor's *Our American Cousin*. This is the scene during which John Wilkes Booth assassinated Abraham Lincoln. Booth waited for audience response to a popular laugh line – Mr. Trenchard's "Wal, I guess I know enough to turn you inside out, old gal – you sockdologizing old man-trap" – to cover the sound of the gunshot

(Steers 118). In this respect, the scene “echoes” not only the previous “Echo” section, but also a moment in Act One in which The Foundling Father as Abraham Lincoln introduces the play, saying, “Ladies and Gentlemen: Our American Cousin –” before being interrupted by a customer (Parks, *America* 167).

In Section D, The Foundling Father as Abraham Lincoln takes on the role of Mrs. Mount in the presentation of Act III, scene 2 of *Our American Cousin*. It is important to note that Mrs. Mount is the character to which Mr. Trenchard delivers the infamous, comedic line which provoked the laughter Booth needed to somewhat cover the sound of the gunshot. In his own reenactments in Act I, this is the very line that The Foundling Father as Abraham Lincoln guffaws at, cueing his customers to fire the gun. In Section D, the script indicates (*Laughter. Applause*) after the delivery of Mr. Trenchard’s line, after which The Foundling Father as Abraham Lincoln thanks the audience for their approval of his presentation, remarking, “I *only* do thuh greats” (188). He then moves on to present the first line of Abraham Lincoln’s famous Gettysburg Address, followed by listing the capitals of several U.S. states, including Springfield, Illinois, once home to Abraham Lincoln, and Lincoln, Nebraska, re-named in honor of Lincoln after his assassination. The Foundling Father as Abraham Lincoln then introduces “the centerpiece of the evening!!” which he calls “The Death of Lincoln!” and consists of a play by play of Lincoln’s assassination:

The watching of the play, the laughter, the smiles of Lincoln and Mary Todd, the slipping of Booth into the presidential box unseen, the freeing of the slaves, the pulling of the trigger, the bullets piercing above the left ear, the bullets entrance into the great head, the bullets lodging behind the great right eye, the slumping of Lincoln, the leaning onto the stage of Booth, the screaming of Todd, the screaming of Todd, the screaming of Keene, the leaping onto the stage of Booth; the screaming of Todd, the screaming of Keene, the shouting of Booth “Thus to the tyrants!,” the death of Lincoln! – And the silence of the nation.

(*Rest*). (188)

This play by play, which arguably is also a commentary, is followed by a more obvious commentary by the Foundling Father as Abraham Lincoln, eulogizing Lincoln. (*Applause*), as indicated in the script, brings section D to a close (189).

Section E, titled Spadework, returns us to the present day, where we see Lucy and Brazil, who are little by little digging their way into the replica of the Great Hole of History. While Lucy muses, “Thats uh hard nut tuh crack uh hard nut tuh crack indeed,” Brazil focuses on matching the names of capital cities with their respective U.S. states (189), which echoes his father’s actions in the previous section. Lucy joins in, quizzing Brazil, and complimenting him on his knowledge. Their game comes to an end with the capitol of Nebraska: Lincoln. It is at this point that Lucy goes into great detail about her husband’s obsession with Lincoln, in particular Lincoln’s assassination and last moments on earth. She notes that though this part of Lincoln’s story is what most fascinated The Foundling Father, for her, the most interesting part of Lincoln’s life was “thuh part where he gets married to Mary Todd and she begins to lose her mind (and then of course where he frees all thuh slaves)” (190). Brazil begins once more to weep, and his mother comforts him by giving him a spade that had belonged to his father, saying, “He woulda wanted you tuh have it” (190). She then further comforts him by telling him how much he looks like his father, which is a complete contradiction to The Foundling Father’s assertion in Act I that Brazil “looked like a nobody. Not Mr. Lincoln or the father or the mother either” (162). This thread of genetic recognition is one we see in MacLeod’s *The House of Yes* as well, with regard specifically to Anthony, who is surprised when Lesly remarks that he looks like Marty, saying, “We’re not exactly sure we had the same father” (*House* 35). This pep talk seems to make Brazil feel more secure about both his past and his future. Lucy goes on to relate to Brazil all the things his father would say if he were present. It is unclear if Lucy’s information is completely hypothetical or if some of it is being filtered through the “whispers” of the dead, of which she believes herself perceptive. What he would say includes a secret shared



between Brazil and Lucy, a secret that is not disclosed to the audience. After a brief (*Rest*), Brazil asks Lucy, “Where is he?” to which she responds “Lincoln?” “Papa,” Brazil says. “Close by, I guess,” is Lucy’s response: “Huh. Dig” (192).

The stage directions indicate “(*Brazil digs. Time passes*)” (192). Lucy and Brazil then have a conversation in which each is talking about two distinctly different subjects: Lucy remembering her own history with The Foundling Father, and Brazil focused on the present, on the objects and the history his labor is unearthing. Notably, Brazil unearths “Uh bag of pennies,” which we can guess were earned by The Foundling Father as Abraham Lincoln, as we know from Act I that “The public was invited to pay a penny, choose from a selection of provided pistols, enter the darkened box and ‘Shoot Mr. Lincoln’” (164). Brazil then finds The Foundling Father as Abraham Lincoln’s yellow beard, and Lucy momentarily brings her focus back to the present because she thinks she hears something. When Brazil asks “Whatchaheard?” receiving no response, he repeats his question. His mother responds, “You don’t wanna know” (193). Brazil then digs up “uh Tee-Vee,” as Lucy returns to her musings on her life with The Foundling Father, or as she calls it “My re-memberies – you know – thuh stuff out of my head” (194). It is at this moment that the television that Brazil has unearthed comes on, and “The Foundling Father’s face appears” (194). Lucy doesn’t notice at first, despite Brazil saying three times “(ho! ho! wonder: ho!)” (194). Lucy finally takes notice saying, “Well. Its him,” bringing section E to a close.

Section F, also titled Echo, consists only of the following: “A *gunshot echoes. Loudly. And echoes*” (194). This echo, which is repeated here for the eighth time in the play, leads us to the final section of the play, Section G, The Great Beyond. The stage directions indicate that “Lucy and Brazil watch the TV: a replay of ‘The Lincoln Act.’ The Foundling Father has returned. His coffin awaits him” (194). They marvel at how many times The Foundling Father as Abraham Lincoln gets “gunned down,” Brazil remarking “He’s dead but not really” (195). When they lament that the sound on the television doesn’t work, the ghost of The Foundling Father chimes

in “I believe this is the place where I do the Gettysburg Address, I believe” (195). They notice him for the first time:

BRAZIL

THE FOUNDLING FATHER

LUCY

BRAZIL: Whoa!

LUCY: Howuhboutthat.

BRAZIL: Huh. Well.

*(Rest)*

Huh. Zit him?

LUCY: Its him.

BRAZIL: He’s dead?

LUCY: He’s dead.

BRAZIL: Howuhboutthat.

*(Rest)*

Shit.

LUCY

BRAZIL

LUCY (195)

The three then discuss the funeral, for which they expect a large attendance. Lucy tells Brazil to turn the television off and asks The Foundling Father, “You gonna get in yr coffin now or later?” (195). He informs her that he’d “like to wait awhile,” and Brazil interrupts to assure his father that he will put on a great show of grieving for him (196). The Foundling Father asks his family to hug him, but they refuse. We then hear the echo of the gunshot for the ninth time. Lucy remarks, “That gunplay. Wierdidhnit. Comes. And goze” (196). They prepare his coffin, Lucy once again reminiscing about her honeymoon at the Great Hole of History. The Foundling

Father interrupts with “*Emergency, oh Emergency, please put the Great Man in the ground,*” prompting Lucy to encourage him to try out his coffin (196, emphasis original). Once again The Foundling Father asks his wife and son for a hug, and once again they deny his request. Lucy and Brazil then begin to talk about The Foundling Father as if he weren’t there. After a “spell,” The Foundling Father announces that he’d “like to say a few words from the grave,” and confesses that he “quit the business” (197). Upon request, The Foundling Father does his Abraham Lincoln impersonation for his family, launching into a speech that consists of well known Lincoln quotes and misquotes, ending with, “Haw Haw Haw Haw (*Rest*) HAW HAW HAW HAW.” This is immediately followed by “(*A gunshot echoes. Loudly. And echoes. The Foundling Father ‘slumps in his chair’*),” marking the tenth and final time we see this repeated stage direction (197-8). Once it is determined that The Foundling Father is dead, Brazil tells the story of how his mother came to be “uh Confidence,” explaining that as a girl, when her uncle had died, she had been the only person in the room. When her family asked her, “what his last words had been,” she didn’t tell them, because there “hadnt been any” (198). Her family believed that she was keeping her Uncle’s last words a secret, and from that day forward, she learned the tricks of the Confidence trade. Brazil then asks Lucy, “Should I gnash now?”, to which she responds, “Better save it for thuh guests. I guess” (198). Lucy instructs her son to “Dust and polish,” and he launches once again into a carnival-esque welcoming to “thuh hall. Of Wonders” (198). He once again shows off the artifacts he has managed to dig up, artifacts his father had collected in his replica of the Great Hole of History, followed by the list of medals awarded, including: “For bowin’ and scrapin’. Uh medal for fakin” (199). Brazil then shows off the latest addition to the Hall of Wonders:

To my right: our newest Wonder: One of thuh greats Hissself! Note: thuh body sitting propped upright in our great Hole. Note the large mouth opened wide. Note the top hat and frock coat, just like the greats. Note the death wound: thuh great black hole – thuh great black hole in thuh great head. – And how this great

head is bleedin. – Note: thuh last words. – And thuh last breaths. – And how the nation mourns –. (199)

This final speech ends the act and the play, leaving the audience with the image of the dead Foundling Father as Abraham Lincoln, slumped in a chair as the lights fade.

### **Critical response, personal experience and impact on the audience**

*The America Play*, while not nearly as often produced as *The House of Yes* or Parks's other Lincoln inspired play *Topdog/Underdog*, may perhaps be Parks's finest work. The non-linear style in which the play is constructed, however, makes it a tough sell for contemporary audiences, who are by and large culturally conditioned by the popular film and television industry to expect orderly, easy to understand plotlines and character arcs. An early review of the first production published in *The New York Times* (1994) was somewhat conflicted about the quality of the play, noting that "Throughout, Ms. Parks's ideas are so crammed and arbitrarily unfolded that her play – her play as a play – is neither fathomable or cohesive. But her unanswerable questions are freeing; the verbal and temporal leaps, even the vastness of her intentions are invigorating" (Klein). In his review for the New York Shakespeare Festival's presentation of the play at the Public Theatre, David Richards remarks that the play "defies easy categorization" as well as "easy explanations." Richards goes on to say that, "If you expect plays to deliver tidy meanings, in fact, you should steer clear," noting that the action of the play "seems purposefully unclear." This insight, however, far from a condemnation of the play and the production, was intended instead as praise for what Richards noted was a play that is "American through and through." Richards remarks that "If, however, you like the freedom to wonder (and wander) about works of art, if the space between words intrigues you as much as words themselves, then 'The America Play' is definitely worthy of your concentrated attention," further noting that the play is "Volunteering no explanations, [Parks] expects spectators to

provide their own interpretations.” In a 1995 interview, published not long after the premiere of *The America Play*, scholar Steven Drukman remarked that Parks’ works “require(s) a lot of audiences,” to which Parks confessed that audiences might have a difficult time with her plays because “They only want something simple” (63). Parks went on to say:

I just wrote a recommendation for somebody and I wrote “You may think theatre is alive and well and that all these ‘special interest groups’ are getting their work done and winning the big prizes, but actually it’s a pretty pitiful place because it’s a place of easy answers and easy questions and those are the kinds of works that are being lauded.” Easy question, easy answer,  $x = y$ , the *meaning*.... (64, emphasis mine)

It is perhaps ironic, given this statement, that just six years later, Parks would win a Pulitzer Prize for *Topdog/Underdog*, easily her most linear and traditional (and therefore most audience friendly) play.

*The America Play* was commissioned by Theatre for a New Audience, a New York-based organization that values “a reverence for language, a spirit of adventure, a commitment to diversity, a dedication to learning, and a spirit of service” and expressly “produces Shakespeare side by side with other plays of classic stature and major contemporary plays, creating a dialogue over centuries between Shakespeare and other authors about our contemporary world” (Theatre). *The America Play* was workshopped by Washington D.C.’s Arena Stage and the Dallas Theatre Center before premiering at the Yale Repertory Theatre in New Haven, Connecticut, in January 1994 and subsequently moving to New York’s Public Theatre (Drukman 71, DeRose 409). In a review published in *Theatre Journal*, David J. DeRose notes that “the structure, characterizations, and even the language (to many, Parks’s trademark) exhibit much more of a Beckettian minimalism than Parks’s usual Gertrude Stein playfulness” (412). This comparison to Beckett is made by Richards as well, who in his review of the transferred original production noted that “the spirit of Samuel Beckett hovers overhead, smiling

enigmatically,” and that “The dark hole that serves as the setting is a Beckettian wasteland par excellence.” Drukman also noted in his interview, “I’ve noticed that there’s a lot of Beckett filtering through your plays,” further stating that in the case of *The America Play*, the Beckettian feel comes through not only in the play text, but also in Liz Diamond’s direction of the world premiere, stating, “There’s something, somehow, *Godot*-like about it” (71-2). Parks’s response to this comparison is that:

[Beckett’s] an influence, but he’s no bigger than Adrienne Kennedy. They both make me think of things. Faulkner, too, actually...Beckett’s not, for me, as big as Faulkner. To think of “Wow, that’s a writer I thoroughly love”...I mean, Beckett, yeah I think he’s great and all that, but Faulkner’s the writer that I think is my favorite. (72)

Parks’s point here, which will be more fully examined in an analysis of the ways in which language is used and repurposed in the play, is well made: Kennedy’s use of historical figures played by African Americans in whiteface in her 1964 play *Funnyhouse of a Negro* is clearly an influence in both *The America Play* and *Topdog/Underdog*. Just as it was true for *Funnyhouse of a Negro*, “The humor and despair in [*The America Play*] relies on the discrepancy between black skin and white images” (Ryan 90). Likewise, the rich imagery and captivating sense of the personal narrative evoked by Faulkner’s consistent use of stream of consciousness is paralleled in Parks’s work; much of the language in *The America Play*, in particular the Foundling Father’s monologue, is difficult to follow. In many ways it demonstrates a sustained course of the non-linear inner workings of the human psyche, relying on memory, sense-perception, thought, feeling: all hallmarks of stream of consciousness narrative.

Of the original production, DeRose also noted that *The America Play* presents a “deeply ironic and profoundly disturbing image of America,” further elucidating that at the heart of the play is an exploration of the many and varied understandings of the term “history,” as well as the ways in which history defines identity, stating:

*The America Play* pursues a theme common to Parks's earlier work, namely, the relationship of Americans, particularly African Americans, to the formative cultural images of their history *and of their public and private past*. How are we shaped by our past? How is our present history written for us by what we inherit – be it cultural relics, disposition, appearance, ability – from the past? And *how do we attempt to know ourselves by viewing and performing ourselves in the mirror of such inheritance?* (409, emphasis mine)

This sentiment is echoed in subsequent reviews of the first production. David Richards remarked that the play “shows us people trying to dig their way (literally) out of the detritus of someone else’s history. More generally, it’s about being trapped in a world of splinters and echoes.” His review also posits that the play “represents the absence of black history in a society that has long defined itself by the exploits of a few white men” (Richards). In a review of a production recently mounted at Indiana University, the reviewer asserts that the “aptly titled” play “embraces, avoids and manipulates history” (Wood).

*The America Play* remains the only play in this study with which I have no experience other than the experience of reading the text. When the play premiered, I was a freshman in high school in a very small town in East Texas. The most radical text I had ever encountered was George Orwell’s *Animal Farm* (1945), which we read in my freshman English class, and the most radical presentation of a theatrical text in my town at the time would have been on par with Joseph Kesselring’s *Arsenic and Old Lace* (1939). Though before its premiere, the play was work-shopped some 120 miles northwest of where I grew up as part of the Dallas Theater Center’s 1992-93 Big D Festival of the Unexpected (Dallas), as a 14 year old, I certainly didn’t prioritize workshops of experimental theatre works. In fact, the first time I read the play was as a 28 year old graduate student enrolled in an American theatre course; it was the first play we read for the course, and was assigned later in the semester as the last play to be read. In a very literal sense, my professor had bookended the semester with a play that he clearly felt was an

important contribution to American theatre. I did the reading both times, and found the play much more digestible the second time around. I will confess that the first reading of the play was tedious enough that I was somewhat ambivalent about the play. It challenged me in ways I hadn't expected, and as it was the first reading of the semester, I feared that the rigor of the semester might be more than I was able or willing to take on. In Drukman's interview with Parks, he ponders, "I wonder if audiences are lazy," to which Parks responded, "Yeah, probably. I think so. I mean, I can be..." (64).

My fear of the complicated text after my initial reading really boiled down to laziness in many respects. The thought that I would have to very carefully read the play in order to glean anything brought about an anxiety that can only come from the fact that I would have to invest time and energy to get anything out the experience, and the very real fear that maybe I wasn't smart enough to understand what the play was really about. Subsequent readings have provided me with deeper and richer experiences of the play and I have come to believe that at no point will I ever be able to fully grasp the complexities that lie within the many layers of text and imagery that Parks has created. With each reading, I am further convinced that *The America Play* may be the most brilliant piece of American theatre ever written. This conviction is of course somewhat influenced by my growth as a human being over the course of several years, but it is safe to say that I wouldn't have been even remotely convinced of its brilliance upon first reading of the play: because I was a lazy, terrified audience.

As noted earlier, the play is not often produced, in large part likely due to the fact that theatre companies fear that it will not bring in a large audience because of the demands it makes on audience. In Drukman's interview, Liz Diamond, who directed the original production and has collaborated with Parks on the development of several of her plays, notes that the artistic director of a prominent regional theatre communicated to her that Parks's work "might never be done in regional theatre at this rate," because of issues of "Accessibility" (66). This, of course, was before Parks won a Pulitzer for *Topdog/Underdog*, arguably Parks's most



accessible play, which subsequently proved quite successful Broadway and on the regional theatre circuit. A review of a 2010 production of *The America Play* stage by Butcher Block Productions in Las Vegas, Nevada noted that “Suzan-Lori Parks...demands a lot from an audience. But she delivers as much as she expects” (Del Valle). The reviewer went on to highlight what he considered the biggest failing of the production: “the show runs less than 45 minutes. At the performance I attended, most of the audience members remained in their seats in the end, *unaware that the production was over*” (Del Valle, emphasis mine). Clearly, this production utilized all of the cuts allowed in the script by Parks, perhaps because the producers feared that the full text would be too much for an audience. It’s safe to say that an audience that is uncertain about whether or not a play has concluded is going to have at least a moderately uncomfortable experience, and American audiences by and large do not like to be made uncomfortable.

Because the play is not often produced, I have never had the opportunity to see it live. Additionally, unlike the Open Theatre’s production of *The Serpent*, there is no easily accessible video of a previous production available to anyone who wishes to see what a production might look and sound like. A performance of the Yale Repertory Theatre/New York Shakespeare Festival’s production of *The America Play* was recorded for the New York Theatre and Film Archive housed at the New York Public Library. Access to this, the only recorded version of the play available, is currently “Restricted to qualified researchers.” Any “qualified researcher” who wants to view the video must travel to New York and make a screening appointment. As such, my only (and therefore primary) experience with *The America Play* lies in many readings of the text, as well as viewing production photographs available of several productions, most notably the world premiere.

### **Analysis: structure and language**

*The America Play*, much like *The Serpent*, defies traditional logic and structure. In many respects, it is as far from a well-made play as one can get. While there are some important structural similarities to *The House of Yes* and *Topdog/Underdog*, most notably the use of a single locale, few characters, and a plot that revolves around members of an immediate family at least one of whom reenacts a presidential assassination, *The America Play* differs in several very important ways. Structurally, the play follows a much looser form, relying on word play and free association, almost to the point of absurdism. While the action of plays like *The House of Yes* and *Topdog/Underdog* takes place over the course of a few hours or a few days, the action of *The America Play* spans decades. Additionally, the structure of Parks's historical re-visioning does not allow for easy interpretation. In fact, "Both the history and the play itself refuse to be pinned down; and appropriately, the play is devoid of clear linear plot movement, and thus hard to follow" (Frank 4). Language and structure play key roles in the disjointed nature of *The America Play*. Parks "uses fragmented repetitive language to comment on established historical narrative" (Saddik 72), and in doing so, disrupts the dominant narrative:

Parks has created haunting characters whose identities change rapidly and who use a new stage language based on the poetry of spoken black English. Her disarming sets and dislocating narratives deconstruct a linear, ordered sense of history. Parks's plays exist in a world where time, space and consequence slip and slide away from the strict obligations of logic. Her characters are displaced versions of themselves, trying to find their identity – in a family, a city, a nation, a continent, the universe. (Kolin 1)

The first act in particular is lacking in significant action that furthers the plot in any crucial way. This intentional aversion to traditional structures is itself a commentary by Parks on the fallacies of recorded history, as well as the outdated and exclusive modes of communication and

methods of creating art our largely patriarchal, white, hetero-normative culture has taught us are “correct” or “appropriate:”

The play resists linear logic. Not only do the spectators try to track down the meaning of the work, but the play also chases its own meaning. Although this makes *The America Play* confusing at first, one eventually realizes that this is exactly the point. Parks consciously approaches the postmodern topic of “what is history” via the instability, complexity and layered-ness of meaning. (Frank 4)

In this way, *The America Play* “is more an American meditation on a pivotal moment in time and race relations than a conventional story unfolding” (Havis xvi).

As is the case with much of Suzan-Lori Parks’s work, language plays a key and complex role in *The America Play*, and an audience has to pay close attention to pick up on the many nuances of Parks’s language. As Alvin Klein noted in his *New York Times* review of the production at the Yale Rep, “For verbal acrobatics, perpetual punning and provoking subtexts, “The America Play” is a cerebral workout.” Further, Havis points out that “In her Beckett-like world, spoken language (along with historical matter) is extremely slippery, inaccurate beyond measure and eternally flawed” (xvi). As such, there are a great many instances of “a play on words” in *The America Play*. For instance, “The play opens with examples of chiasmus – syntactical inversion (‘to stop too fearful and too faint to go’); and continues to emphasize this kind of turnabout” (Holder 20). Parks’s use of chiasmus, perhaps the most notable of her linguistic and structural trickeries, is something we see layered in with regard not only to language, but also with regard to the action, and even the literal circumstances of the characters. Though the Foundling Father insists on his resemblance to Abraham Lincoln, the fact remains that he is a black man and Lincoln was a white man. This fact in and of itself is just one of many inversions we see in the play; “the implied but never acknowledged racial inversion in the role of Lincoln is accompanied by other reversals” (21), not the least of which is the fact that the setting itself is a hole in the earth dug by the Foundling Father. In much the same way,

history is consistently inverted. In fact, “the governing image is one of systematic inversion...The real is confused with the impersonation, and the theme park of history, instead of being something built up, is a hole in the ground” (20-1).

Another instance of verbal play in *The America Play* includes fun with homophones. Brazil’s interchanging of terms, calling his father his “foe-father” early in Act II and then just a few pages later referring to him as his “faux-father,” is clearly a play on the word “forefather” (Parks, *America* 178, 184). However, because Brazil and Lucy’s dialogue is written in a distinct, African American dialect, an audience would likely have to be very alert to discern the difference, not only with regard to the words “foe” and “faux,” but with the pronunciation of “foe-father” or “faux-father” versus “forefather.” This is further complicated by the fact that each time it’s said, the homophone, by definition, has a completely different meaning, providing layers of complicated subtext and alternate meanings that must be conveyed by the actor, and interpreted by the audience. This gives the actor playing Brazil an insight into the characters’ view of the Foundling Father, however; despite his search for his father, he clearly sees him as a fake as well as an enemy. The Foundling Father’s status as “uh faker” is well established in the play, but his standing as an enemy is not as apparent. While it could be argued that his abandonment of his family in some respects marks him as an enemy, it’s more likely that his “foe” status has more to do with the rejection of his own identity and history in relentless pursuit of the historical accomplishments of a white man long dead and gone. These subtle differences in language might only be caught by a reader of the play, allowing for a different interpretation by an audience hearing the language rather than reading it.

Another hallmark of Parks’s writing which plays a prevalent role in *The America Play* is the use of both “(rests),” which she indicates are to be used to “make a transition,” as well as what she terms “spells,” or “An elongated and heightened (rest)” (*America* 16). These spells are “Denoted by repetition of figures’ names with no dialogue,” and “Has sort of an architectural look” (16). Parks indicates that “A spell is a place of great (unspoken) emotion” as well as “a

place for an emotional transition” (17). It could be argued that these rests and spells highlight gaps in language, as well as the failures of verbal communication. They draw attention to embodied communication, or communication that is rooted in the physical realm rather than the verbal realm, and in doing so, they directly challenge the widely accepted communication modes put in place by the dominant culture.

In some respects, Parks paints for us a world in which the language with which we are traditionally equipped is no longer adequate or powerful enough to fully communicate what her characters seem so desperate to transmit; perhaps, in fact, it never was. Arguably, this highlights what Peggy Phelan points to as “the trauma of the loss of language’s direct communicative function” (*Mourning* 5). In *The America Play*, we see a world in which the creation of a new language is required to communicate the grief and perseverance experienced by the primary characters in the play: The Foundling Father, Lucy and Brazil. As Lois Tyson points out:

[A]frican American literature has its own unique qualities, its own politics and poetics, that cannot be fully explained by or contained within the larger framework of European American literature. Some theorists believe that this uniqueness derives from the African American oral tradition of storytelling, folklore and oral history, which has its roots in African culture and, according to some critics, relates to an essential, or inborn, “blackness,” a way of thinking, feeling, and creating shared by all peoples of African descent. Others argue that there is no such thing as an essential blackness, that the qualities African American texts have in common result from the shared history and culture of their authors. For some of these critics, the distinctive quality of African American literature follows from its unique blending of both African and European American cultural traditions. (*Critical* 366)

In many ways, Parks's vernacular reflects this "unique blending," and is used as a tool to upend the dominant culture's stranglehold on the African American community and what is traditionally considered "proper" or "acceptable" language. The Foundling Father, for instance, who adopts the speeches of Abraham Lincoln, is in some respects quite disconnected from his own heritage. His futile desire to be like the "Great Man," to leave behind a legacy, is impeded by his blackness, and his adoption of the language of the white oppressor is just one of many indications of his failed attempts to be something he is not. It also reflects the history he has lost, both in trying to be like the "Great Man" and in respect to the history of his ancestors, which was not considered important enough to be appropriately documented by white historians. Lucy and Brazil, on the other hand, with their myriad "uh" instead of "a," "thuh" in place of "the," and "tuh" in place of "to," etc., adopt a speech pattern much more indicative of what is termed Black Vernacular English (Tyson, *Critical* 362). As respected scholar Henry Louis Gates claims in his seminal *Figures in Black*, "it is language, the black language of black texts, that expresses the distinctive quality of our literary tradition" (xxi). Brazil and Lucy, in sharp contrast to The Foundling Father, communicate in a language that is less formal, more natural and relaxed. Brazil, in what could easily be asserted is an imitation of his father, occasionally breaks out of this less formal language, adopting a more formalized manner of "speechifying," but inevitably reverts to the language he is more comfortable with, a vernacular with which he is accustomed to communicating. This blending makes for a fascinating text that clearly displays the conflict around the colonization of language, as well a subsequent attempted reclamation of a native language or, alternatively, an intentional stylistic alteration of the dominant language, which renders it the unique property of the characters.

This use of language highlights the subjugation of African Americans, leading to what W.E.B. Du Bois first defined in his seminal 1903 text *The Souls of Black Folk* as "*double consciousness* or *double vision*, [or] the awareness of belonging to two conflicting cultures: the African Culture, which grew from African roots and was transformed by its own unique history

on American soil, and the European culture imposed by white America” (Tyson, *Critical* 362).

Further,

For many black Americans, this means having one cultural self at home and another cultural self in white-dominated public space, such as the workplace and the school. And double consciousness sometimes involves speaking two languages. Black culture lived at home sometimes includes the use of *Black Vernacular English* (BVE, also called *Ebonics* or *African American Vernacular English*), which fulfills all the grammatical criteria of a genuine language but is still dismissed by many white and some black Americans as substandard or incorrect English rather than recognized as a language in its own right. (362-3)

We see this need for having two cultural selves reflected in *The America Play*, particularly in The Foundling Father’s monologue in the first act. He vacillates between utilizing the language of the dominant culture for the purposes of communicating with his customers and a more relaxed manner of speaking reminiscent of Black Vernacular English. He is a man trapped between two cultures, a man forced to shed the roots of his African heritage in pursuit of a very hegemonic American Dream. The irony, of course, is that The Foundling Father can never shed his blackness, despite his fervent worship and extreme emulation of a martyred white leader.

This “double-consciousness,” coupled with a desire to reclaim native language is not uniquely American; it is the consistent hallmark of any culture subjugated by colonization.

Kenyan writer Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o, in his book *Decolonising the Mind* (1981), describes the effects colonization has had on the languages of Africa. Speaking of his experience as a child, in particular his experience listening to good storytellers in his community:

We...learnt to value words for their meaning and nuances. Language was not a mere string of words. It had a suggestive power well beyond the immediate and lexical meaning. Our appreciation of the suggestive magical power of language was reinforced by the games we played with words through riddles, proverbs,

transpositions of syllables, or through nonsensical but musically arranged words. So we learnt the music of our language on top of the content. The language, through images and symbols, gave us a view of the world, but it had a beauty of its own. The home and the field were then our pre-primary school but what is important, for this discussion, is that the language of our evening teach-ins, and the language of our immediate and wider community, and the language of our work in the fields were one.

And then I went to school, a colonial school, and this harmony was broken. The language of my education was no longer the language of my culture. (11)

Thiong'o goes on to explain that English became the language of "formal education," and that children who were caught speaking their native language were beaten and publicly humiliated – essentially, they were made to feel ashamed of their own native language (11). This subjugation of native language in favor of the language of the dominant culture is a hallmark of colonization, and the need to fight against the oppressor by trying to prevent the loss of language is clearly present in Parks's plays. Likewise, Thing'o's recognition of the musicality inherent in the learning of his native language, is also a recognition evident in *The America Play*. Parks uses what she calls a "rep & rev," a term she defines in *Elements of Style*:

Repetition and Revision is a concept integral to the Jazz esthetic in which the composer or performer will write or play a musical phrase once and again and again; etc. – with each revisit the phrase is slightly revised. "Rep & Rev" as I call it is a central element in my work; through its use I'm working to create a dramatic text that departs from the traditional linear narrative style to look and sound more like a musical score. (8-9)

This "improvisational jazz style allows [Parks] to depart from traditional dramatic structures" (Havis xv-xvi). In *The America Play*, repetition is often utilized, and in each instance of repetition, there is a slight revision. Characters repeat some of their lines several times over the



course of the play, in addition to repeating historical utterances. Because of this repetition, time passes in a unique way. Traditionally, this sort of repetition is utilized to alert the audience or reader to the significance of a line, while allowing them to ponder its meaning, especially when the play is being performed, as a play is ideally experienced. The audience or reader knows if a line is repeated, it must be important and therefore, their attention is drawn to these repetitions in a very direct way. However, in the case of *The America Play*, a strong argument could be made that the utilization of repetition serves as a commentary on the failures of language of the dominant culture to communicate what most deeply needs to be conveyed. Additionally, the reader or audience member is kept alert and off-balance by the constant minor revisions made with each repetition.

Another use of repetition we see in the play is metatheatrical in nature, and as Kevin J. Wetmore, Jr. points out, "Parks's plays demonstrate a proclivity towards metatheatre" (90). For example, we see more than one scene enacted from Tom Taylor's *Our American Cousin* within the context of the play (90). Further, selected lines from *Our American Cousin* also appear within the play, out of context of a specific scene. This metatheatricality can be taken even one step further by considering the fact that a scene performed from *Our American Cousin* is itself performed within an "act" created by the Foundling Father. Likewise, the assassination reenactments themselves are also metatheatrical, an "act" contrived by the Foundling Father within the context of the larger play, and are theatricalized by the use of specific costumes, makeup and props, also a hallmark of ritual. As Wetmore points out, even the stage directions feed the metatheatrical nature of the assassination reenactments:

Parks's stage directions indicate the performed nature of the repeated shooting of Lincoln. All "Booths" must "Stand in position." The stage directions then indicate, "(Booth shoots. Lincoln 'slumps in his chair.' Booth jumps)" (165). There is literally a stage direction within the stage direction dictating how the actor

playing The Foundling Father playing Lincoln should perform the death. Parks presents stages within stages. (96)

Further, “We see these ‘death’ scenes over and over, until the ‘Lesser Known’ finally dies himself at the end, in the same posture and attitude as in the earlier ‘mock’ death scenes” (Holder 19). In *The America Play*, this ritualistic repetition serves as a commentary on language, history and therefore the historical and continued subjugation of African Americans in the United States. Additionally, repetition illustrates the ways in which history is manipulated, reinterpreted, or misinterpreted. As Una Chaudhuri points out in *Staging Place: The Geography of Modern Drama*, “Parks’s denial of history occurs at the level of language, or rather of the recognition that history, because it exists as language, is always subject to revision” (264). Parks explains “I’m re-membering and staging historical events which, through their happening on stage, are ripe for inclusion in the canon of history. Theatre is an incubator for the creation of historical events – and, as in the case of artificial insemination, the baby is no less human” (*America* 5). In *The America Play*, history is continually reinterpreted or re-invented, thus blurring the lines between the past and the present, reality and imagination. Further, history is reinterpreted nightly in live performance. Repetition of language, circumstance and events therefore play a key role in this play in that “theatre does not merely re-enact history,” but additionally serves as “the enactment of a whole new history. Theatre does not simply re-write history for Parks, it enacts it, re-enacts it, and demands continual re-enactment” (Wetmore 89).

## Themes

### Ritual and Violence

Just as is the case with Wendy MacLeod’s *The House of Yes*, themes of ritual and violence, familial dysfunction, images that evoke mythic ideas of America, and a commentary on individual and cultural identity play a prominent role in Suzan-Lori Parks’s *The America Play*.

Likewise, just as we see in *The House of Yes*, ritual and violence are very closely tied in Parks's re-visioning of the Lincoln assassination. At the heart of this ritualistic violence, is the show the Lesser Known creates, "Shoot Mr. Lincoln" (Parks, *America* 164), which catapults him into immediate notoriety. Chaudhuri observes:

He starts a sideshow in which he plays Lincoln himself at the moment of his hypertheatrical death. Seated in a replicated balcony of Ford's Theatre, watching a performance of *Our American Cousin*, he is murdered over and over again by patrons who first deposit a penny in the head of a bust of Lincoln, then select a gun from a collection provided, wait for their cue, and fire. As person after person goes through the murderous motions, the ludicrous script they follow is gradually transformed through repetition into ritual, in which what is being celebrated, we realize, is the violence at the heart of American history. (263-4)

Further, Chaudhuri points out that:

This violence is directed not only at leaders but at fathers, and a rebellion against patriarchy emerges as the animating principle of national history. As the patricidal fantasy is repeated again and again, as the father-son dyad of Founding/Foundling Father returns from the repression of myth into the symptomology of the present, *history is rewritten as a collection of desperate death cries*. (264, emphasis mine)

In each reenactment, the customer playing Booth alternately shouts one of several varying sentences upon "assassinating" Lincoln. The first customer exclaims, "Thus to the tyrants!" (Parks, *America* 165, 171), and immediately follows his first "assassination" with another, this time shouting, "The South is avenged!" (165). The second customer says, "Strike the tent," which a footnote indicates were "The last words of General Robert E. Lee, Commander of the Confederate Army" (167). The third customer, upon "assassinating" the President bellows:

"LIES!"

*(Rest)*

LIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIES!

*(Rest)*

LIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIARRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRS!

*(Rest)*

Lies.

*(Rest. Exits. Reenters. Steps downstage. Rest)*

LIES!

*(Rest)*

LIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIES!

*(Rest)*

LIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIARRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRS!

*(Rest)*

Lies.

*(Rest. Exits). (167-8)*

Customer number four remarks, “Now he belongs to the ages,” which a footnote indicates were “The words of Secretary of War Edwin Stanton, as Lincoln died” (169), while the fifth and sixth customers, “newlyweds” who ask to be allowed to assassinate the president together lament, “Theyve killed the president!” (169-70). A footnote tells us that these “were the words of Mary Todd, just after Lincoln was shot” (170). In a repetition and revision of the first “assassination,” the seventh customer also shouts “Thus to the tyrants!” and after a lengthy “spell” exclaims, “The South is avenged!” without shooting again (172).

It could be argued that the variations with regard to what each customer shouts as he or she “assassinates” the President serve to point out the fallacies of recorded history, and therefore play directly into Parks’s “rep and rev” philosophy. In this way, the re-visioning of Lincoln’s assassination in *The America Play* serves as a commentary on memory and a desire

to assassinate the dominant narrative by destroying it in every way possible. As Chaudhuri notes, “the ritual of American violence is stitched into history by means of textual fragments that then textualize its citizens as Americans. That the fragments consist, one and all, of famous last words – carefully historicized in the play’s *end*notes – bespeaks a recognition of the apocalyptic strain in American ideology” (264, emphasis original). In this way, “the repeated enactment of the assassination becomes a ritual that highlights the ‘violence at the heart of American history’ and exposes the ‘patricidal fantasy’ of national culture” (Ryan 85). As the national culture is built upon the dominant discourse, it stands to reason that the re-visioned assassination in *The America Play* bespeaks a desire to assassinate this discourse in favor of one that is more inclusive.

Just as is the case with *The House of Yes*, the assassination ritual in *The America Play* as created by the Foundling Father relies heavily upon the element of costuming. As Kevin J. Wetmore, Jr. points out:

[I]n *The America Play* the Foundling Father is literally defined by his costume, which is a literal costume, complete with fake beard. In an interview with Michele Pearce, Parks sees Lincoln as “the sum of his outfit. You know, his beard...and his hat, coat, vest, and shoes” (qtd. in Pearce, 1993: 26). Indeed, the cover photo for the Theatre Communication Group edition of *The America Play and Other Works* features a photograph not of the Foundling Father (the Lincoln character), but of his hat, beard, and suit, as if Lincoln were standing in front of the flag but his face (except the trademark beard) had been erased. Lincoln *is* his “costume” and the costume (and beard) is what makes The Foundling Father Lincoln. (90, emphasis original)

Parks has commented that she was drawn to Lincoln because of his clothing. In a 2007 interview for the Academy of Achievement, when asked “What was it about Lincoln, as a historical figure, that captured your imagination,” she replied:

What is it about Lincoln that hooks me first? It's his costume. That's not irreverent or dissing Lincoln. You know what I'm saying? It's his costume: the hat, the beard, the height. This is from a person who as a child was very drawn to mythic characters. So the hat, the beard, the height, I think that that has burned itself in the imagination of the universe in a very deep way, and even if he had been just - - I don't know. Then the other things around it I think -- I don't know -- but I think that we can't dismiss that, because all the world's a stage, and the costume is very, very important. And he freed the slaves and whoo! You can imagine that. There they go, running free. (Academy of Achievement 1)

The Lincoln costume helps distinguish the Foundling Father from the character he's playing: the Lesser Known. As Wetmore notes, "The Foundling Father becomes the Lesser Known because of his costume, just as in the theatre an actor becomes Hamlet or Medea or the Hottentot Venus via the transforming properties of costume" (91). The use of costuming helps ritualize the assassination reenactment by making it seem more authentic, though the deviations in both language and costuming make it impossible for the Foundling Father "to reproduce the real exactly" (Phelan, *Unmarked 2*). The Foundling Father himself acknowledges his occasional deviations from authenticity with regard to costuming, most notably in his propensity for using a blonde beard:

This is my fancy beard. Yellow. Mr. Lincoln's hair was dark so I don't wear it much. If you deviate too much they won't get their pleasure. That's my experience. Some inconsistencies are perpetuable because they're good for business. But not the yellow beard. It's just my fancy. Every once and a while. Of course his hair was dark. (Parks, *America* 163)

Faedra Carpenter in her forthcoming chapter, "Spectacles of Whiteness from Adrienne Kennedy to Suzan-Lori Parks," points out the ways in which these types of deviations from accuracy filter into our documented accounts of history, noting:

At one point, the Foundling Father asks the audience to “pretend for a moment that our beloved Mr. Lincoln was a blonde.” Just as images of Jesus Christ have been refashioned as blonde, we are asked to accept a refashioned image of Abraham Lincoln – a rewriting of historical accounts demonstrates how notions of whiteness are often centralized within American folklore. Moreover, Parks’s suggestion that the Foundling Father imposes a deviation from the truth due to his own sense of subjective “fancy” exposes the ways in which America’s history has been written according to the whim and fancy of “founding fathers.” (19)

It is, of course, ironic that the Foundling Father’s customers are unwilling to tolerate the slight deviation in beard color, but are content to overlook the deviation in skin color; they are able to suspend their disbelief enough to allow a black man to fill the role of Lincoln, but the use of a blonde beard is something that pushes the envelope too far. One could argue that the fact that the Foundling Father is black is “good for business,” speaks volumes about the historical and continued subjugation and violence inherent in the African American experience. Parks highlights this issue by refusing to address it directly: race remains the elephant in the room, the unnamed “inaccuracy.” She does so by focusing on more trivial inaccuracies: “Some inaccuracies are good for business. Take the stovepipe hat! Never really worn indoors but people dont like their Lincoln hatless” (Parks, *America* 168).

Loss and grieving also play a prominent role in *The America Play*. Just as is the case with the children in *The House of Yes*, Brazil is desperate to uncover the truth about what became of his father, the Foundling Father. It could be argued that Brazil’s search for his father is a search for identity which is paralleled by The Foundling Father’s pursuit of Abraham Lincoln. It’s worth noting that the characters in *The America Play*, “are all professionally in the ‘death business’: the ‘Lesser Known’, before impersonating Lincoln, was a grave digger in a long line of grave diggers; his wife keeps the secrets of the dead; and his son is a professional mourner, or ‘gnasher” (Holder 21). As Una Chaudhuri points out, “A partially hidden part of the patricidal

myth now comes fully into view: the role it enforces in future generations. The nation's histrionic mourning in the past has become, over time, a professional duty" (266). This "duty," as it were, is in every respect a performance, and further, a performance that sustains the family financially. Brazil's occupation as a mourner exemplifies metatheatricity in the play in that it is in every sense of the word a performance. Before heading out West, the Foundling Father "taught his son the performance of mourning" (Wetmore 96). Further, "He does not feel the emotions, but rather performs them for personal gain. The more genuinely sad his mourning appears, the better paid he is" (96). The commodification and performance of mourning serve as a commentary on the socio-economic situation of the characters in the play and, more generally, of the historic socio-economic situation of African Americans. As Chaudhuri notes, "This transmutation of mourning into a skillful performance is one symptom of the racism that has made Black history...an extended obituary" (266). In this way, it also points out the larger implications of the holes in the narrative of our national histories; by choosing to ignore the histories of marginalized groups, we relegate them to the status of a carnival sideshow, a burial in an unmarked grave, a replica of the Great Hole of History.

The dead play a further role in the context of *The America Play*. As Holder points out, "The insistence on the presence of the dead, on endings that do not end, is contextualized in Parks's plays by an intense, at times disorienting, manipulation of the elements of order and structure" (21-2). The Foundling Father appears in Act 2, though he is dead. He walks and talks, and even tries to attain physical affection from his wife and son, who reject him. Though he resists climbing into his ready coffin, he does acknowledge his reality, saying, "I'd like to say a few words from the grave" (Parks, *America* 197). Soon after this, the Foundling Father reenacts the assassination one last time before "slumping in his chair" (197-8), bringing a close to not only his own life, but the echoes of Lincoln's assassination within the context of the play.

As Kevin J. Wetmore, Jr. points out, "...the Lincoln of *The America Play*...and the Lincoln of *Topdog/Underdog* are not the dead historical figures brought back to life on stage but



very different kinds of metatheatrical echoes. Parks is not simply re-writing history, through her plays she re-enacts a variation on that which has been performed before” (89). This “variation” disrupts the dominant narrative by bringing into question the accuracy of history as a written record of human events.

### **Imagery**

Just as it did in *The House of Yes*, the theme of digging and holes plays a crucial role in *The America Play*. As the entire play is set in an “exact replica of the Great Hole of History,” which is literally a hole in the ground, “the gaze is directed not heavenward but resolutely earthward, into the ground” (Holder 21). We learn early in the play that the Foundling Father was previously a gravedigger and that before he headed “out West...he had dug over 7 hundred and 23 graves...Excluding his Big Hole. Excluding the hundreds of shallow holes he later digs the hundreds of shallow holes he’ll use to bury his faux-historical knickknacks when he finally quits this business” (Parks, *America* 169). We see here the ways in which digging is a commentary on time and history; in some respects, gravedigging is an occupation that seeks to conceal history by burying a person, animal or object. While there may be a recorded history documenting the existence and experience of who or what has been buried, the truth of that history can easily be manipulated or even erased; that particular history can never again be verified without exhumation, and even then, verification isn’t always possible. The Foundling Father, who in some respects is a man desperately searching for history, digs a hole in the earth in an effort to reconstruct previously reconstructed histories, and ultimately, for reasons that are never explained, “quits the business” and buries “his faux-historical knickknacks” for someone else to unearth in the future.

In the second act, Brazil replaces his father as “uh digger,” searching with his mother for the remains of the Foundling Father. Just as his father had before him, Brazil searches for clues to his history by attempting to unearth any traces of his late father. In this respect we see that

“What matters is what is hidden, what needs to be unearthed; despite their apparent professional interest in putting things into the ground, these characters seem compelled to dig things up” (Holder 21). Early in the second act, Lucy remarks that she “need[s] to know thuh real thing from thuh echo. Thuh truth from thuh hearsay” (Parks, *America* 175). One way to get to the truth is by digging for it ourselves, rather than believing the hearsay that is put before us, just as one way to discern the real thing from the echo is by witnessing the real thing with our own eyes. It could be said, therefore, that Lucy is actively seeking to dig to the heart of things, to discover a truth that has long been buried by the dominant culture.

The image of a long-lost father buried in the earth without “proper burial,” as Brazil remarks (Parks, *America* 179), echoes the situation of the Pascal patriarch in *The House of Yes*. Neither The Foundling Father nor Mr. Pascal were given a “proper burial” or even a funeral, which as Pulitzer Prize winning poet and activist Gary Snyder points out is a necessary communal ritual. Further the idea that the “Hole is [an] inheritance of sorts,” being left to Lucy and Brazil by the Foundling Father, represents much more than merely a hole in the earth; the inheritance is in many respects a lost history, both collective and individual. Ryan notes:

*The America Play* critically engages with the mythologizing and apotheosis of Lincoln to suggest the viability of personal memory as an interventionist strategy in the creation of historical imaginations. The play satirizes nostalgia for objects dug up from a history echoing with LIES and gunshots, realizing the difficulties of archaeological inquiry. (91)

In digging for the remains of their loved one, Brazil and Lucy make many archaeological discoveries: “A Jewel Box made of cherry wood, lined in velvet, letters ‘A. L.’ carved in gold on thuh lid...Mr. Washintons bones...his wooden teeth...uh bust of Mr. Lincoln...documents...medals,” all “knickknacks” (Parks, *America* 185-6), useless objects that represent the life blood of the Foundling Father. These objects are the only legacy of a man who so desperately wanted to leave something great behind him, as The Great Man had done.

The replica of the Great Hole of History is representative of many things: it is a theme park, a grave, the absence of history (in particular black history); it is a monument, a void, the hole in Lincoln's head; it has sexual connotations; it is a chiasmus, an inversion. It is alternately all of these things and more. Parks, when asked why there's no sex in her plays, remarked, "The Great Hole of History' – like, duh" (Parks, *America* 16). Ryan further asserts that "The 'great hole' clearly invites sexual readings, unearthing what western metaphysics has vigorously tried to bury" (86). Sexual innuendo is apparent upon close reading of the text. In the first act, the Foundling Father, speaking of his honeymoon, remarks, "The Lesser Known had a favorite hole. A chasm, really. Not a hole he had dugged but one he'd visited. Long before the son was born. When he and his Lucy were newly wedded...When he and his Lucy were newly wedded and looking for some postnuptial excitement: A Big Hole" (Park, *America* 162). In Act Two Lucy comments on the Foundling Father's love for the Great Hole, saying, "He loved that Great Hole so. He'd stand at thuh lip of that Great Hole: 'OHWAYOHWHYOHWAYOH!'" (181).

While sexual innuendo is apparent, and will be discussed later as it relates to female sexuality, Parks also claims,

Since history is a recorded or remembered event, theatre, for me, is the perfect place to "make" history – that is, because so much of African-American history has been unrecorded, dismembered, washed out, one of my tasks as a playwright is to – through literature and the special strange relationship between theatre and real-life – locate the ancestral burial ground, dig for bones, find bones, hear the bones sing, write it down. (*America* 4)

As Chaudhuri asserts, "*The America Play* locates America where the theatrical imagination has long looked for it: in a grave" (262). Further, "Parks's writing constantly returns to the twin acts of burial and mourning. *The America Play*...blurs the distinction between the living and the dead; it is a play preoccupied, not only with the aspirations of a gravedigger, but with the grave itself" (Ryan 85). As Foucault points out:

[H]istory, in its traditional form, undertook to “memorize” the *monuments* of the past, transform them into *documents*, and lend speech to those traces which, in themselves, are often not verbal, or which say in silence something other than what they actually say; in our time, history is that which transforms *documents* into *monuments*. In that area where, in the past, history deciphered the traces left by men, it now deploys a mass of elements that have to be grouped, made relevant, placed in relation to one another to form totalities. There was a time when archaeology, as a discipline devoted to silent monuments, inert traces, objects without context, and things left by the past, aspired to the condition of history, and attained meaning only through the restitution of a historical discourse; it might be said, to play on words a little, that in our time history aspires to the condition of archaeology, to the intrinsic description of the monument. (7, emphasis original)

The replica of the Great Hole of History is in many respects a monument that memorializes great men and moments in American history. It does so in a carnival-esque sort of way, by creating what Chaudhuri points out is “a theme park populated by the dead heroes of America” (262). This setting most tangibly represents the sort of restoration attraction popular throughout the United States, with the Foundling Father serving as an actor in a sort of theme park. We see a very similar representation in *Topdog/Underdog*; though we never actually see Link’s place of business, we get the sense that it is carnival-esque, a cross between a theme park and a Coney Island attraction. It is true that:

All over America restorations of behavior are common, popular, and making money for their owners...Their diversity is undeniable: Renaissance Pleasure Faires in California and New York, restored villages in almost every state, Disneyland, Disney World and Epcot, safari and wildlife parks, amusement parks organized around single themes, Land of Oz in North Carolina, Storyland in New

Hampshire, Frontierland, Ghost Town in the Sky, even L'il Abner's Dogpatch... These places are large environmental theaters. (Schechner, *Between* 79)

Further:

One of the big differences among performance systems is the framing made by the physical environments – what contains what. In ordinary theater the domain of the spectator, the house, is larger than the domain of the performer, the stage, and distinctly separate from it. In environmental theater there is a shift in that the spectator and performer often share the same space, sometimes they exchange spaces, and sometimes the domain of the performer is larger than that of the spectator, enclosing the spectator within the performance. (95-6)

In *The America Play*, an “environmental theatre” is dropped into an “ordinary theatre,” and thus both things are true: for those who have come to see *The America Play*, the domain of the spectator is larger, but for the characters who have come to see and take part in the Foundling Father's Lincoln act, the domain of the performer and spectator are identical in size, because they are the same domain. In this way, “in Parks's play, the hole is never singular; it is always both a metaphor and the stage itself, constantly revisited and revised” (Ryan 88).

As Chaudhuri points out, in setting her play in a “theme park,”

Parks extends the insight of Black playwrights like Adrienne Kennedy and George Wolfe (*America as funnyhouse and museum*, respectively), suggesting that the simulacral logic of America's self-representation has now burst its confines and moved out from the enclosure of specific discourses to take over the culture at large. (263)

This “theme park” setting “produces the desire to move on, to travel west, and to reproduce the same stilted images of past greatness” (Chaudhuri 262). These images include not only some founding fathers of America, but prominent Jamaican businessman Marcus Garvey, who was

active in the Black Nationalism and Pan-Africanism movements, early explorers and colonizers, such as “Mistifer Columbus,” Amerigo Vespucci, and Ferdinand and Isabella, and even fictional characters such as “Tarzan King of thuh apes” – “all thuh greats” (Parks, *America* 180). The Tarzan story is itself in some respects an inversion of the story of African Americans, as it highlights the struggle of a noble “other.” Tarzan, an orphaned Caucasian boy who is raised in Africa by apes, is hyper aware of his difference (Torgovnick 48-9). Though he is characterized as intelligent, ethical, loyal, and generous, Tarzan is often faced “with shame and confusion,” wondering “why don’t I look like the other apes?” (48). Further, “At moments like these, the Tarzan novels imply that norms and any sense of self and Other are culturally defined” (48). In this way, the Tarzan books could be considered a condemnation of colonialism, but as Torgovnick points out:

As American books published mostly in the teens and twenties, the Tarzan novels could afford to condemn colonialism in Africa and brutality toward African people, especially in Belgian and Portuguese territories – after all, the United States had no African colonies. And...they do condemn colonialism, in unequivocal terms, exempting only British colonialism, the colonialism of fellow Anglo-Saxons, represented by Tarzan’s father, John Clayton, a benevolent man who was on his way to aid Africans he regarded as “British subjects” when he was stranded and died. (57-8)

However, as discussed in the Introduction, America’s relationship to colonialism is far from innocent:

It would be wrong, though, to assume that because the United States had no African colonies it had no stake in colonialism and in the host of issues associated with it. The United States had done to Native Americans and Mexicans what countries in Europe were doing to Africans. It had recently embarked on imperialist adventures in Cuba, Hawaii, and the Philippines. The

ancestors of its black population came from Africa and came here unwillingly, as slaves. Slavery constituted the great shame of America's past and conditioned all racial attitudes. (58)

The inclusion of a fictional character like Tarzan in the parade in the original Great Hole of History, a character that is evidently a far more complicated symbol than one might realize upon first glance, indicates the gaps left by the exclusion of the histories of the "other," or the absence of black history in the traditional historical dialogue of America. Additionally, "This fabricated absence, the hole idea, encourages shifting and simultaneous readings...Meanings are (re)generated, not given" (Ryan 88). As Chaudhuri points out, "the principle of the theme park enacts the dispossession of nature that lies at the roots of geopathology; in *The America Play* we are shown the consequences for individual lives of this dispossession" (263). Just as the Foundling Father seeks to recreate and re-vision a history that he has heretofore been excluded from in an effort to claim an identity for himself, Brazil, in turn, searches for family history, for familial identity and a larger sense of belonging, by digging for his father's remains. Brazil, as is typical of most individuals with absent parents, is searching for the missing pieces of a puzzle that will reveal to him his identity. As Gregory Max Vogt and Stephen T. Sirridge explain in their book *Like Son, Like Father: Healing the Father-Son Wound in Men's Lives* (1991), in the case of absentee fathers, the "responsibility of initiating contact" lies with the son (209). If the son rationalizes that, "It's dad's responsibility to do something about this"...he is "perpetuating the fantasy that [he is] still a little boy, without the power to make things happen" (209-10). As such, initiating contact allows the adult son to step into the role of manhood by taking on responsibilities. It also generates a boost in self-confidence because the son is doing something *right* to correct or address the *wrong* in his father. In the case of Brazil, who is following in his father's footsteps as a digger, the search for his father's remains could be said to be akin to an archaeological dig for his own history and identity. Further,

In the plays of Parks, in particular, this business of staring into an absence and attempting to see it clearly has involved not a simple filling of a blank spot, but an intensification of and obsession with absence. All history plays, by placing before an audience past events and dead persons, display what Freddie Rokem has called the “inevitable ghostly dimension of history” (6). One tactic for the playwright is to try and overcome this ghostly dimension, to revivify and embody the past; another approach is to raise into relief the contradictions inherent in the staging of history: to embrace the ghostly, to turn the focus to the dead and what they have left us. (Holder 19)

In *The America Play*, Parks uses both of these tactics in an effort to point out the holes and fallacies in the dominant narrative: the whole is not part of the picture in the narrative of American history.

### **Time, Space, and History**

Time is a delicate and flexible entity in *The America Play* in many respects. As Ryan notes, “In Parks’s dramaturgy, ‘now and then’ is not chronologically but spatially conceived; death is always present and always has something to say. The Lesser Known tries to follow in the Great Man’s footsteps ‘that were of course *behind* him,’ impossibly trying to ‘*catch up*’ to the past” (85, emphasis original).

*The America Play* allows for various considerations and interpretations of the defining characteristics of time. For instance, one function of time in this play is that of assessing the value of a person’s life after death. This assessment itself is undeniably a construct: an identity based on perceptions and memory. We see this most obviously in The Foundling Father’s obsession with Abraham Lincoln, his intense desire to leave behind a legacy as powerful, essential and lasting as that of “The Great Man’s.” Additionally, Lucy refers to “Little Bram Price Junior,” whose entire family she served as a confidence, saying “that boy comes back. Not him



though. His echo. Sits down tuh dinner and eats up everybodys food just like he did when he was livin” (Parks, *America* 175). Brazil, spurred by this revelation and his mother’s prompting notes that he remembers Bram Price Junior’s mother, “Miz Penny Price,” also deceased, noting that she “Wore red velvet in August” (175). We learn that Miz Penny Price’s legacy is much like that of Mary Todd Lincoln’s: that the death of her husband and son lead to her insanity, from which she never recovered; and her name, of course, both literally and metaphorically serves as currency of sorts, conveying memories and history as goods.

In similar fashion, Lucy and Brazil desperately strain to hear the “echoes” and “whispers” of The Foundling Father. These instances serve to communicate the idea that a part of us, even after death, is forever alive in time, whether within the thoughts and memories of those we loved in life or through the echoes of our accomplishments as recognized by those who never knew us. Abraham Lincoln will always be associated with “thuh freeing of the slaves” while John Wilkes Booth will forever remain infamous for inflicting “thuh great black hole that thuh fatal bullet bored” (Parks, *America* 189). Likewise, The Foundling Father, also known as the Lesser Known, will forever be remembered by his wife and son as “uh faker...One of thuh best” (180), following in the footsteps of the Great Man which were always behind him. His son Brazil sees the hole his father dug as an “inheritance of sorts” comparing it to the void before history began (185). In this way, the replica of the Great Hole of History represents more than The Foundling Father’s grave, a grave he ostensibly dug for himself. For Brazil, it also represents his father’s “shape,” symbolizing not only a grave, a site for death, but some sort of birth, a big bang of inspiration as to what he, Brazil, will become: “we could say I just may follow in thuh footsteps of my foe father” (191). In this way, time as re-visioned in *The America Play* reflects the ways in which actions shape future generations, demonstrating that each of us, whether “Great” or “Lesser,” leaves an imprint upon the world by creating an indelible history that cannot be duplicated.

One cannot ignore the myriad of ways in which history plays a role in *The America Play*, from the immediate reenactment of Lincoln's assassination, to the larger exploration of identity and trauma on national and personal scales. As we are pulled into the lives of people past and people present, we are reminded again and again that history has shaped the current set of circumstances. Without Lincoln, there would be no Foundling Father. Without the Foundling Father, there would be no Brazil. Without Brazil, there would ostensibly be no future. The piece begins in a "great hole...an exact replica of the Great Hole of History" and carries us through the life of a man who has not only clearly been affected by history but is living *his* story through the story of a man he perceives as "greater." Further, in Act Two, "Returned from the 'dead' to enter another grave, the Foundling Father quickly becomes a spectacle, a commodity, buried in another narrative, as the nation mourns" (Ryan 85). These overlapping narratives disrupt our sense of linear time and space, disrupt our sense of history and reality.

In Act I, The Foundling Father, recalling the trip home from his honeymoon and the events he and his new bride witnessed in the Great Hole of History says:

[T]he Reconstructed Historicities he has witnessed continue to march before him in his minds eye as they had at the Hole. Cannons wicks were lit and the rockets did blare and the enemy was slain and lay stretched out and smoldering for dead and rose up again to take their bows. On the way home again the histories paraded again on past him although it wasnt on past him at all it wasnt something he could expect but again like Lincolns life not "on past" but past. Behind him. Like an echo in his head. (Parks, *America* 163)

The Foundling Father, so consumed with these memories of "reconstructed historicities" leaves his family to construct one of his own. These "reconstructed historicities," both as remembered and enacted, invite us as reader and audience to pause for a moment in order to realize that all things are born of a past moment; they force us to consider the ways in which the experience at hand can be viewed as a collection of history, of stories. As noted scholar Richard Schechner

points out in *Between Performance and Anthropology* (1985), a work which in part explores the performative aspects of historical reenactments similar to those remembered and subsequently reenacted by The Foundling Father, "History so-called is not 'what happened' but what has been constructed out of events, memories, records: all shaped by the world view of whoever – individually or collectively – is encoding (and performing) history. To 'make history' is not to do something but to do something with what has been done" (50-1). Abraham Lincoln is a man who made history, in part by being assassinated, while in turn, the Foundling Father is making history by doing something with what was done, specifically by reenacting and re-visioning Lincoln's assassination. Through these "reconstructed historicities," "History is not what happened but what is encoded and transmitted" (51). John Wilkes Booth assassinated President Lincoln in an attempt to disrupt the dominant narrative; to avenge the Confederacy and assert the power of a defeated nation. However, in doing so, he succeeded primarily in making a national martyr out of the man many in the South counted as chief among enemies. In much the same way, The Foundling Father is attempting to disrupt the dominant narrative by organizing and enacting these "reconstructed historicities," which are subsequently tailored by his customers, who are allowed to choose from a variety of weapons and utter any one of several "historically accurate" lines, as documented to be spoken by Booth upon assassinating Lincoln. As Lee points out, "The fact that The Foundling Father was indispensable in this subversive performance signals his agency in his performative rewriting" (25). Additionally, as previously discussed, the Foundling Father himself occasionally opts for less realistic details, such as the use of a blonde beard. In the Foundling Father's re-visioning of Lincoln's assassination we see the reality that "Restorations are immediate, and they exist in time/space as wholes; but the occasion is different, the world view is different, the audience is different, and the performers are different" (Schechner, *Between* 50). Parks disrupts the dominant narrative by upending history in such a way that it becomes more difficult to discern a realistic reenactment from one re-visioned with more creative license; it is perhaps even more difficult to discern the

reenactment from the real thing, thus suggesting that with regard to the traditional historical narrative, there is no such thing as “the real thing.” The consistent use of anachronism further throws the notion of time and history into question. As the playwright herself says, “The history of history is in question...Through each line of text I’m rewriting the Time Line – creating history where it is and always was but has not yet been divined...History is time that won’t quit” (Parks, *America* 4-5, 15).

In the same way that language and history transcend time and space, so does the relationship between The Great Man (Abraham Lincoln) and the Lesser Known (The Foundling Father as Abraham Lincoln). The historical details of Lincoln’s life, which ground the audience or reader with some familiar history, are juxtaposed with the fictional details of the Lesser Known’s life. Although “The Great Man lived in the past that is was an inhabitant of time immemorial and the Lesser Known out West alive a resident of the present” (Parks, *America* 170-1), The Foundling Father is obviously greatly influenced in the present by historical accounts of Abraham Lincoln’s life. However, the fact remains that The Foundling Father, despite being “lesser known,” wields a certain amount of power because he controls the story in the present. As Ryan points out, “Marc Robinson reads the Foundling Father’s mimicry of the assassination on Lincoln as more than ‘merely returning to a legendary moment. He is also forcing the past back into the present, and thus enabling himself to revise history’” (90). By allowing paying customers the opportunity to “shoot the president,” the Foundling Father forever alters the subjective historical perspectives of all those who participate; his actions arguably change history, because they change the way his customers (and in turn the audience in the present) views the assassination. Although the Foundling Father in the present is “all the while trying somehow to equal the Great Man in stature, word and deed going forward with his lesser life trying somehow to follow in the Great Mans footsteps footsteps that were of course behind him” (Parks, *America* 191), the fact remains that he has in some respect wrested control of the narrative from the dominant culture by re-visioning history. Additionally, to allow paying

customers in the “present” to participate in a significant historical event such as the assassination of Abraham Lincoln forces an examination of the fluid and imprecise nature of “history.” Each participant possesses their own version of the story of Lincoln’s assassination, informed not only by written historical accounts, but by their own individual social, political and economic situation, and by allowing them to embody John Wilkes Booth in a reenactment of Lincoln’s assassination, their subjective history becomes a present reality. In this way, Parks creates a dynamic relationship between the past and present, between the Great Man and the Lesser Known, which consistently points out the subjectivity of history and subverts the dominant narrative.

### **History vs. The “Other”**

Just as the Pascals of *The House of Yes* are obsessed with the Kennedys and what they represent in American culture, the Foundling Father is obsessed with Lincoln and all that his image conveys. It could be said that the Foundling Father’s obsession with Lincoln, which manifests in the taking on of Lincoln’s image, suggests an inherent hatred of himself as a black man, or what is termed “internalized racism” (Tyson, *Critical* 362). This “Internalized racism results from the psychological programming by which a racist society indoctrinates people of color to believe in white superiority” (362). In this way it could be said that *The America Play* explores the psychological effects of centuries of racism and colonization. After all, the Foundling Father assumes the role of a white man, right down to the costume, in what could be deemed a bizarre and violent homage in which he is repeatedly “murdered.” This homage, however, when viewed through the lens of postcolonial and African American theory, as well as Marxist theory, has much more subversive implications. It could be said that the Foundling Father’s impersonation of Lincoln is simultaneously an attempt to fit into the dominant culture, an attempt to shed a history that does not belong to him, and an attempt to discover his own

history and identity. It could also be argued that his impersonation is both a grotesque and clever way to earn a living in a society in which access to jobs and education is more limited for people of color.

The image of an African American man earning a living as an Abraham Lincoln impersonator is an interesting commentary on both race and capitalism, which is inevitably tied to class distinction. Double-consciousness comes into play in this context in that the Foundling Father clearly has “one cultural self at home and another cultural self in [a] white-dominated public space” (Tyson, *Critical* 362); we see this differentiation between “cultural selves” upon the arrival of any customer in the replica of the Great Hole of History. Despite the fact that he himself is African American and the fact that his customers are all played by African Americans, the replica of the Great Hole of History is immediately transformed into a “white-dominated public space” the second the Foundling Father takes on the speech of embodiment of Lincoln. It could also be argued that the play highlights instances of “intra-racial racism, which refers to discrimination within the black community” simply because of the fact that African American customers line up to “shoot” another African American in the back of the head repeatedly (362). However, in light of the fact that the Foundling Father is impersonating a stalwart image of the white, American patriarchy, I believe that the assassination reenactments more strongly illustrate an attempt at the assassination of the dominant narrative.

Further, the role that women play in the context of this world speaks to the ways in which gender and female sexuality operate as a locus of oppression. Parks does not employ “imagery associated with black women’s domestic space” and instead shows us a woman who is as much a crucial part of the “death business” as the men in her family (Tyson, *Critical* 391). However, despite the fact that she is not relegated to the home, Lucy’s situation is far from ideal; she is, after all, left to fend for herself and her young child when her husband decides to “go West” in pursuit of his skewed American Dream. As Ryan points out, “Parks engages with

the complex constellation of race and gender relations in the United States through the image of a (nonempty) hole in the ground” (85).

Heidi J. Holder claims in her chapter, “Strange Legacy: the history plays of Suzan-Lori Parks,” that “The ‘Lesser-known’ in *The America Play* claims to be a dead-ringer for Abraham Lincoln and insists that he should have been present at the President’s funeral, all this despite the fact that he was born after Lincoln’s death and looks nothing like him (all of the actors are black, but race is never directly alluded to or acknowledged)” (21). Race, however, is alluded to and acknowledged, perhaps most directly by the fact that all of the actors are black. Further, it is repeatedly said in the play that the Lesser Known bears a strong resemblance to Lincoln; that the two were “pronounced...in virtual twinship” (Parks, *America* 162). In fact, the only difference between the two men aside from living in different times is race, and therefore, access and privilege. By having a black man take on the role of a white Founding Father, a man whose image is central to the identity of America, Parks calls into question the social construction of race. After all, were it not for the Lesser Known’s “natural God-given limitations” (Parks, *America* 163), i.e. his blackness, he might more readily have the opportunity to leave behind a legacy as great and lasting as the Great Man’s. Further,

As a black man, The Foundling Father cannot simply enter into history with full subjecthood; the history of racial inequality writes him into an inferior being without a privileged position in the official genealogy of America. Therefore, The Foundling Father’s performance of Lincoln, on the one hand, disturbs the historical order by insisting on his participation in the discourse that has excluded him. (Lee 20)

As Katy Ryan points out, the social construction of race is even highlighted in the design of the cover for the Theatre Communications Group publication of *The America Play and Other Works*:

The front cover of *The America Play* displays a picture of Lincoln's top hat, beard, and dark suit against an American flag. There is no body, no color – only the outline of a president. His, presumably his, whiteness is invisible. On the back cover is a black man wearing the same top hat, beard, and dark suit in front of the red, white, and blue. As in the performance, a “white” body could not be substituted for a “black” one, since the history of the United States, the performance of “America,” has everything to do with perceiving differences in “race.” By incubating history on a stage filled with black performers, Parks fundamentally shifts the ground on which the vents of America's official past are remembered. (90-1)

Further, by having her characters reenact and re-vision Lincoln's assassination, Parks subverts the dominant narrative, as her characters attempt over and over again to assassinate a stalwart image not only of freedom for African Americans, but of American patriarchy. As Chaudhuri points out:

The Lesser Known's way of countering the nightmare of American history is to reenact it, not only by himself but for others too. Doomed as he is to reproduce the model of greatness established by the long-dead Founding Father, this child of the present, this “*Foundling Father*,” as he comes to be called, constructs a performance in which other belated Americans can participate in the deadly funnyhouse of American history. (263)

This device points out the surreptitious ways in which white privilege operates in American culture, and as viewed through the assassination reenactment, provides an interesting insight into violence on both national and personal levels. As Tim Wise points out in *White Like Me* (2008):

[T]o be white is to be “born to belonging.”... To be white is to be born into an environment where one's legitimacy is far less likely to be questioned than would



be the legitimacy of a person of color, be it in terms of where one lives, where one works, or where one goes to school. To be white is, even more, to be born into a system that has been set up for the benefit of people like you (like us), and as such provides a head start to those who can claim membership in this, the dominant club. (xi)

The Foundling Father's illegitimacy, as indicated by his very name, strips him of those opportunities that would allow him such a "head start;" he is not part of "the dominant club." In this way, the Foundling Father acts as a representative for all subjugated people in the United States. His limited access to opportunities in turn inspires a repetition of reenacted and re-visited violence that reflects a cultural struggle and a desire to break free from the perpetuation of a cycle of violence. Further, "instead of recuperating the greatness of the past, the performance of history unravels that greatness, textualizing its performers as inauthentic and belated 'bit-players' in the drama of American greatness" (Chaudhuri 265). However, through her use of repetition and a carnival-esque setting, Parks manages in some respects to destroy the image of Lincoln as a leading American patriarchal figure by reducing him to a gimmick, much like the Santa Clauses that appear in every American mall as the holiday season approaches. The image of Lincoln is cleverly commodified by a black man, who uses it in order to make a living. The unfortunate reality is that "The desire to advance oneself in the *material* world...the desire to advance oneself financially or to feel better about oneself psychologically – *determines* the ways in which the dominant society practices racism" (Tyson, *Critical* 371, emphasis original). Despite the Foundling Father's status as a "'bit-player' in the drama of American Greatness," he manages to subvert the dominant narrative by becoming an active and successful participant in the American economic system by commodifying the image of Lincoln as a means to economic success.

The role of "other" is filled in *The America Play* not only by African Americans, but by women, who are categorically denied sexuality in a patriarchal culture. We see this as it relates

to the women in the play, most notably Lucy, as well as the women who are mentioned in historical references throughout the play, most notably Mary Todd Lincoln, for whom Lucy has a special affinity. Throughout the first act, we hear the echo of the patriarchy, but as Ryan points out, the same is not true for the women in the world of the play and beyond:

We do not even hear the echoes of Lucy's stories; we hear the "rest" of silence. Lucy, who identifies not with the Great Man but with the Great Man's wife, would choose a different "moment" to enact than her husband: "me myself now I prefer thuh part where he gets married to Mary Todd and she begins to lose her mind (and then of course where he frees all thuh slaves)" (190). The "part" that Lucy prefers, the suspicion that Mary Todd Lincoln was "given to hysterics," is an excerpt from a grand narrative of marriage that obscures the experiences of "First Ladies" and assumes the absence of women of color. Irigaray writes, women's "sex organ represents the horror of having nothing to see. In this system of representation and desires, the vagina is a flaw, a hole in the representation's scopophilic objective." (Ryan 87)

Because "black women must negotiate the conflicting requirements of their relationship to the black community as a whole – their solidarity with black men against racist oppression – and their relationship to women of all races in an effort to resist sexist oppression" (Tyson, *Critical* 389), it is worth noting that Lucy puts Lincoln's marriage to Mary Todd above his act of "freeing all thuh slaves," suggesting that she identifies more strongly with her role as a woman than her role as an African American. It could be argued that in this respect the cultural expectations of women serve to enslave them within the domestic sphere. Further, "In white American history, black women's sexualities remain largely unknown, 'unfound,' though something called 'black woman's sexuality' has been fabricated by 'civilizing' forces" (Ryan 87). Likewise, "The systematic rape of black women by white men is one of the most absent parts of American

history (if one can speak of degrees of absence), and Parks's staging of a 'patricidal fantasy' that spatially coincides with 'the freeing of thuh slaves' evokes this history" (88).

Lucy's role as a "confidence" is only second to her role as wife and mother. It is difficult to ascertain what her marriage was like, but we do know that according to her version of events, she basically let her husband have his way in any situation:

LUCY: I could never deny him nothin'.

I gived intuh him on everything.

Thuh moon. Thuh stars.

Thuh bees knees. Thuh cats pyjamas.

*(Rest)*

BRAZIL

LUCY

BRAZIL: Anything?

LUCY: Stories too horrible tuh mention.

BRAZIL: His stories?

LUCY: Nope. (Parks, *America* 187)

Lucy remains the individual who must live with the "stories too horrible tuh mention," the historical echoes and memories that haunt her, and while it's not explicitly stated, it could be inferred that some of what she had to "give intuh" included unwanted sexual advances on the part of her husband. Though it could be said that she is somewhat overbearing at times in her role as mother, constantly goading Brazil to continue with the difficult work of digging, it could be argued that her role as the keeper of confidences, the steward of the secrets of the dead, weights her with a responsibility the likes of which the men in her world will never have to bear. Further, "Brazil's legacy is shaped largely by Lucy, as her memories serve as the basis for Brazil's images of his father" (Woodworth 143). Lucy is saddled not only with the burden of keeping the secrets of the dead, but with raising a child on her own and instilling within him, as

much as is possible, a sense of identity in a culture where the histories of subjugated people are largely ignored, forgotten and erased.

### **Is There Room for The American Dream in a replica of The Great Hole of History?**

In his fourth presidential debate with Stephen A. Douglas, held on September 18, 1858, in Charleston, Illinois, presidential candidate Abraham Lincoln shared his views on racial equality, stating:

I will say then that I am not, nor ever have been in favor of bringing about in anyway the social and political equality of the white and black races – that I am not nor ever have been in favor of making voters or jurors of negroes, nor of qualifying them to hold office, nor to intermarry with white people; and I will say in addition to this that *there is a physical difference between the white and black races which I believe will forever forbid the two races living together on terms of social and political equality.* And inasmuch as they cannot so live, while they do remain together there must be the position of superior and inferior, and I as much as any other man am in favor of having the superior position assigned to the white race. (qtd. in Basler 145-6, emphasis mine)

Lincoln's views on the "physical difference between the white and black races" echoes the ideals of the American Dream, which as previously discussed is defined as "a dream of social order in which each man and each woman shall be able to attain to the fullest stature of which they are *innately capable*, and be recognized by others for what they are, regardless of the fortuitous circumstances of birth or position" (Adams 404, emphasis mine). In the view of white supremacists, therefore, any failure of an African American to achieve the American Dream is due to a natural condition of perceived inferiority, or a lack of "innate capability." Notably, Lincoln's views on "physical difference" is directly contradicted in *The America Play*, in which a

black man is “pronounced...in virtual twinship” with a white man, the only difference being the color of his skin. In this way, Parks calls into question a dominant narrative that propagates race as a biological difference rather than a social construct.

Lincoln’s legacy is complex. As “W.E.B. Du Bois wrote...Lincoln was ‘big enough to be inconsistent – cruel, merciful; peace-loving, a fighter; despising Negroes and letting them fight and vote; protecting slavery and freeing slaves’” (Shenk 5). Further:

As the face of the five-dollar bill, Lincoln’s dark features are engraved with the uncomical grief and solemnity of 19<sup>th</sup>-century fatalism. As a symbol, too, he has an unusually shared currency among quite divided groups. Republicans cling to him as the first member of their party to become president. Liberals hold to him as a great unifier and emancipator. Socialists present him as a champion of the labourer over the capitalist; conservatives have it the other way around. He was a poor boy, born in a log cabin, with an authoritative baritone voice, who educated himself and fought the good fight against slavery. Or he was a middle-class man, a Shakespeare enthusiast, with a high-pitched voice that verged on shrillness, who was ambitious, and ambivalent about the plight of slaves. He is all things to all people. (Crawley 14)

Lincoln’s beliefs surrounding the superiority of whites was not unusual for his time, and we see the repercussions of these beliefs echoed today. The tenets of the American Dream and pervasive racist beliefs like those espoused by Lincoln do not allow for true equality, even today. Lincoln further remarked, “I do not perceive that because the white man is to have the superior position the negro should be denied everything” (qtd. in Basler 146). We can assume by this that Lincoln was referring specifically to freedom: to the “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness” promised in the *Declaration of Independence*. However, his clear beliefs on the inferiority of blacks reflects a cultural struggle for equality that still resonates today, and the American Dream plays a crucial role in the vision of equality. After all, the image of Lincoln,

which is “the birthright of most American children,” is “as much the creation of mythology as history” (Boritt viii).

Parks’s Foundling Father is clearly pursuing a version of the American Dream, albeit skewed. Most people of color in America do not dream of becoming someone as influential and significant as Lincoln, in large part due to the fact that they recognize the adversity they face simply by virtue of the color of their skin. As Lee points out, *The America Play* “comments more broadly on the idea of the Founding Fathers of America; the promise of national lineage inherent in the concept is not meant for all Americans, as it is certainly gender- and race-specific. Because The Foundling Father is a black man, his connection to Lincoln can never be complete” (19). Realistically, it is nearly impossible for a grave digger to abandon his profession and rise to the ranks of lasting political celebrity and mythology in the same way that Lincoln was able to rise above his admittedly humble beginnings to become a lasting symbol of freedom in American iconography. As Hochschild points out, “the American dream is a central although contentious ideology of Americans” that “is threatened for all Americans in ways that the disaffection of most middle-class blacks and the fury of a few poor blacks most clearly reveal” (3). Further, “as blacks have become more discouraged about whether the American dream applies to their race, whites have become considerably more convinced of the inclusion of blacks in the dream” (4-5). The election of Barack Obama as the 44<sup>th</sup> President of the United States highlights this point. As Wise asserts, “For a nation built on a foundation of slavery, disenfranchisement, and white domination, the election of a person of color (and a man who, according to the racial taxonomy that has long existed in the United States, is indeed black) to the highest office in the land, is of no small import” (*Between* 7). However, Wise argues that “while the individual success of persons of color, as with Obama, is meaningful...the larger systematic and institutional realities of life in America suggest the ongoing salience of a deep-seated cultural malady – racism – which has been neither eradicated nor even substantially diminished by Obama’s victory” (8). The image of a black man as President of the United States

is now a reality, but racism in America is alive and well. Abraham Lincoln, despite his views on equality, did champion the elimination of slavery in America, and he lived to see the emancipation of American slaves enacted into law. As Wise points out, in much the same way, many expect Obama to lead the way with regard to eliminating racism in America, but “Obama cannot be relied upon, any more so than any other president or national leader, to shepherd our nation out of the wilderness of racism and inequality. The job is too great, and the single solitary man too small for such an effort” (*Between* 113).

The Foundling Father is the embodiment of the American Dream in respect to the ideal of the rugged individual. As Chaudhuri points out, the Lesser Known:

Succumbs to the lure of the all-American journey: “The Lesser Known went out West finally...A monumental journey. Enduring all the elements. Without a friend in the world...He got there and he got his plot he stake his claim he tried his hand at his own Big Hole” (Parks *America* 28). In making the mythical journey West, the Lesser Known was reenacting the core principle of American History. (63)

Further, his creation of a replica of the Great Hole of History with his addition of “shoot the president” is an overnight success, reminiscent of the many “restored villages” that came into popularity in the last half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century:

As of 1978 there were over sixty [restored villages] in the United States and Canada and, it seems, more are coming. Millions of people visit them each year. Typically they restore the colonial period or the nineteenth century; *they reinforce the ideology of rugged individualism* as represented by early settlers of the eastern states (Colonial Williamsburg, Plimoth Plantation), or the shoot-‘em-up West (Buckskin Joe and Cripple Creek, Colorado; Cowtown, Kansas; Old Tucson, Arizona), or the romanticized “heroic” industries like mining and whaling...The scope of the architectural reconstructions and the behaviors of the

persons who work in the villages make these restorations more than museums.  
(Schechner, *Between* 80, emphasis mine)

While the Foundling Father is himself a manifestation of rugged individualism, the “ideology of the rugged individualism” as “reinforced” in the replica of the Great Hole of History is, in some respects, that of the assassin. However,

a feature of [the Lesser Known’s] identity – that he was a digger (and nigger) – puts him in absolute conflict with the expected benefits of following that [core] principle [of American History]. Irrevocably separated as he is (by virtue of his class and his race) from the enabling narratives of the (white) past, the Lesser Known’s efforts to connect his identity to the Great Man’s prove futile. (Chaudhuri 263)

He does succeed, however, in creating an act in which the dominant narrative is directly challenged. By handing the reins over to the “assassin” for a penny a pop, the role of “rugged individual” is in some respects transferred to a paying customer. In this way the white, patriarchal dominant narrative as embodied by a quintessential American icon of freedom is assassinated by the very ideals it cultivates in a never-ending cycle of violence.

### **Conclusion**

As Ryan asserts, “The iconography of Lincoln surpasses that of all other Americans; his speeches, which are often reproduced in classrooms and on stages, including the floors of the House and Senate, have become part of our national discourse” (82). However, the image of Lincoln in Suzan-Lori Parks’s *The America Play* presents an audacious and subversive re-visioning of assassination that takes on centuries of racism, colonization, gender oppression, economic oppression, and the pervasive vision of the American Dream by seeking to assassinate the dominant narrative. Further,



Whether African Americans achieve their versions of the [American] dream, and the effort they undergo to do so, tells us much about America's deepest and most bitter social divide. Conversely, the degree to which African Americans embrace, reject, redefine, or ignore the American dream tells us much about the meaning and value of the ideology for all Americans. (Hochschild 4)

The characters in *The America Play* run the gamut as it regards the American Dream: they “embrace, reject, redefine,” and in some respects, they “achieve,” but they never “ignore;” the American Dream is much too pervasive to be ignored. The Foundling Father sacrifices his family and his health in pursuit of the American Dream, and is met with success and fame in his replica of the Great Hole of History. However, it doesn't seem that his success and fame make him happy, and he eventually quits the business, though the echoes of gunshots continue to ring out in perpetuity.

Speaking of the tradition of storytelling in his African village, Ngūgĩ wa Thiong'o said:

There were good and bad story-tellers. A good one could tell the same story over and over again, and it would always be fresh to us, the listeners. He or she could tell a story told by someone else and make it more alive and dramatic. The differences really were in the use of words and images and the inflexion of voices to effect different tones. (10)

In much the same way, the Foundling Father tells the same story over and over again, keeping the story fresh by reenacting and re-visioning the stories of someone else, the Great Man, using slightly altered “images” and “inflexions,” in an effort to reveal what has heretofore been ignored. And as Ryan points out, “Keeping the story to scale is precisely the difficulty when one is dealing with history, whether familial or national” (88). Further,

In a dialogue with Stuart Hall, Henry Louis Gates writes, “our social identities represent the way we participate in historical narrative. Our histories may be irretrievable, but they invite imaginative reconstruction.” Parks's play responds to

this invitation by reconstructing historical narratives vis a vis sexual and racial positionings that, like queer theories, refuse ontological verity of social identities and upset the most intransigent of borders – that between life and death. (Ryan 89)

In a 1955 letter to the family of a friend, renowned physicist Albert Einstein wrote that “the separation between past, present, and future is only an illusion, however tenacious” (qtd. in Bernstein 92). Through the use of a number of devices in *The America Play*, including but not limited to anachronism, real and “faux” historical references and quotes, re-visioned national trauma, and a setting that “subverts all notions of epic drama and historical pantheons” (Havis xvi), Parks illustrates this theory in a way that creates layer upon complicated layer of meaning. As Lee asserts, “In citing Lincoln’s history, Parks not only presents history as performative but also critiques the way in which history participates in creating a dominant culture that is predominately white and male” (10). In some respects, the Foundling Father disrupts the narrative generated by the dominant culture by repeatedly living through the assassination reenactment, something the Great Man was unable to do. As Chaudhuri notes:

Though [the Lesser Known] dismisses as “ridiculous” the implication of...historical disjunction – “Maybe the Great Man had to catch him” (30) - this is precisely the main insight and challenge of the play: how and when, asks *The America Play*, will American history make room for its victims? When and how will the story of America take the reflexive turn to glimpse its old blind spots? When will America finally emerge from the black hole of racism? (263)

As the “echoes” of Parks’s assassination re-visioning hang in the air, we come to realize that we will all eventually become part of the whole of the hole of history, regardless of our race, gender, economic status, accomplishments and failings.

## CHAPTER THREE

### Suzan-Lori Parks' *Topdog/Underdog*

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

(Parks, *Topdog* 32).

Suzan-Lori Parks's Pulitzer Prize winning play *Topdog/Underdog* premiered in the summer of 2001 at the Joseph Papp Public Theatre/New York Shakespeare Festival, before moving to Broadway in the Spring of 2002. Easily one of Parks's most traditional and linear plays, *Topdog/Underdog* features only two characters, brothers Link (short for Lincoln), and Booth, who live together in a single room in a rooming house. Perhaps in part because of the small cast and the accessible, linear nature of the play, *Topdog/Underdog* has become the most produced of Parks's work. The play, which features a character who earns a living playing Abraham Lincoln in an arcade, specifically in a reenactment of Lincoln's assassination, is Parks's second work featuring a character with this particular profession, premiering less than a decade after *The America Play* (1994). Parks's second run at this fascinating set up is just as creative, striking, and powerful as her first. However, the linear nature of the play and the closely drawn relationship between the two brothers makes for quite a different experience. The play is, in every respect, what is deemed a well-made play: it takes place in a single location, features few characters and takes place over the course of just a week. It has a clear beginning, middle and end, clear conflict between the two characters as well as a conflict between the characters and their society, and ends on a climactic note that has the potential to leave an audience stunned. The linear, traditional nature of the play makes it easier to follow than *The America Play*, and there are fewer layers to sift through, but the commentary on identity, history, memory and race in America is no less powerful. *Topdog/Underdog* is a clear, direct and heartbreaking piece of theatre that highlights a nation on the verge of self-annihilation.

*Topdog/Underdog* echoes each play discussed in this study in some respect. We see not only the echo of the Foundling Father's story from *The America Play*, but the echo of the murder of a sibling as featured in *The House of Yes*. Further, we see the echo of the struggle against the American Dream and the role it plays in the cultural dominant narrative. Finally, we see yet another reenactment of presidential assassination, which ultimately serves as an attempted assassination of the dominant narrative and the ideals it holds sacred. The play presents a re-visioning of presidential assassination that speaks not only to national trauma tied to the continued subjugation of people of color but to personal trauma that in the case of Link and Booth, proves too devastating to overcome. Further, as is the case with *The America Play*, *Topdog/Underdog* presents a powerful commentary on the destructive nature of the tenets of capitalism, as well as the ways in which race and economic status are inevitably connected. While in some respects, the play once more presents the absurd premise that an African American man would take on the role of Abraham Lincoln as an economic necessity, the situation and relationships, like those presented in *The House of Yes*, are completely relative. However, while *Topdog/Underdog* is in many respects a commentary on race, racism and identity in America, as well as the ways in which national tragedies such as presidential assassination has the power to affect the citizens of a nation for years to come, the play's focus on the relationship between brothers Link and Booth is at the heart of the play. In the case of *Topdog/Underdog*, we are shown the inevitability of a repetition of history that is both heartbreaking, shocking and yet somehow, comes as no surprise.

### **Synopsis and Preliminary Analysis**

Act One of *Topdog/Underdog* opens on Booth, alone in the room he shares with his brother. Booth is practicing 3-card monte, a scam that involves deftly "throwing" the cards in such a way that a person who has entered the game thinks they can follow, but will almost

always fail. The stage directions indicate that he is not especially good at 3-card monte, and we soon learn that his older brother, Link, short for Lincoln, was at one time one of the best 3-card monte scam artists in town. As Booth practices, Link enters, wearing “an antique frock coat...a top hat and fake beard” (Parks, *Topdog* 6). He stands behind Booth, who is unaware that he has come in, in an image that immediately establishes who is the “topdog” and who is the “underdog,” as well as ironically situates the brothers in a positioning that is a mirror image of the Lincoln assassination, in which Booth stood behind a seated Lincoln before taking his aim. When Booth becomes aware that someone is behind him, he “whirls around, pulling a gun from his pants” (7). He lays into Link for wearing his work clothes home, who claims that he had to choose between taking off his work clothes or catching the bus. Booth responds with “Bullshit,” and Link replies with, “Not completely. I mean, its either bull or shit, but not a complete lie so it aint bullshit, right? (7). This immediately sets the tone for the many lies that the brothers tell each other throughout the play, some harmless, and some less so. Booth explains that he doesn’t like Link wearing his work clothes in the room the two men share, mostly because he’s afraid it will make a bad impression on his “women” (8). He goes on to tell his brother that he has a date with a woman named Grace, and that further, he recently gave her a “diamond-esque” ring that he stole. He confides in Link that he stole a ring half a size smaller than her ring finger size “so she cant just take it off on a whim, like she did the last one I gave her” (8). Booth asks his brother again to take off his work clothes, claiming that he makes him “nervous standing there looking like a spook” (9). Link takes off his work clothes and as he removes his make-up he tells his brother that because he was wearing his work clothes, he was able to trick a kid on the bus into giving him \$20 for his autograph. The kid had just learned about Abraham Lincoln in his history class and was desperate for an autograph. Link told him he would give him one for \$10, but the kid only had a \$20 bill on him. So Link “took the 20 and told him to meet me on the bus tomorrow and Honest Abe would give him the change” (9-10). He then proceeded to

buy a round of drinks for patrons of a bar called Lucky's, prompting Booth to say "you shoulda called me down" (10).

When Link changes the subject by asking Booth what he's doing with milk crates and a piece of cardboard, the typical set up for a game of 3-card monte, Booth claims that he is creating a "modular" bookshelf/dining table so that they two "can eat and store our books," prompting Link to remark "We just gotta get some book but thats great, Booth, thats real great" (11). Booth retrieves a "raggedy family photo album" which he uses in place of books, and then tells his brother that he doesn't want to be called Booth any more, announcing that he's decided to change his name but that he's unprepared to reveal just what he wants to change it to yet. Lincoln remarks that he should change his name to "something african," like "Shango...the name of the thunder god" (12). Link has brought home dinner, Chinese food, and the two brothers decide to "try the table out" (12). They then argue over who should set up the food. Link feels that because he bought the food, Booth should set it up. But Booth feels that because Link is crashing at his place indefinitely, Link should set up the food. Lincoln points out that when he brings home his paycheck every Friday, Booth is happy to have him staying with him, to which Booth retorts, "Every Friday you come home with yr paycheck. Today is Thursday and I tell you brother, its 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" (13). Link still refuses to get the food, pointing out that there's no running water, exclaiming, "You living in thuh Third World, fool!" (13). Link then inexplicably gives in, going to get the food. In doing so, he notices a card on the floor, prompting him to ask his brother if he's been playing cards. Booth replies that he's been playing solitaire, and that further, he's "getting pretty good at it" (14). Link then gives Booth his meat, taking the "skrimps" for himself, to which Booth objects. Link reminds his brother that he earlier indicated that he wanted the meat, and when Booth doesn't respond, Link trades food with him, saying, "Here man, take the skrimps. No sweat" (14). They eat, with the stage directions indicating that "Lincoln eats slowly and carefully, Booth

eats ravenously” (14). The focus comes back immediately to the cards, with Booth asking Link if he’d care to play a hand of “poker or rummy or something” after they finish their meal (14-15). Link responds with, “I dont touch thuh cards” (15). Booth tries several tactics in an attempt to get his brother to play a card game with him, even offering to play for money, his “inheritance,” pointing out that he still has his, while Link “blew” his (15). Link then changes the subject, asking his brother, “You like the skrimps?” (15). Booth responds with “Ssallright.” The two men then eat their fortune cookies. Booth’s fortune reads, “Waste not want not,” while Link’s says, “Your luck will change!” (15-16).

Booth takes the cards and moves over to his bed, practicing his 3-card monte moves as quietly as possible, trying to keep his activity a secret from Link. After a bit, Link finally speaks up and tells Booth what he’s doing wrong. Booth tries to get his brother to show him, but Link refuses. Booth then tries to convince Link that the two of them should go into business together hustling 3-card monte on the streets. Link ignores his brother’s request and starts cleaning up the aftermath of dinner. Booth chooses this moment to tell Link what he wants to be called from now on: 3-Card. He tries again to convince Link to go back to “throwing down the cards,” but Link responds again with, “I dont touch thuh cards no more” (17-19). Link’s response is followed by one of Parks’s “spells,” as described in the previous chapter:

LINCOLN

BOOTH

LINCOLN

BOOTH

Booth breaks the “spell” by launching into the story of what their mother told him “when she was packing to leave” (19). He belittles Link for not being there when she left, for going to school like he did everyday and not having enough sense to know that something was wrong. He claims that he cut school and went back because he sensed something was “going on,” that something was “changing” (19). Link points out that he cut school “almost every day,” but Booth continues

unphased, telling Link that their mother told him to look out for his brother, despite the fact that he was the younger of the two. He uses this story as a tactic to get Link to return the favor and look out for him for once, saying "YOU STANDING IN MY WAY, LINK!" (19). Link apologizes, explaining that he can't hustle anymore, to which Booth retorts, "What you do all day aint no hustle?" (20). Link replies that "Its honest work" because "People know the real deal" and "When people know the real deal it aint a hustle" (20). Booth tells Link that he's "gonna have to leave" for the first time, pointing out that "this was only supposed to be a temporary arrangement," and Link promises that he will leave "tomorrow" (20-21). Booth goes over to his bed while Link settles into his chair with his guitar. He sings a blues song that he wrote, which Booth proclaims "Sounds good" (21). Link then tells Booth that their father told him why their names are Lincoln and Booth, that he named them so because he thought it was funny: "It was his idea of a joke" (21-22).

Scene two takes place the next day. Booth enters the room "looking like he is bundled up against the cold" and starts to produce stolen goods from his coat, including two new suits – one for him and one for his brother – complete with neckties, shirts, shoes and socks. He has also managed to steal "a folding screen which he sets up between the bed and the recliner creating 2 separate spaces" (23). Link enters with his week's pay and the two celebrate by smelling the money and having a large glass of "med-sin" (whiskey) each (24). Booth then points Link in the direction of the recliner, showing him the new suit he's managed to shoplift for him, and the two men put on their new suits, Booth bragging about his thieving abilities. The discussion turns to their father, who abandoned them, leaving his clothes behind. Booth remarks that what their father "didnt spend on booze he spent on women. What he didnt spend on them two he spent on clothes" (27). Link, however, tired of seeing his father's clothes in the closet, burned them. The two men admire themselves in their new suits, eventually deciding to trade ties because Link asserts that the tie Booth has stolen for him would actually match his



suit better and likely be more attractive to Grace, who Booth hopes to impress with his sharp, new wardrobe. The stage directions indicate that they are both pleased with the outcome.

The two men then budget out the money that Link has brought home to ensure that they have enough to cover their rent and expenses. Link then reveals that he may lose his job, and when Booth assures him that if it happens, they'll manage, Link replies that he actually likes his job and doesn't want to lose it. They discuss Link's "Best Customer," who always talks to him: "In a whisper. Shoots on the left whispers on the right" (31-2). The customer, who Link believes is also a black man, always has an enigmatic remark or question, and "makes the day interesting" (32-3). We then learn that the reason Link quit card hustling was because one of his friends got shot the last time he did and that he knew he "was next," and "quit" to save his own life (33). Booth tells Link that the best bet at keeping his job at the arcade is to "jazz up" his act, and after Link gives him an extra \$5 for his date with Grace, promises to help him practice later. He encourages Link to put on his work clothes and practice until he returns from his date. Booth leaves and Link does just that, forgoing the whiteface makeup. He runs through his "act" one time before pouring himself "a big glass of whiskey" (35).

Scene three takes place "much later that same Friday evening," and we see Link, still dressed in his work clothes, asleep in the recliner. Booth enters loudly in an attempt to wake his brother up, and when Link is awake, Booth "swaggers about...rooster-like," bragging about Grace wanting to take him back, claiming that she let him "do her how I wanted," "Dogstyle," "and no rubber" (36-9). When Link asks Booth to help him practice his assassination act, revealing that the arcade plans to replace him with a wax dummy Booth refuses, claiming that he's tired. Link lashes out, calling his brother out on his story about his evening with Grace, saying, "You didn't get shit tonight...You laying over there yr balls blue as my boosted suit" (43). Booth retaliates by reminding Link that he slept with his wife, and the two remain silent for a while, as indicated by a "spell." The two retire to their separate spaces, Booth to his bed and Link to his recliner. Eventually Link breaks the ice by reminding his brother that he can hustle

cards without him, even offering to contact his former hustling colleagues to set Booth up with an established crew. Link then informs Booth that he'll need to get a new gun, "something more substantial than that pop gun" (45). Booth asks Link if he ever worries that someone who dislikes him will come into the arcade and shoot him for real, and Link responds that he "dont got no enemies" (46). When Booth presses the issue, saying that some "miscellaneous stranger" could come in and truly assassinate him, Link retorts with, "I cant be worrying about the actions of miscellaneous strangers" (47). Booth asks Link if he ever sees his customers, and Link reveals that he can see them reflected in an electrical box on the wall, but that they're reflected upside down because the box is dented. When Link again laments the fact that his boss plans to replace him with a wax dummy to "cut costs," Booth tells him that he needs to spice up his act in order to show his boss that he "can do things a wax dummy cant do" (48). The two men rehearse the assassination act, in an attempt to make it more interesting, with Booth playing the assassin. Booth "assassinates Link three times, each time coaching him to make his death look more realistic. The third time Booth shouts at him, "Come on man, this is life and death! Go all out!" (50). Link does just that, and when he asks Booth how it looked, a disturbed Booth replies, "I dunno man. Something about it. I dunno. It was looking too real or something" (50). Link then accuses Booth of trying to get him fired, claiming that if the act looks too real it will "scare the customers" (50). Booth assures his brother that he's just "trying to help," and that if he was to get fired, the two of them could "hustle the cards together" (50-1). When Link doesn't respond, Booth tries to get him to show him a card move; he refuses and the two brothers retire to their separate areas of the room.

Scene four begins "Just before dawn" the following morning, with Link waking up and lamenting the fact that there's "No fucking running water," and then relieving himself in a plastic cup. He realizes that he's still in his work clothes, and tears them off, stripping "down to his t-shirt and shorts" (53). Though Booth is still asleep on the other side of the room, Link begins recounting the last time he threw the cards, when his friend Lonny was shot and killed. Seeing a

pack of cards, "He studies them like an alcoholic would study a drink," and unable to resist their draw he sets up a 3-card monte game and begins to throw the cards. Lincoln displays skills that are far superior to his brother's: "[his] patter and moves are deft, dangerous, electric" (55). As Link plays 3-card monte, "Booth wakes and...listens intently" (56). The scene and act ends with Lincoln walking away from the cards and set up, retiring once more to his recliner, unable to "take his eyes off the cards" (57).

Act Two begins a few days later, with Booth waiting alone in the apartment for his date, Grace, to show up. He is wearing his stolen suit and has spruced the apartment up as best he can with more stolen goods. Link arrives, upsetting Booth, who wants the apartment to himself for his evening with Grace. Link reminisces about hearing his parents' nocturnal sexual activities when the brothers were children before revealing that he has lost his job. Booth suggests that Link go back to hustling the cards before again asking his brother to leave. Link sits in his recliner and promises to leave when she arrives. We then discover that it's 2 a.m. and Grace was supposed to arrive at 8. Link avoids saying the obvious, just remarking that she's "late," before Booth changes the subject, hopefully suggesting that perhaps Link will teach him how to throw the cards someday (62-3). This is followed by a spell, which is broken when Link again reassures his brother that he'll leave when Grace arrives. Booth watches for Grace at the window while Link drinks whiskey and looks through the family photo album. He begins reminiscing about the house they lived in as boys with their parents, about their lives as children. Link then reveals that he was given severance of a week's pay and spent it all, before wondering aloud why their parents left them. We learn that the brothers were 16 and 13 when their parents left, their mother leaving first, then two years later, their father. Booth is more forgiving of his parents than Link, positing that the responsibilities they had taken on were overwhelming and stating, "I dont blame them" (67). He then returns his attention to Grace, clearly growing more agitated by her extreme tardiness. Link remarks, "Moms told me I shouldnt never get married," and Booth replies, "She told me thuh same thing" (68). We then learn that

their parents gave them each \$500 before they left, telling each of them not to let the other know about it (68-9). The brothers run out of whisky, and Booth opens the champagne he's been saving for Grace, all the while trying to convince his brother that it didn't matter that their parents left because they had each other, in an attempt to get Link to agree to teach him how to throw the cards. Link remarks that "Throwing thuh cards aint as easy at it looks," before finally agreeing to teach Booth a few moves (69-71). Booth immediately dismantles the dinner setup and transforms it into a 3-card monte set up. Link begins teaching him the game, and Booth begs him to let him play the role of the Lookout, stating "I'll keep an eye for thuh cops. I got my piece on me," to which Link replies, "You got it on you right now?" (71). Booth replies that he "always carr(ies) it," to which Link marvels, "Even on a date? In yr own home?" (71). Booth replies simply with "You never know man" (71). Link takes Booth's gun from him and puts it in a chair, reminding Booth that they're just studying and don't need a lookout. Booth's second choice is Stickman ("The one in the crowd who looks like just an innocent passerby, who looks just like another player, like just another customer, but who gots intimate connections with you, the Dealer") (17-18), but Link points out that the "Stickman knows the game inside out," and that in order to learn, he needs to be the "Sideman. Playing along with the Dealer, moving the Mark to lay his money down" (72). Booth agrees and Link begins "sizing up thuh crowd," before announcing, "Dealer dont want to play," much to Booth's irritation (73). Link then reveals that his hesitation to play is all part of an act, a manipulation that encourages the crowd to play: "the Dealer has been wanting to throw his cards all along. Only he dont never show it" (73). Link teaches Booth that "Theres 2 parts to throwing the cards...what yr doing with yr mouth and what yr doing with yr hands," further remarking that Booth "need[s] to work on both" (74). Link instructs his brother to "look into my eyes" to learn how to throw the cards, at which point Booth notices that his brother's eyes are red, asking, "You been crying?" (75). Link avoids the question by focusing on teaching his brother his moves. When the time comes for Booth to pick the card, he does so successfully and "struts around gloating like a rooster. Lincoln is mildly crestfallen"

(76). Link is quick to move on, bringing in the element of patter. Booth again selects the correct card, and again responds with a great deal of brotherly machismo, prompting Link to retort “You wanna learn or you wanna run yr mouth?...That yr whole motherfucking problem. Yr so busy running yr mouth you aint never gonna learn nothing! You think you something but you aint shit” (77-8). Booth continues to gloat, prompting Link to switch roles with him, putting Booth in the role of the Dealer. “Booth moves the cards around in an awkward imitation of his brother” (78). His patter and moves are so “loud” and “jerky” that Link “doubles over laughing,” prompting Booth to “put on his coat and pocket his gun” (79). Link then reminds Booth of the one time he let him hang out with his crew, and “turned thuh wrong card,” causing them to lose \$800 (79). Booth asks what time it is, and when Link shows him, he launches into a tirade about Grace. Link tries to calm his brother down, but Booth storms out of the room, leaving Link by himself with the cards.

The final scene of the play takes place the following evening, as Link enters the seemingly empty room, drunk and with “an enormous wad of cash” (82). We soon learn that he has successfully returned to dealing 3-card monte, and as such, has returned to popularity in the neighborhood. He has spent the evening at Lucky’s in the company of several fawning women. Booth, who has been standing behind the screen, emerges without being seen by his brother and moves to the door that Link has left open. Link continues his monologue until he is interrupted by Booth, who closes the door. Booth announces that Grace has proposed marriage to him, explaining that she hadn’t stood him up at all, that he had the wrong night all along. Further, he explains, Grace is set on moving in with him immediately, meaning that Link will need to leave. Link agrees that its time he got his own place, and begins packing his belongings. This sends Booth, who unbeknownst to Link has seen and heard everything, into a fury. Booth exclaims: “Just like that, huh? ‘No sweat’?! Yesterday you lost yr damn job. You dont got no cash. You dont got no friends, no nothing, but you clearing out just like that and its ‘no sweat’?! (86). Link gives in a little, lying to his brother and telling him that he’s found a new job

as a security guard before asking him if he ever plans to get a job and support himself. Link warns Booth that Grace won't stay with him if he doesn't pull his weight. Booth replies that Grace likes him just the way he is before turning the conversation to their parents. Booth reveals that their mother "had a man on thuh side," and Link reveals that their father "had side shit going on too" (88). Link further reveals that their father used to let him meet his "ladies," and that one of them even took a shine to him and would have sex with him after their father was done with her "on the sly" (89). Link takes out his old work clothes, the Abraham Lincoln costume, and Booth laments that he doesn't have a picture of his brother in the costume for the photo album. Link agrees to put it on and have his picture taken, complete with "2 thin smears of white pancake makeup, more like war paint than whiteface" (90). Booth snaps a picture, and Link says "Lets take one together, you and me." Booth refuses, claiming that he wants to "Save the film for the wedding" (91). Link offers to put in a word for Booth at the arcade, in case business picks back up, but Booth refuses. Booth asks him what he thought about all day at work in the arcade, and Link admits that sometimes he thought about women, including his ex-wife, Cookie. This prompts Booth to tell his brother how he seduced his wife, promising her that if she left Link, he would marry her, but then changing his mind. The two men argue, prompting them to set up the cards. Link deals and Booth again picks correctly. This gives him the courage to confront Link about going back to dealing 3-card monte on the streets. He goads Link into playing "for real" by putting down money on the next game. Link takes out his roll of cash, \$500, and Booth retrieves the \$500 inheritance his mother gave him when she left, still in its nylon stocking. Link begs his brother not to bet the money, refusing to play. Booth insists, and finally, Link begins the hustle, asking him if he thinks they're "really brothers" right before Booth has to pick the correct card. A distracted Booth chooses the wrong card, losing the \$500 he's been saving for so many years. Link, unable to control himself, begins laughing as he tries to untie the knot in the stocking so that he can count the money. Booth, who has never opened the stocking, asks Link not to open it, but Link insists on making sure that their mother really did put

\$500 in the stocking. Link keeps laughing, saying “Shit. Sorry. I aint laughing at you Im just laughing” (103). He belittles Booth for never opening the stocking to make sure that their mother wasn’t “jiving” him, further deriding him for not learning the first rule of the game: “that there aint no winning” (105-6). Booth becomes increasingly agitated, as Link pulls a knife out of his boot to cut the knot from the stocking. Link keeps laughing, again saying “Im not laughing at you, bro, Im just laughing,” as Booth, too, begins to laugh (106). Just as Link is about to cut the stocking open, Booth says “I popped her...Grace. I popped her” (106-7). He tells Link that Grace wasn’t wearing the ring he gave her, and that further, she “Said she was into bigger things,” so he killed her (107). Link immediately offers to give his brother his stocking back, but Booth refuses, ordering his brother to “Open it open it open it open it. OPEN IT!!!” (108). As Link “brings the knife down to cut the stocking,” “Booth grabs Lincoln from behind,” “pull[ing] his gun and thrust[ing] it into the left side of Lincolns neck” (108). Link simply says “Dont” before Booth pulls the trigger, shooting his brother, who “slumps forward, falling out of his chair and onto the floor. He lies there dead” (108-9). Booth continues to rail about Link stealing his inheritance, reclaiming the money along with the roll Link had put down, before falling to the ground next to his brother’s body. He drops the money, and the play ends with Booth wailing as he cradles his brother’s body.

### **Critical response, personal experience and impact on the audience**

*Topdog/Underdog* is perhaps Suan-Lori Parks’s most accessible play. Its small cast, single location and tight, linear time frame make it easier to follow and immediately understand than the majority of Parks’s other works. In a *New York Times* feature published July 21, 2001, the day the play premiered, Don Shewey wrote, “Most shocking to anyone familiar with Ms. Parks’s work, the new play is a two-character, one-set contemporary drama with recognizably naturalistic dialogue.” Likewise, Nancy Franklin in a review for *The New Yorker* (2001) remarked

that the play's "naturalism constitutes a departure for the generally more experimental Parks." Though the play was initially met with mixed reviews when it premiered in 2001, it was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for Drama in 2002, notably, the first Pulitzer ever awarded to an African American woman. Of the Pulitzer award, Robert Brustein, a very well respected theatre critic remarked, "I was on the committee that gave the Pulitzer Prize to Suzan-Lori Parks for *Topdog/Underdog*. It was not my first choice for the award. The play is far from her most ambitious writing. But as an admirer of Parks' previous work I was content to endorse the decision of the majority" (129).

Of the off-Broadway premiere, Robert Dominguez remarked in his review for the *New York Daily News* (2001) that "With squabbling characters named Lincoln and Booth – and a gun that makes an appearance a few minutes into the action – there's little doubt how things are going to turn out." Of the Broadway premiere of the play, Elysa Gardner in her review for *USA Today* (2002) remarked that "Parks...is not the most subtle of playwrights," and that the play was constructed "with dialogue so full of transparent symbolism and foreboding that any fifth-grade English student could guess how the story ends before the first scene is over." Further, she complained that "the play's conclusion is predictable," ignoring the fact that this may well have been an intentional and well thought out device. Charles Isherwood in his review for *Variety* of the off-Broadway production (2002) noted that "the final, violent climax seems a contrivance – an ironical nod to some sort of historical inevitability, not a tragedy arising from a man's losing battle against his demons and his circumstances" ("Sibling Rivalry"). The inevitability of the ending, as indicated by "the fatalism implicit in such nomenclature" (Brantley, "Not to Worry"), echoes criticism of *The House of Yes*, and while some critics point to this as detrimental to the momentum and structure of the play, it could be argued that it speaks to a cycle of violence that forces an audience to consider his or her own social and individual patterns. Dominguez went on to remark that the "play is a searing, darkly funny drama," that "suffers from a weak second act that clumsily exposes family baggage before coming to an



inevitable conclusion.” Any praise in Dominguez’s review is focused on the performances of actors Don Cheadle (Booth) and Jeffrey Wright (Lincoln), and he surmises that “the audience will feel cheated by the pat ending.”

Likewise, in her review of the off-Broadway production, Franklin remarked that while the acting was strong, the play “keeps letting the air out of its own tires” due to “clunky, overwritten exposition” which “stalls the play, again and again, particularly when Lincoln and Booth are discussing their childhood.” She notes that while the play “does have the energy and fascination of a hustle,” it “has the deck stacked against it.” Isherwood praised the work of Cheadle and Wright, but noted that the “performances are so captivating that it may take a while before audiences notices that there’s not a lot going on in this disappointing new play” (“Sibling Rivalry”). Isherwood also remarked of the premise that “Lincoln’s patently unbelievable line of work strains belief in the realistic context of this play” (“Sibling Rivalry”). Isherwood does, however, praise Parks’s verbal acumen, stating that her “dialogue has a sharp vernacular verve that’s entertaining in itself. She has created distinct voices for these characters that are fresh and funny and infused with real gritty lyricism,” but somewhat negates himself just a few sentences later, stating “we get little sense that the events of both past and present have a powerful emotional hold on the characters. The dialogue is too diffuse, and it doesn’t reveal any depths of feeling in the characters” (“Sibling Rivalry”).

*Topdog/Underdog* moved to the Ambassador Theater on Broadway on April 7, 2002, after running off-Broadway at the Joseph Papp Public Theater, and Ben Brantley’s *New York Times* review hailed the play as a “deeply theatrical experience,” noting that it “vibrates with the clamor of big ideas, audaciously and exuberantly expressed” (“Not to Worry”). Brantley further noted that the Broadway production was “tighter and tenser” than the original production at the Public Theater, calling it “the most exciting new home-grown play to hit Broadway since... Tony Kushner’s *Angels in America*.” Brantley praised the performances of Jeffrey Wright and Mos Def, who replaced Don Cheadle as Booth, noting of Wright’s performance that “To watch his

Lincoln impersonating Abe Lincoln getting shot at Ford's Theater is still one of the funniest and most disturbing bits of pantomime I've ever seen." Howard Kissel, however, in his review for the *New York Daily News* (2002) stated that "There is no real consistency in Parks' portrayal of the brothers," and that "It may be more helpful to think of [the play] as a violence-oriented piece of vaudeville." He further remarked that the plot was not "very compelling," but that the performances of Wright and Def were "marvelous" and "fun," if not "sometimes intelligible" on the part of Def, for whom the play was a Broadway debut.

In her review of the Broadway production, Gardner called the play "at times awkward and obvious," but also "thought-provoking and engaging, thanks to rich themes and a stylish, potent production with two riveting performances." She further remarked that "For all her self-conscious use of imagery and metaphor, Parks provides little coherent insight into the personal and social dynamics affecting her characters," but that "Despite its weaknesses, *Topdog* offers plenty of bite" and that "its final moments carry as much visceral impact as anything you're likely to see on Broadway this season." It is worth noting that Gardner's review is rife with conflict, as not moments before she wrote of the "visceral impact" of the play's "final moments," she lambasted the conclusion as "predictable." Charles Isherwood in a review for *Variety* changed his tune somewhat from his initial review of the off-Broadway production. Isherwood hailed the Broadway production as "an utterly mesmerizing evening of theater," though "hardly a flawless dramatic work," noting that "The play is a risky choice for Broadway," but positing that the award of the Pulitzer would possibly generate interest in "a play that could bring some much-needed new audiences to Broadway" ("Uptown Move"). However, Isherwood remarks that the extremes represented in the play as highlighted by the brothers' behavior – "Both seem to be having a fine old time until, instantly, they're not" – is the play's downfall, the result being that "the play's tragic climax feels superimposed – so it doesn't bring the powerful charge it should." Further, he remarks: "It can be argued, of course, that Parks' point is precisely that the brothers' family history – and the cultural traps they were born into – have determined their ugly fates. They

could no sooner escape them than President Lincoln could avoid his fatal bullet. But this is satisfying only intellectually, not dramatically. It should be both.” He does conclude by recommending the production, noting that “the production still provides a thrilling chance to see two performers connecting with their characters, with the words of a gifted writer – and with each other – in a way that comes along all too rarely on Broadway, or indeed anywhere else.”

Of the 2003 London production, which featured Def and Wright, Maddy Costa for *The Guardian* wrote that staging the play in an intimate setting made for a better production. Costa, who also saw the Broadway production remarked that “the huge space” highlighted the play’s “flaws – clunky plotting and static, verbose dialogue,” but that the staging at London’s more intimate Royal George “feels taut, involving and strange.” Costa also noted the difference in Def’s performance from Broadway to London, remarking that in the New York production the actor “muttered his way through the part,” something Brustein also noted, calling Def “unintelligible” (Costa, Brustein 129). Costa praised Def’s London performance, noting the transformation and remarking:

Radiating confidence, his words startlingly clear, he has developed a powerful stage presence. Where he was once overshadowed by Jeffrey Wright, formidable as Booth’s older brother Lincoln, the two performances are now more balanced – which is crucial if Parks’s vision of an intense sibling rivalry is going to make any dramatic sense.

Costa went on to say, however, that “improved acting and a sympathetic space can’t eradicate a play’s problems,” noting that Parks “explains [the characters] unstable personalities with a textbook warped-family background that is simply too contrived.”

Despite his frustration with Mos Def’s diction and volume, Brustein noted that “*Topdog/Underdog* extends the ambiguous fascination with the Great Emancipator that Parks first displayed in *The America Play*” by “reversing the conventions of the minstrel show” due to the use of white face, as well as “underlining the African-American ambivalence towards the

man who both freed the slaves and, in the minds of some black commentators, patronized them as well" (130). Brustein further notes that the play is "a non-didactic theatricalization of the American black condition" which uses Parks's "increasingly naturalistic language and domestic themes" rather than exploring "fresh uncharted territory" (131). Given this response, it is perhaps ironic that of all of Parks's work, *Topdog/Underdog* was singled out for a Pulitzer, but as Brustein noted, "Prizes often go to the lesser achievements of good playwrights whose better stuff has been ignored" (129). Of Parks's success with *Topdog/Underdog*, Teresa Wiltz in a feature for *The Washington Post* (2002), points out that the mostly positive response coupled with the award of the Pulitzer Prize is

Heady stuff for a playwright whose works have always been deemed avant-garde, too esoteric, too smart, to ever be commercial. This is no overnight success story. Nor is it a tale of someone who's been toiling away in obscurity for years, only to find fame suddenly shining a white-hot klieg light upon her. She's written 15 plays, won a MacArthur "genius" grant last fall, earned a Guggenheim fellowship, was nominated for a Pulitzer for her Play "In the Blood," garnered a couple of Obies and penned a screenplay about phone sex operators, "Girl Six," for Spike Lee.

Further, in an interview conducted not long after the Pulitzer Prize was awarded, Charlie Rose said to Parks, "You're not an overnight sensation," to which she responded, "Well it's been a long night if I am" (Parks, "Interview"). In the interview Parks states that she started writing plays as a college student in 1982, due to feedback and encouragement she received from James Baldwin, who was teaching a creative writing seminar she was enrolled in. And while she did garner success as playwright before *Topdog/Underdog*, it is perhaps ironic that her most linear, traditional play, a play that most critics and scholars don't consider her best work, has become her most commercially successful work. Further, in an interview with the *Christian Science*

*Monitor*, Parks remarked that *Topdog/Underdog* is “the easiest thing I’ve written” (qtd. in Fanger).

Despite the play’s success, it is worth noting that in some theatres that produced the work received higher than usual negative response from audience members. For instance, a 2004 production of the play at the Dallas Theater Center (an organization which as earlier noted played an important role in the development of *The America Play*) drew a strong reaction from patrons, both positive and negative. The DTC lost an estimated 10 percent of their patrons each night on average, some of whom asked for refunds, due to what they deemed inappropriate language and subject matter (Sime). One patron noted that he had “never been so offended by a play,” further stating that he had “difficulty comprehending” how the play was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for drama. Two DTC season ticket holders noted that they “walked out because of ‘the bad language and the vulgarity,’” further noting that it “‘was way beyond anything I could accept.’” Other patrons, however, praised the play, one even comparing it to the work of Tennessee Williams and praising the production as “the best show I’ve seen here this year....It was great theater....” Most of those interviewed who had positive things to say about the play, including the cast, blamed the high walk out rate on prosaic conservatism. Additionally, Jac Alder, an Executive Producer at another Dallas theatre that also encountered strong reactions to their production of *The Wild Party*, noted that “Dallas has got to wake up to the fact that these important pieces by important artists are gonna make you stretch” (qtd. in Sime).

I saw the Broadway production starring Jeffrey Wright and Mos Def in 2002. At the time I was living in Brooklyn and working in Soho, and when I got off work one day, somewhat impulsively decided that I would take a train uptown and see the show. It was one of only two Broadway shows I saw that year, as I was unable to afford the steep ticket prices for Broadway productions on a regular basis. When the curtain fell, I was glad that I spent my hard earned dollars on a ticket to *Topdog/Underdog*. I found the play extremely moving, relevant and relative. It was a production that managed to open my eyes to a number of things, including but

not limited to family dynamics, cycles of violence, and the continued struggles of African Americans.

In an article titled “Suzan-Lori Parks: Does Race Matter?” (2006), Robert Brustein points out that though Parks’s work “has always been as much a product of Western postmodernism as of African-American consciousness and the black experience,” Parks herself gets frustrated by being pigeonholed as an African American artist (218). He details her frustration at a public symposium, at which she stated, “It’s insulting...when people say my plays are about what it’s about to be black – as if that’s all we think about, as if our life is about that. My life is not about race. It’s about being alive...Why does everyone think white artists make art and black artists make statements?” (218). Likewise, in the 2009 documentary *The Black List* (2008), Parks exclaims that people often tell her that *Topdog/Underdog* “is about identity, meaning it’s about the black man’s need to figure out his place in the white world...but really, for me, the play’s about this dude who doesn’t get along with his brother!” I would argue that good artists, regardless of their race, gender, sexual orientation, spiritual practices or any other socially constructed category humankind can manage to imagine and impose, make statements with their art. Further, I would argue that Suzan-Lori Parks makes bold and multi-faceted statements with her art, including statements about family dynamics, as she claims, but that just because she doesn’t consciously set out to “talk about what it’s like to be black,” it remains a vital and essential part of what she does.

In an interview with Charlie Rose, conducted just after her Pulitzer Prize win, Parks claims that “at the deep, basic root,” *Topdog/Underdog* is about giving African American actors the opportunity to work together (Parks, “Interview”). It could be said that this goal in and of itself is at least partially focused on “what it’s like to be black” in America: if African Americans are rarely afforded the opportunity to work in theatre together, then Parks’s plays are a welcome addition to the distinguished cannon of African American theatre. Further, I would argue that because of this goal, the success of plays such as *Topdog/Underdog* helps attract a neglected,

underrepresented audience that might otherwise be disinterested in attending a play. It is worth noting that when I looked around the Ambassador Theater in 2002 as the curtain opened on the first act of *Topdog/Underdog*, I couldn't help but notice that an overwhelming number of people in the audience were black, something I can honestly say has never been the case at any other Broadway production I have ever attended. This in and of itself is an accomplishment.

Though I did have the opportunity to see the Broadway production of *Topdog/Underdog*, it has been almost 10 years since I've seen a live production of the play. While I do have vivid (if fragmented) memories of the production, my primary experience with the play lies in many readings of the text, along with seeing production photographs and video clips of the off-Broadway and Broadway productions. Perhaps inevitably, I feel a need to compare *Topdog/Underdog* with its predecessor, *The America Play*, especially as it relates to the contemporary situation of African Americans and the public's view of Abraham Lincoln. As Verna Foster points out in her essay, "Suzan-Lori Parks's Staging of the Lincoln Myth in *The America Play* and *Topdog/Underdog*" (2005), "the fact that Parks revisited the chief concerns of *The America Play* and in such a different form in *Topdog/Underdog* calls for some critical attention to the nature of her revisions. In particular, the historical themes of the later play can best be understood in light of their more explicit articulation in the earlier one" (25).

### **Analysis: structure and language**

*Topdog/Underdog*, like *The House of Yes*, falls more directly into the category of the "well-made play:" it follows a tight, linear time frame, focuses on few characters and locations and concludes climactically. Additionally, it shares another important similarity with *The House of Yes* in that it ends with the murder of one sibling by another. It differs structurally, however, in that it is broken into two acts, while *The House of Yes* is a neat, 90-minute full-length play with no intermission. As previously noted, the more naturalistic style of writing displayed in

*Topdog/Underdog* is a departure for Parks, whose “plays have always been hailed for their creative mix of fantasy, myth, and history, expressed in metaphor and language that capture the explosive patois heard on the inner-city streets and in the rural backwaters of America” (Fanger). Parks attributed her change in style in part to “writing on deadline,” which forced her to zero in “on character and narrative in a new way” (Shewey). However, she also attributed this shift in part to spending “a year and a half reading all the plays of Shakespeare,” a writer she claims to “want to emulate,” whereas previously her “influences were modernist icons (Joyce, Woolf, Faulkner) and unconventional African-American writers (James Baldwin, Adrienne Kennedy, Ntozake Shange)” (Shewey).

As Foster points out, while “At first glance the later play seems to beat a dramaturgical retreat from the experimental mode of *The America Play* to the more conventional dramatic realism of family drama...the realism (even naturalism) of the later play is an important move forward in Parks’s continuing experimentation with the relationship between content and form” (24-25). Additionally despite the more linear, traditional nature of *Topdog/Underdog*, the structure of the play still relies heavily upon multiple layers of meaning. As Jochen Achilles points out, in some respects, the structure of the play mirrors that of the 3-card monte game that plays such a crucial role in the lives of the two characters in the play:

By having their father name the brothers after the historical participants of the original Lincoln shooting, which can thereby be repeated and revised both in the penny arcade and in Booth’s rooming house, Parks generates an indeterminacy about her protagonists’ respective identities which matches the indeterminacy of the winning card in its constant repositionings during the movements of the three-card monte con. In this sense, Parks’s *Topdog/Underdog* reproduces the ground structure of three-card monte. (113)

Further, the device of an African American man taking on the role of Abraham Lincoln, though it may be implausible and even absurd to some, invokes a surrealistic quality reminiscent of the



works of Adrienne Kennedy, providing an interesting contrast to the otherwise naturalistic qualities of the play. As Ben Brantley notes:

With “Topdog,”...Ms. Parks demonstrates that she can shape a captivating narrative without sacrificing her high thematic ambitions. She even incorporates one of the more far-fetched metaphoric devices from her “America Play” into “Topdog” – the idea of a black man portraying Abraham Lincoln in an arcade shooting booth – and gets you to accept it without blinking.

Similarly, Wiltz comments of *Topdog/Underdog*:

Indeed, her work reads like a dream, liberally layered with all the seemingly disconnected connects of the subconscious. Parks traffics in history, playing it like a jazz riff, repeating and revising it until familiar events take on a new meaning, where a brother can make a living impersonating Abraham Lincoln, spending his days sitting in an arcade, sitting in whiteface, reenacting his assassination, each day sitting and waiting for someone to come shoot him. With caps.

As Achilles points out, while the play’s “psychologically rounded characters and quasi-realistic plotline” makes “*Topdog/Underdog*...more accessible than some of Parks’s earlier plays, she is not falling short of her avantgardist aesthetic claims” (104). Further, “The play’s straightforward action that seems to hark back to a realistic theatre tradition is radically reshaped by the fissures that run through it and by the contexts in which it is ironically embedded” (104). Much like we see in *The House of Yes*, these “fissures” and “ironic contexts,” which highlight a commentary on memory, history, trauma and violence, demonstrate the ways in which the desire to assassinate a dominate narrative can be highly personal. For this reason, it is interesting to note the importance of “games” in both *The House of Yes* and *Topdog/Underdog*, and the role these games play in shaping the structure of each play. As Achilles points out, “Performative scenarios whose ground structures resemble those of games dominate Parks’s drama,”

including both *The America Play* and *Topdog/Underdog* (105). Therefore, “As scenarios such as the Lincoln shootings and the three-card monte con tend to swallow up the action of the play, they suggest a growing convergence of games and play on the one hand and reality and life on the other” (105). In *The House of Yes*, Marty and Jackie-O call their assassination reenactment “the game,” and in many ways, it mirrors the simultaneously antagonistic and loving game between the brothers in *Topdog/Underdog*. Though Booth and Jackie-O kill their brothers for different reasons, ultimately, their desire is to assassinate a narrative that will not allow them to have what they want and what they believe they deserve: recognition, power, happiness. As is true in *The House of Yes*, the lines between what is real and what is imagined (or in the words of Link “what is” and “what aint”) become blurred in *Topdog/Underdog*, allowing for “the existence of a universe of the playful that tends to collapse the distinction between virtuality and reality and to become universal” (Achilles 105).

Isherwood remarked that while the structure of *Topdog/Underdog* left something to be desired, “the vitality, freshness and gritty lyricism of Parks’ writing are unlike anything to be heard on a Broadway stage right now,” further commenting that Parks “may currently be more skilled as poet than playwright, but her language...makes intoxicating music here” (“Uptown Move” 36). Similarly, Kissel asserts that the play is not particularly plot driven, suggesting “The whole thing makes more sense if you think of it as a series of routines.” Given the vaudevillian nature of Lincoln’s job, as well as the central focus given to the card game, both of which fall into the category of “routines” in a sense, this is a defensible stance. Additionally, the language employed helps fuel a sense of “performance” on the part of both brothers, who constantly try to one up each other. The language displays “a cross between a hip-hop riff and a Greek Tragedy,” and the brothers “express their frustrations in rhythmic poetry” (Fanger). In an interview about the play, Don Cheadle, who originated the role of Booth, remarked “What excited me was the language, which seems naturalistic but is not at all. The tension between

what's real and what's poetry makes for a more intricate dance than I've been involved in in a long time" (qtd. in Shewey).

The language flows from poetic to naturalistic, displaying "inventive wordplay" and "slouchy, slangy charm" (Isherwood, "Uptown Move" 36). However, for some this integration of slang and poetry doesn't ring completely true: "For the most part, their vocabulary reflects...bleak beginnings. But sometimes Parks give them middle-class jokes that don't fit. Booth arranging the milk crates on which he does the three-card monte, refers to them as 'a modular unit.' Lincoln, using actors' jargon says his job in the arcade is 'not a stretch'" (Kissel). It is true that at times the brothers use elevated language, and as is also the case in *The America Play*, they also use language that can convey multiple meanings that may not be immediately evident. For instance, as Jennifer Larson points out in "Folding and Unfolding History: Identity Fabrication in Suzan-Lori Parks's *Topdog/Underdog*" (2007), the use of the word "spook" in the first scene of the play can mean any number of things, ranging from ghost to a spy to "a more pejorative, racialized insult" (187). Further, it can evoke images of "the ghosts of Lincoln-as-President as well as the brothers' familial past," or can be used to suggest that "Lincoln is a ghost, a shadow of himself...completely stripped of his identity, unrecognizable and undesirable even to his brother; or, he is a spy, a white man's pawn infiltrating his own people" (187). For this reason, when Booth calls his brother a spook in the scene, "he layers these various meanings onto Lincoln" (187).

*Topdog/Underdog* also highlights the ways in which language fails to wholly communicate what the characters are trying to convey. Link points out the failure of relying solely on language when he begins teaching Booth how to throw the cards. The patter itself is mesmerizing, and showcases Parks's hallmark "rep and rev" style:

Lean in close and watch me now: who see thuh black card who see thuh black card I see thuh black card black cards thuh winner pick thuh black card thats thuh winner pick thuh red card thats thuh loser pick thuh other red card thats thuh

other loser pick thuh black card you pick thuh winner. Watch me as I throw thuh cards. Here we go.

*(Rest)*

Who see thuh black card who see thuh black card. You pick thuh red card you pick a loser you pick that red card you pick a loser you pick the black card thuh deuce of spades you pick a winner who sees thuh deuce of spades thuh one who see it never fades watch me now as I throw thuh cards. Red losers black winner follow thuh deuce of spades chase thuh black deuce. Dark deuce will get you thuh win. One good pickll get you in 2 good picks you gone win. 10 will get you 20, 20 will get you 40.

*(Rest)*

Ima show you thuh cards: 2 red cards but only one spade. Dark winner in thuh center and thuh red losers on thuh sides. Pick uh red card you got a loser pick thuh other red card you got a loser pick thuh black card you got a winner. Watch me watch me watch me now. (Parks, *Topdog 77*)

However, as Link tries unsuccessfully to teach his brother, the patter part of the con only constitutes half the skill needed to succeed; a good card con artist must also know how to use his hands. When Booth claims that he's "got thuh words down pretty good," Lincoln insists, "You need to work on both...A goodlooking walk and a dynamite talk captivates their entire attention" (74). Booth, however, "values word over action, symbol over referent, appearance over essence" (Dietrick 49-50), and his belief that he can alter action, referent and essence, and thus reality, by telling tall tales and even renaming himself, speaks to a desire to assassinate the narrative that makes the brothers' reality so grim.

Parks's use of "rep & rev," as previously discussed, is further extrapolated upon in *Topdog/Underdog*, as the play is in some ways a repetition and revision of *The America Play* (Foster 25). As Foster points out:

*Topdog/Underdog* repeats and revises from a contemporary and pessimistic (and thus naturalistic) perspective – or, equally, from a naturalistic (and thus contemporary and pessimistic) perspective – *The America Play*'s recreation of African American history through its staging of the Lincoln myth... *Topdog/Underdog* takes its inspiration from *The America Play* and thus is in itself an "echo," a revised repetition, of the earlier work. (Foster 27, 29)

Further, the use of metatheatricality, which we see in each of the plays that constitutes this study, is arguably more potent in *Topdog/Underdog* than it is in *The America Play*, due to the more naturalistic leanings of the play. Foster asserts that *Topdog/Underdog*, "within its naturalistic terms is as metatheatrical as its more overtly experimental predecessor," pointing out that "Linc [sic], at Booth's suggestion, rehearses the death of Lincoln, the brothers dress up and strut in fancy stolen clothes, their practice sessions for 3-Card Monte (performed clumsily by Booth and expertly by Linc) punctuate the play" (Foster 25, 29-30). In *Making It 'Real': Money and Mimesis in Suzan-Lori Parks's "Topdog/Underdog"* (2007), Jon Dietrick also notes the use of metatheatricality within the play, especially as it pertains to the assassination reenactment in scene three, when Booth helps Link practice by "repeatedly pretend(ing) to shoot Lincoln," while Link "holds his head, moans, and generally goes (as the stage directions tell us) 'all out' (56-7)" (Dietrick 65). This instance of repetitive metatheatricality within the play in particular speaks to a desire to assassinate a pervasive narrative, which will be further discussed later. Likewise, the 3-card monte game is metatheatrical, even in practice, which both brothers acknowledge to some extent (Dietrick 67-8). Link "understands the game as a type of theatre," and even Booth, who is less able to understand the theatrical nature of the con still acknowledges that their practice session in the apartment doesn't quite feel real for some reason (68). Link points out that they're missing several important components, most notably the crowd, or audience, but Booth insists that what's missing is the money (68). When the brothers do play for money, the game becomes all too real, concluding with the ultimate re-

visioning of assassination: Booth murdering Link, who is in turn still dressed in his Lincoln costume, in an act that echoes not only the Lincoln assassination, but the Biblical murder of Abel by his jealous brother Cain, and even the violently divisive nature of the American Civil War, which often pitted “brother against brother.” In this way, the metatheatrical structures in the play collapse one on top of another, revealing a pervasive cycle of violence and a multi-layered desire to assassinate a narrative that privileges one set of ideals over another.

Finally, Parks uses the linguistic device of her hallmark “rests” and “spells,” as we saw in *The America Play*, to indicate moments when characters should communicate without speaking. Often, in *Topdog/Underdog*, these devices come into play at moments of conflict, typically, when one brother is trying to best the other in some way. In some respects, this reflects what Geis claims is Parks’s interest “in the political effects of competing ways of using language” (9). Further, as Dietrick points out,

In theatre...the written text of the play is only one part of the play’s totality.

Writers like Parks who consciously employ the actors’ and the directors’ non-verbal contributions to the creation of character and of drama on stage go perhaps further than the writer of fiction can go in creating works that explore the dialectical relation of material to identity, action to talk, material value to face value. (72)

In *Topdog/Underdog*, we see the ultimate failure of language, as “the play ends with screaming, an emotive release, rather than language. Only Booth and this money-stocking remain. There is no language, no card play, and no audience – just an insane, and perhaps unwilling, assassin alone” (Larson 200).

## Themes

### Ritual and Violence

Just as is the case with the other plays in this study, the theme of ritual and violence, especially as it relates to familial dysfunction and a search for identity, plays a key role in Suzan-Lori Parks's *Topdog/Underdog*. Likewise, just as we see in the other plays, ritual and violence are very closely tied in Parks's re-visioning of the Lincoln assassination. However, the re-visioning of assassination in *Topdog/Underdog* highlights themes of patricide as well as fratricide, mirroring a very similar situation seen in *The House of Yes*. In the context of *Topdog/Underdog*, the inevitable fratricide is directly tied to the brotherly (and often brutal) competition between Link and Booth, whereas in *The House of Yes*, Jackie-O's killing of her brother is more indicative of competition between herself and Lesly, who she ultimately views as a viable contender for Marty's affection. In both plays, the assassination also implies the ritualistic assassination of the father figure, with Marty and Link stepping into the role not only of the national patriarch, but in some respects, the role of the absent father in each family. Further, in both plays, a gun is introduced relatively early, "proving Chekov's rule that if a gun is displayed on stage in the first act it is bound to go off in the last" (Brustein 131).

In *Topdog/Underdog*, the re-visioning of presidential assassination is directly tied to a search for identity, both within a family structure and outside of that structure. Booth and Link, named as such as a joke by their father, were abandoned by their parents as children, and this sense of loss and betrayal permeates their adult relationships with each other and characters we only hear about, primarily Grace, Booth's girlfriend, and Cookie, Link's ex-wife. Their names alone "suggests interconnectivity within history and identity," as well as an inevitable cycle of violence that we see repeated in the play (Larson 192).

The brothers have several rituals which are acted out in the course of the play, rituals that clearly indicate their individual roles within the context of the family they have created on

their own, perhaps most prominently the payday ritual. As Dietrick points out, in this weekly ritual,

[T]he two engage in a very self-conscious, highly metatheatrical performance in which they play-act a stereotype of a Southern black family, even calling themselves “Ma” and “Pa” (30)...“Lordamighty, Pa, I smells money!” exclaims Booth as his brother enters. Answers Lincoln, “Sho nuff, Ma. Poppa done brung home thuh bacon” (30). The self-conscious minstrelsy continues as Lincoln brings the money to Booth with “*a series of very elaborate moves*” (30). Finally, Booth asks Lincoln to “[p]ut it in my hands.” Lincoln insists “I want ya tuh smells it first, Ma!” and “Take yrself a good long whiff of them greenbacks” (30). (60)

The ritual continues, as Booth budgets out the money Link has brought home, setting aside some for rent, some for bills, some for “med-cin” (whiskey), and a little spending money for each brother (Parks, *Topdog* 29-30). Another ritual, and one that we see enacted more than once in the play, involves Booth asserting his dominance by telling Link that he’ll have to move out. It could be said that these rituals are both tied to identity within the familial structure the brothers have set up as well as to the constant struggle for dominance the brothers find themselves in. Further, the repetitions of the 3-card monte game and the assassination reenactment play a ritualistic role in the play that highlight the inevitable cycle of violence that the brothers are doomed to enact. These two metatheatrical elements in some ways mirror the crumbling nature of the brothers’ relationship, pointing to a desire to assassinate a narrative which precludes them from achievement, stability, trust, even love. As Jochen Achilles points out in his essay “Does Reshuffling the Cards Change the Game?: Structures of Play in Parks’s *Topdog/Underdog*” (2010), “The Lincoln act and three-card monte begin to converge on the basis of their common game structure but also as a ritualization of desire and violence” (117). Further, “The Lincoln act is devoid of freedom in different ways. It amounts to little more than a fluctuation between historical violence and its virtual repetition. By Booth’s murder of his brother,



violence comes into its own again. It is only temporarily relegated to symbolization before it cyclically resurges” (122).

Within this family of two, Link, in many respects, takes on the role of the “father,” not only because he is older than Booth, but because he is the breadwinner, which in traditional, patriarchal terms makes him the man of the house (Dietrick 60; Achilles 106-7). Further, “He leaves the house to work every day and spends his time in the apartment on a recliner – that great symbol of masculine domestic leisure” (Dietrick 60). This highlights another theme we see across all three of the plays in this study: the role of the father within the context of the family and the nation. Though Booth is viewed as a surrogate son to Link by some scholars, Dietrick asserts that he “acts what has been until recently the traditional role of the woman in the American nuclear family. He does not earn money, and he chooses clothes for both himself and Link” (59-60). Regardless, a traditional masculine identity is thrust upon Link due to the nature of his job: he takes on the symbolic role of the Father of a Nation, and perhaps more importantly, the Father of a divided nation. This division is clearly represented in *Topdog/Underdog*, as Link and Booth constantly compete for power within their established familial structure. In this respect, just as is the case for *The House of Yes* and *The America Play*, costuming plays a crucial role in *Topdog/Underdog*, speaking both to the search for identity and the often problematic line between what is real and what is constructed. As Dietrick asserts, “To look at the issue of ‘essential’ versus ‘surface’ identity as embodied in Lincoln is to experience the vertigo of stripping away layer upon seemingly endless layer of meaning. On the surface Lincoln is dressed like the nation’s sixteenth President, which includes (in addition to the familiar coat, stovepipe hat, and beard) whiteface make-up” (56). Lincoln struggles to assert his identity as separate from the role he plays to earn a living saying:

They say the clothes make the man. All day long I wear that getup. But that dont make me who I am. Old black coat not even real old just fake old. Its got worn spots on the elbows, little raggedy places thatll break through into holes before

the winters out. Shiny strips around the cuffs and the collar. Dust from the cap guns on the left shoulder where they shoot him, where they shoot me I should say but I never feel like they shooting me. The fella who had the gig before I had it wore the same coat. When I got the job they had the getup hanging there waiting for me. Said thuh fella before me just took it off one day and never came back. (Parks, *Topdog* 27)

The image of the previous Lincoln impersonator leaving the costume behind for Link to fill symbolically mirrors the image of the brothers' real father's clothes, which he left hanging in the closet when he abandoned them. Despite the fact that Booth hoped to wear the clothes someday, Link finally "took em outside and burned em" in an effort to create a clean future by denouncing and destroying his sullied past (27). However, Link's attempt to sever these ties and assert his own identity is symbolically conflicted, as Larson points out:

This connection between the father and Lincoln-the-President highlights the formative role that both have played in Lincoln's identity as well as Booth's. Booth thinks that he can grow into being a man like his father, simply by growing into his clothes – thus transferring his father's identity onto himself. Lincoln, on the other hand, complicates his father's legacy...In burning the Father's clothes, Lincoln both affirms and denies clothing's ability to imbue identity. For example, when Booth asks, "Whyd he leave his clothes though? Even drunks gotta wear clothes," Lincoln responds "Whyd he leave his clothes whyd he leave us? He was uh drunk bro. He – whatever, right? I mean, you aint gonna figure it out by thinking about it. Just call it one of thuh great unsolved mysteries of existence" (89). Lincoln's response takes the emphasis away from the father's clothes and transfers it back on to where it belongs, the father's actions. The clothes cannot stand for the father because they are just a shell. "Without him in em," they are just an empty signifier. Yet, the clothes hold some significance, for they still

signal his absence and the pain associated therewith. If the clothes were truly meaningless, Lincoln would not need to burn them or allow them to hang around for so long before burning them. (Larson 194-5)

Link's conflict regarding the identities that have been thrust upon him is evident, especially as it relates to his interaction with the Lincoln costume he wears for his job. In scene four, for instance, when he awakes after a night of heavy drinking to find that he is still in his work clothes, "He claws at his Lincoln getup, removing it and tearing it in the process" (Parks, *Topdog* 53). This reflects the "parasitic" nature of the costume, which has the power to "come alive...possessing or infecting the character with which it comes into contact. This life grows both from the significance and meaning with which history has imbued the suit, top hat, and white face, as well as from life that it usurps from its wearer" (Larson 184). But Link's relationship to the costume is complicated: he both reveres and despises the costume, claiming that he doesn't like to wear it, but refusing to be separated from it, stating that if he leaves the costume at work, it might get stolen (Parks, *Topdog* 9). It could be argued, in this respect, that the costume symbolically represents aspects of Link's own identity, about which he has conflicted feelings. Further, though Link states that he fully plans to follow in the footsteps of the impersonator before him (and thus symbolically his own father) by leaving the costume "hanging there" and not returning, the reality is that when he is laid off at the arcade, he walks out wearing the costume (Parks, *Topdog* 28, 60). As Larson points out, Link

[C]learly acknowledges the personal identity sacrifice and self-displacement needed to put on the costume. He realizes...that in "[leaving his] own shit at the door" to put on the Lincoln costume, part of his own identity is being usurped by Lincoln-the-President...He acknowledges the toll that the Lincoln costume takes on him when he must leave himself behind in order to put it on, thereby rendering himself invisible. (193)

Further, though he has been laid off in favor of a wax dummy, Link agrees to don the costume one last time in order to allow Booth to photograph (or “shoot”) him for their family album, indicating the ways in which his “dualistic relationship with the Lincoln costume...deepens as the play draws to its close” (Larson 193). Link “remains in the costume... for the rest of his life,” Booth killing him not long after taking his photograph (193).

Akin to the Foundling Father’s occasional use of a blonde beard, the white make-up Link wears as part of his job plays an important role in the context of costuming, taking the costume a step further than *The America Play*. As Carpenter points out, “In *Topdog/Underdog*, however, the spectacle of whiteness is far more pronounced in that the aptly-named character, Lincoln, not only wears the famous top hat, frock coat, and (dark) fake beard associated with the 16<sup>th</sup> President of the United States, but he also wears whiteface makeup to make his performative transformation complete.” Larson points out that Lincoln’s costume makes it possible for him to take advantage of the boy on the bus, who pays for Honest Abe’s autograph and is promised that he will receive \$10 change from his \$20 the following day (185). The boy “cannot separate Lincoln-the-President from a Lincoln impersonator – he does not know actual history from a disparate facsimile. The play thus problematizes conventional historical knowledge and the modes of imparting it upon or sharing it with others” (185). Carpenter takes this point one step farther by pointing out that “It was, after all, not merely Lincoln’s clothing, but his apparent whiteness that placed him in a position of acceptance and authority. One is led to believe that this exchange (or even the initial request that precipitated it) would not have occurred without the special effect of whiteness working on Lincoln’s behalf.” The use of whiteface, coupled with the garb traditionally associated with Lincoln, “shows history to be fluid and unstable because it allows itself to be so easily transferred onto an unrealistic paradigm that borders on the absurd – a black man in white face dressed up as Lincoln-the-President (Larson 185).

The costume and its implications have an effect not only on Link, but on Booth as well. As Larson points out:

The stage directions tell us that even though Lincoln sneaks up on Booth, “the presence of Lincoln doesn't surprise him, the Lincoln costume does” (9). In the lines that follow, Booth continues to express his revulsion... Yet, Booth clearly, at least at this moment, does not express revulsion for Lincoln-himself – his past or present actions – but for the effects of the Lincoln costume, with all of its racial and historical baggage. (187)

Further, the effect stretches beyond the brothers to characters we never see, including Link's customers and even Grace, Booth's erstwhile girlfriend (Larson 187, 189). Booth expresses concern about what Grace will think if she sees Link in his costume, claiming “She see you in that getup its gonna reflect bad on me” (Parks, *Topdog/Underdog* 8). In this way, Booth suggests that “The clothes emanate an unpleasant aura, so powerful it can, theoretically, even negate the love of a woman” (Larson 187). Further, “By claiming that the Lincoln costume has the power to negate Grace's love and her presence, Booth is essentially claiming that the costume – with all of its negative connotations about the past and the present – chases away any hope that he might have for the future” (188), or perhaps, even, his ability to reach a state of spiritual grace. Similarly, the costume has a powerful effect on Link's customers, who come daily to “assassinate Lincoln,” by allowing them to ritualistically take part in a distorted and constructed version of reality (189). Notably, “The Lincoln costume allows them to believe that Lincoln-the-President is not dead and that they can remake history or place themselves within it by shooting a live version of him, even if that version is a black man in white face” (189). Clearly, the Lincoln costume, replete with whiteface makeup plays an important role in the ritualistic enactment of assassination in *Topdog/Underdog*. As is the case with both *The House of Yes* and *The America Play*, the costume allows for as close a replication of the historical event as possible, which necessitates that Link put it on in order to complete the cycle of violence that ends the play. In this way, the costume plays an undeniably necessary role in the assassination reenactment, highlighting, as do the other two plays, the basic needs and requirements of ritual.

Another important theme we see enacted in *Topdog/Underdog*, as with *The House of Yes* and *The America Play*, is a repetition of history. In this respect, “Parks’s use of cycles also reflects her treatment of history” (Woodworth 140). Time and history as represented in the play are malleable entities, as evidenced both by the characters’ speech and action. As Ben Brantley notes, “everyone is a prisoner of the past,” and Link and Booth are no exception to this rule. Further, this sense of the past, of history, as well as the lack of clarity around what is real and what is not, are pervasive themes that highlight the metatheatrical nature of much of the action. Therefore, “In a sense the whole play is about life as a series of theatrical postures: some voluntary, some reflexive and some imposed by centuries of history...for Lincoln and Booth, it’s always showtime” (Brantley, “Not to Worry”). This malleable history is both collective and highly personal, as Link points out in the play, saying, “People are funny about they Lincoln shit. Its historical. People like they historical shit in a certain way. They like it to unfold the way they folded it up. Neatly like a book. Not raggedy and bloody and screaming” (Parks, *Topdog* 50). However, as Larson points out, “When Booth becomes the assassin at the end of scene 3, Lincoln can no longer fold history, or the Lincoln costume, back up and put it away the way he found it; he cannot leave the suit behind. He claws desperately at the costume in scene 4 because the history is no longer superficial; it is deeply personal” (193). While Link’s relationship to history is certainly complicated, in some respects, Booth has a more romantic relationship with time and history. Upon returning home from his date with Grace, the girlfriend he hopes to win back, Booth marvels:

Grace Grace Grace. *Grace*. She wants me back. She wants me back so bad she wiped her hand over the past where we wasnt together just so she could say we aint never been apart. She wiped her hand over our breakup. She wiped her hand over her childhood, her teenage years, her first boyfriend, just so she could say that she been mine since the dawn of time. (Parks, *Topdog* 36-7, emphasis original)

Because we soon learn that it's likely Grace wasn't so interested in taking back up with Booth, it's more likely that this romantic gesture of "wiping her hand over the past" is completely fabricated by Booth.

As we see, in some respects, Link is more practical when it comes to questions of time and history. When Booth tries to convince him to return to the 3-card monte scam which brought him so much financial success, Link remarks: "I aint going back to that, bro. I aint going back" (Parks, *Topdog* 20). Link's attitude very much reflects the American stance when it comes to the future vs. the past, as inherent in the American Dream: going back is a fruitless endeavor, and the key to success lies in the future. Booth, however, points out the irony in Link's refusal, rebutting with: "You play Honest Abe. You aint going back but you going all the way back. Back to way back then when folks was slaves and shit" (20). In this way, Parks demonstrates that "Like the Foundling Father, this heir to Lincoln seems simultaneously abandoned by a history that could nourish him and bound to repeat much of its violence" (Shenk). Booth, too, looks to the future, and Booth, too, is doomed to repeat the violence of history. For instance, when the brothers reminisce about their abandonment, Booth remarks, "Thats what Im gonna do. Give my kids 500 bucks then cut out. Thats thuh way to do it" (Parks, *Topdog* 68). When Link points out that Booth doesn't have any children, Booth retorts, "Im gonna have kids and then Im gonna cut out" (68), positing the potential for the continuation of a cycle of abandonment that mirrors not only the brothers' abandonment by their parents, but a cycle of abandonment by a nation that prefers to erase any documentation of the subjugation of people of color. Likewise, when Booth returns from his final date with Grace, he claims: "She wants to get married right away. Shes tired of waiting. Feels her clock ticking and shit. Wants to have my baby. But dont look so glum man, we gonna have a boy and we gonna name it after you" (85). However, the vision of a future Lincoln, named for his uncle, is a shadowy one, as we soon learn the reality: that Booth has killed Grace because she rejected him, setting into motion yet another cycle of violence. The situation is further exacerbated by the fact that Link has given in and returned to the past he

swore he would never go back to: the 3-card monte con. As Foster points out, “When Grace abandons him and Linc beats him at the game, Booth snaps and kills his brother, as both dramatic (specifically naturalistic) and historical necessity, suggest he must” (29). This “historical necessity” reflects a cycle of violence that mirrors not only Lincoln’s assassination by Booth, but the “first” murder of Abel by his brother Cain and the inevitable pitting of brother against brother in the American Civil War. In this respect, it could be said that Booth joins a long and tragic line of men desperate to eliminate a narrative that robs them of any sense of freedom and dignity they’ve managed to maintain.

### **Imagery**

As we see in *The House of Yes* and *The America Play*, the theme of digging comes into play in *Topdog/Underdog*, albeit in a much less literal way. As Foster asserts, “Parks’s preoccupation with Lincoln’s assassination and her emphasis on the need to dig (literally in [*The America Play*]) in order to recover African American history from the ‘Great Hole of History’ are repeated more obliquely in *Topdog/Underdog*” (24).

In *Topdog/Underdog*, the brothers mine the depths of their own histories, revealing secrets along the way that highlight themes of identity and belonging. In many respects, the play is about “the uncertainty of documentation, and knowing the difference between... ‘what is’ and ‘what aint’” (Foster 24). While *The America Play* takes place entirely in a hole in the ground, *Topdog/Underdog* takes place entirely in a single room, highlighting its “domestic focus” (29). However, this more naturalistic focus is contrasted with “the grotesque humor of the brothers’ names,” therefore suggesting “right from the start that the play’s ostensible realism of characterization, dialogue, and setting will be somehow twisted” (29). It could be said that the “twisted” nature of the play, which incorporates both naturalistic and absurdist elements, allows for a metaphorical theme of digging that appropriately mirrors its more literal partner in *The America Play*. In *Topdog/Underdog*, the brothers dig into history in a way that mirrors the



archaeological expedition set forth in *The America Play*, but is more immediately personal, thus allowing for the inevitable violence that ends the play.

In many respects, this theme of digging serves to highlight the themes of dysfunction and identity that permeate the play. As Shenk points out:

The characters in *The America Play* and *Topdog/Underdog* are in a struggle to know who they are – and so they dig at, sift through and “play” the old stories to shape their lives. Abraham Lincoln is a burden to them but also a source of life. And this is true for all the layers of history that they are wrapped in. The brothers Lincoln and Booth were abandoned by their parents, and they both resent and long for them. Similarly, they need each other to survive (perhaps even to exist) but are also locked in a battle, the origins of which they can never fully know.

In this regard, we see that *Topdog/Underdog* is in many respects an example of naturalism, because the “characters’ behavior is to a large extent determined by their heredity and environment” as defined by Emile Zola (Foster 25). The naturalistic thrust of the play allows for a psychological exploration of the characters that reveals the ways in which the trauma they suffered as children continues to affect their lives. Further, it allows for a more symbolic exploration of how this personal trauma is tied to historical trauma relating to the subjugation of people of color in the United States, thus revealing the search for tangible identity, which the brothers dig for throughout the play. It could be argued that the brothers have essentially known nothing but betrayal, making it difficult if not impossible for them to trust others. They have been betrayed by anyone they’ve ever loved, including their parents, their wives and girlfriends and each other. As Woodworth points out, “The relationship between Booth and Lincoln is not that of good-naturedly brotherly love. Instead it is marked by jealousies and resentment, suspicion and rivalry” (144). Further, “*Topdog/Underdog* offers its audience a rich and realistic psychological study of the relationship between two brothers that resonates with all of the other great fraternal

conflicts in history and literature” (Foster 29). In many respects, the play mirrors the Biblical story of Cain and Abel. As Ben Brantley points out:

*Topdog* is of course a variation of sorts on the story of Cain and Abel, a tale that has traditionally served American artists well in exploring the divided nature of their country, from John Steinbeck’s “East of Eden” to Sam Shepard’s “True West.” Ms. Parks gives the archetype her own dizzying spin. Brotherly love and hatred is translated into the terms of men who have known betrayal since their youth, when their parents walked out on them, and who will never be able to entirely trust anyone, including (and especially) each other. Implicit in their relationship is the idea that to live is to con.

Further, it could be argued that their parents reinforce this mistrust by instructing each of the brothers not to let the other know about the money they give them when they leave. Notably, “These inheritances symbolize their childhoods, which were marked by poverty, crime, and Lincoln’s role as the big brother and surrogate parent, a legacy that they failed to escape until the violent death of Lincoln,” and they were each explicitly ordered by their parents not to tell the other about their “inheritance,” further perpetuating a cycle of mistrust (Woodworth 144). This highlights the ways in which “Children are inseparable from the troubled families they come from. For Parks, the family is a complexly woven, yet fractured entity” (Woodworth 140).

The betrayal the brothers suffer due to abandonment as children sets the stage for every future relationship, including their relationship with each other, which is simultaneously loving and competitive. For instance, “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” (Achilles 110). Similarly, Dietrick points out:

Booth’s desperate plans to “team up” with Lincoln are of course thinly veiled attempts to re-establish some kind of *intimate* connection with his brother...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. “I didnt mind them leaving,” Booth says, “cause you was there. Thats why Im hooked on us working together. If we could work together it would be like old times. [...] It was you and me against thuh world, Link. It could be like that again” (74). (63, emphasis original)

Further, as Woodworth points out, “There is a strong sense of the history of the brothers’ relationship in every discourse” (143). This is reflected perhaps most strongly when “Lincoln pulls out the photograph album and reminisces about their childhood before their parents abandoned them” (144). Lincoln paints a much prettier picture of their childhood than is reality in “a nostalgic attempt to rewrite the brothers’ history” (144), and Booth negates his re-imagined memories, refusing to allow his brother this creative license. In this way, “the patterns of their ghosted childhood feature a relationship that is at once loving and fraught with competition and distrust, ending in the destruction of their tenuous family unit through Booth’s murder of Lincoln” (143). We see clearly here the ways in which “Booth and Lincoln are metaphorically and literally destroyed by their inability to break free from the cycles of poverty and betrayal inherited from their parents” (144).

As is the case in *The House of Yes*, the infidelity of the mother plays an extremely important role in *Topdog/Underdog*. The reactions to this reality, however, couldn’t be more different. While the Pascal children seem relatively nonplussed by the idea that they may not have the same father, Lincoln and Booth display a very different relationship to this reality. Booth in particular struggles with the memory of his mother, desperately seeking to create a viable family structure with his brother that will simultaneously mirror and replace the childhood relationship he had with his parents, most notably his mother (Achilles 110). In this respect, “From Booth’s perspective the three-card monte team of his brother, whom he sees as a surrogate father all along, emerges as a surrogate family constellation” (110). Lincoln, in the final 3-card monte game, capitalizes on his brother’s desperate attempts to construct a sense of

family by insinuating that the two might not actually be brothers. This insinuation bothers Booth enough that he selects the wrong card, losing the only tangible thing that ties him to his mother: the stocking full of money she gave him as an “inheritance.” Further, as Achilles points out:

Lincoln does not realize that the unopened nylon stocking with its implications of intimacy without reserve is the objective correlative of Booth’s need to accept his mother’s integrity as sacred, even in the face of his positive knowledge of her infidelity. Opening the stocking is therefore tantamount to violating Booth’s innermost being. (119)

Perhaps ironically, “Booth wanted to make things ‘real’ by playing for money, but the real is exactly what he fears the most” (Dietrick 69). Additionally, as Achilles points out, in this final 3-card monte game, there is more at stake than meets the eye:

[T]he 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...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. This fundamental destabilization is signaled by the seemingly humorous banter about their brotherhood, which precedes the decisive three-card monte game. Booth and Lincoln are certainly brothers in the sense that all Africa American men are. But the focus on their mother’s promiscuity raises doubts as to their common paternity. (118-19)

Booth “has neither spent this money nor even untied the stocking to verify the money’s existence. As long as the package remains unopened, Booth can believe what he wants to believe” (Dietrick 69), including believing in his mother’s honor and a paternal blood tie to Link.

It is perhaps important to note that in *Topdog/Underdog*, infidelity on the part of the father, while also damaging, is viewed as less disgraceful than infidelity on the part of the mother. In fact, it could be said that *Topdog/Underdog* reflects a culture that is comfortable with

the image of the philandering man, because it conveys virility, whereas a philandering woman brings shame to her family. This is reflected in the ways Booth and Lincoln react to the revelations that their parents were unfaithful to each other. For Lincoln, accompanying his father to visit the women he kept on the side was akin to an initiation into manhood: after all, as Link relates, “Sometimes he’d let me meet the ladies. They was all very nice. Very Polite. Most of them real pretty. Sometimes he’d let me watch” (Parks, *Topdog* 88). It could be argued that this reflects his father’s desire to teach him how to relate to women, especially sexually. Further, Link reveals, “One of his ladies liked me, so I would do her after he’d done her. On thuh sly though. He’d be laying there, spent and sleeping and snoring and her and me would be sneaking it” (89). This reflects not only Link’s initiation into manhood in sexual terms, but also his initiation into deceit: he deceives his father by “sneaking it” with one of his ladies, much in the same way that his father deceives his mother by seeing other women on the side.

This pattern of infidelity is one that Link himself is doomed to repeat: we get the impression that in the heyday of his success as a hustler, he was often unfaithful to his ex-wife, Cookie. Further, the power struggle between the two brothers often centers on sexual prowess, something that Link could once claim, but seemingly lost, another casualty of the 3-card monte game that claimed the life of his friend Lonnie. Booth capitalizes on this reality frequently in the play, using any and every opportunity to emasculate his brother by making pointing out his sexual failings. For instance, when Link makes fun of Booth’s use of his “fuck books,” Booth attacks Link’s manhood, saying:

When you dont got a woman you just sit there. Letting yr shit fester. Yr dick, if it aint falled off yet, is hanging there between yr legs, little whiteface shriveled-up blank-shooting grub worm. As goes thuh man so goes thuh mans dick. Thats what I say. Least my shits intact.

*(Rest)*

You limp dick jealous whiteface motherfucker whose wife dumped him cause he couldnt get it up and she told me so. Came crawling to me cause she needed a man. (Parks, *Topdog* 43)

This reveals another significant betrayal in the play, and one that mirrors a betrayal in *The House of Yes*: the younger brother betraying the older by sleeping with his wife/fiancé. In the context of the “surrogate family” created by the brothers teaming up for the 3-card monte con, “[Booth’s] affair with Lincoln’s wife may be a symbolic reenactment of the mother’s infidelity – this time with Booth as the triumphant lover. From the angle of this psycho-logic Booth’s murder of Lincoln at the end of the play completes the oedipal father slaying which the mother’s departure sets in motion” (Achilles 110). Further, when Booth threatens to come down to the arcade and steal a pistol, Link responds with: “It aint worth it. They dont shoot nothing but blanks,” to which Booth responds “Yeah, like you. Shooting blanks” (Parks, *Topdog* 46). In the case of Link, sexual prowess is clearly connected to the idea of “success,” as he reportedly regains his ability as soon as he returns to his role as dealer in the 3-card monte con.

Alternatively, Booth “is emasculated rather than empowered by witnessing his mother’s adultery, as sexuality is coupled with irretrievable loss and sadness [...] It is perhaps this Faulknerian dimension of psychological and emotional depth which is most responsible for the hitherto unique position of *Topdog/Underdog* in Parks’s canon” (Achilles 111). Further, just as Booth consistently emasculates his brother, Link does the same to Booth. However, Link is more indirect in his attacks on his brother’s manhood. For instance, in scene three, Link indirectly emasculates Booth for being unable to stand up to Grace about his desire to forgo wearing a condom. When Booth tells Link that Grace is studying cosmetology, Link indirectly assaults his manhood saying, “Too bad you aint a woman” (Parks, *Topdog* 41). When Booth asks him what he means by that, he replies, “You could get yrs done for free, I mean” (41). The clear implication, however, is that Booth possesses “feminine” traits – his passive behavior indicates that he is fearful of asserting himself as a man to Grace by demanding that he be

allowed to perform sexual intercourse without a condom. Further, we soon learn that the reality is that Booth likely didn't actually have sex with Grace, setting the tone for consistent elaborations on the truth. As Achilles notes, "Ironically, Booth is continually pretending to be a successful lover and card hustler. His very identity consists of permanent self-stylization that glosses over his inability to cope with the loss of his mother" (115). When Booth claims in the last scene of the play that Grace wants to marry him and have his children, Link replies:

You gonna have to get some kind of work, or are you gonna let Grace support you?...She might want you now but she wont want you for long if you dont get some kind of job. Shes a smart chick. And she cares about you. But she aint gonna let you treat her like some pack mule while shes out working her ass off and yr laying up in here scheming and dreaming to cover up thuh fact that you dont got no skills. (Parks, *Topdog* 87)

This attack on Booth's manhood is more direct: however, it could be said that the implication that Booth has "no skills" and spends his time "scheming and dreaming" speaks to Link's failure to initiate his little brother into manhood, as well as to the overarching ideals of the American Dream as it relates to success. Likewise, this reflects a theme of "legacies and inheritances, lineage and the recording (and sometimes misremembering) of history" (Geis 120).

As Achilles notes, "The familial game of betrayal and loss is a game in which disloyalty as well as lack of control and order seem the only valid rules that tend to invalidate all others....The brothers' place in the family is questionable on account of their parents' promiscuity, or rule-breaking, which makes it doubtful whether they are really brothers" (121). However, though their biological relationship is questionable, and their interpersonal relationship is tenuous, the brothers do still convey a sense of caring for one another. As Woodworth points out, "even through these examples of familial rupture, there is a sense of connectedness and a focus on the cyclical nature of family" (140). For instance, when Link falls asleep in his recliner, "Booth covers him with a blanket," showing that there is some affection between the brothers -

that Booth does continue to heed his mother's instructions to look after his brother (Parks, *Topdog* 52). Though "Poverty, murder, war, and absent fathers often push children into adulthood...the sense of innocent childhood – however fleeting – persists" (Woodworth 140). However, as Achilles point out:

Right from the start, it is clear that, for Booth, losses in gambling symbolize the loss of his parents. He wants to stake five hundred dollars, exactly the sum his mother bequeathed to him. And he fantasizes in ways which recall his own problems with his parents about the ignominious familial background of a fictional adversary, whom he just gloriously beat in a three-card monte game he really played against himself. Booth's remarks appear as a projection of his own suffering and demonstrate that, for him, the scenario of three-card monte is a reanimation of the scenario of his family history. While for Lincoln, three-card monte has come to mean a threat to his life since his partner Lonnie was shot, Booth romanticizes what for him was probably a time of prosperity, when his brother brought home lots of money won by the three-card monte con. (Achilles 116)

In these terms, it is clear that Booth seeks the safety that he believe a family structure will provide, despite the evidence to the contrary that his own childhood experience has demonstrated. Additionally,

[Lincoln] is unable to grasp that for Booth three-card monte is a way of redefining his relationship to his brother in a continuation of their childhood solidarity. Describing the three-card monte game as being predetermined by the dealer, Lincoln gives Booth to understand that this transformation does not work, that the underdog is the underdog right from the beginning, and that the dealer will always be top dog. In Lincoln's interpretation of the game, Booth will always remain inferior. In this case, the father's naming the brothers Booth and Lincoln is



not at all a joke; it is a statement on unmovable hierarchies. Like the murder of Able by Cain, the murder of Abraham Lincoln at the hands of John Wilkes Booth is perhaps not a singular historical event but an anthropological pattern which can be revised but does not lose its essential contours. (Achilles 119)

As previously discussed, the image of the national patriarch as embodied in the Lincoln act is juxtaposed with the image of the familial patriarch in the context of *Topdog/Underdog*, with Link assuming the patriarchal role. Notably, “Like the paternal deity, like a national hero such as Abraham Lincoln, the card dealer inevitably decides the fate of his people, the players” (Achilles 120). Link, as “the card dealer,” decides the fate of “his people” when he wins the final 3-card monte game, and thus, Booth’s inheritance. Further, he simultaneously assumes the role of “paternal deity” in his schooling of Booth, as well as the role of “national hero” in his donning of the Lincoln costume. This sets into motion the inevitable ending, in which Booth subverts a dominant narrative that reinscribes this model of patriarchal domination by assuming the disruptive role of assassin. This disruption is foreshadowed when Booth “shoots” Link with a camera, recording an image of Link as Lincoln ostensibly for all posterity. As Foster points out, “The one photo that is taken during the play is fake: Booth photographs Linc [sic] in his Lincoln costume with two smears of white paint on his face. The image Booth captures is neither Linc nor Lincoln. It is a confused representation of a representation” (34). Further, as the stage directions indicate that Link puts on “2 thin smears of white pancake makeup, more like war paint than whiteface,” which “signals impending civil war,” arguably further confusing the representation of a representation (Larson 195).

### **The “Other” vs. The “Other”**

Whereas the Pascals are obsessed with the Kennedys in *The House of Yes* and The Foundling Father is obsessed with Abraham Lincoln in *The America Play*, there is much less

reverence paid to Abraham Lincoln on the part of the characters in *Topdog/Underdog*. This perhaps has to do with the fact that the brothers are somewhat more immediately aware of the reality of their situation than the characters in the other two plays are. As Foster asserts, “Linc [sic] and Booth talk about the past, but, like the Foundling Father, they have been abandoned by it. They too are “foundlings” in that they were abandoned by their parents as children. Thus what is metaphorical Joycean wordplay in *The America Play* is literal and depressing reality in *Topdog/Underdog*” (33). Likewise, the hints of internalized and intra-racial racism we see take root in *The America Play* are further examined in the context of *Topdog/Underdog*, perhaps most obviously through the killing of one black man by another: Booth’s murder of Link. Further, as Larson posits, this struggle is arguably an instance of self vs. self: “Overall...the play makes any analysis of identity difficult because the brothers, in many ways, seem to be two sides of the same man. The stage then becomes a battlefield in which the two sides of his identity fight for dominance” (200). As Shewey points out, “topdog/underdog is a term coined by Fritz Perls, the father of gestalt therapy, to describe the internal battle between the righteous, demanding perfectionist and the lazy, resistant saboteur that neurotic individuals commonly conduct in a vain attempt to avoid the anxiety of everyday life.” If the reality is that Link and Booth are, as Larson and even the title of the play suggests may be possible, “two sides of the same man,” this internal struggle reveals a multi-layered and complicated instance of inner conflict that is inextricably tied to a struggle that simultaneously reflects larger cultural issues.

Likewise, as we saw in *The America Play*, Link’s job as a Lincoln impersonator reveals a level of self-loathing that it could be said is inextricably linked to his status as “lesser than.” Further, Link’s job takes “an emotional toll...on him. Dressed as Lincoln-the-President, he dies countless times a day, and he witnesses this assassination – his own assassination. But he is a disembodied witness,” viewing his assassination over and over again, reflected upside down in an “electrical box” that is situated on the wall opposite where he sits (Larson 188). Additionally, Link’s “best customer,” a man who often visits, whispering inexplicable musings in Link’s ear

before “assassinating” him, is believed to be a “brother,” further highlighting intraracial violence in the world of the play (Larson 191). Booth appears fascinated by this customer, asking Link “whether this black customer actually shoots” (Larson 191), to which Link carefully remarks “He shot Honest Abe, yeah” (Parks, *Topdog* 32). “In [Link’s] answer to this inquiry, complicated by the threat of intraracial violence, Lincoln again seeks to draw a clear line between himself and Lincoln-the-President,” perhaps in part to avoid the implications of this “threat” (191).

As is the case in *The America Play*, double-consciousness comes into play as it relates to Link’s situation: he has “one cultural self at home and another self in [a] white-dominated public space,” namely his work place, where he plays the role of a man associated with white patriarchy (Tyson, *Critical* 362). As Foster notes, “In symbolic terms, he has abandoned and wasted his African heritage and become complicit in the Anglo-American version of history personified by Lincoln” (34). In this respect, Link is emblematic of a fully colonized individual. We also see this double-consciousness displayed in the very first moments of the play. When Booth announces that he’s going to change his name, Link replies:

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 cant say they names neither. I mean, you dont want yr new handle to obstruct yr employment possibilities. (Parks, *Topdog* 12)

Arguably, Link’s conflict around “African” names indicates the level at which institutional racism has infiltrated his consciousness. Assimilation into the American lifestyle requires a patent disregard, even a rejection of African heritage on some level, and a double-consciousness emerges.

Clearly, in some respects, the conflict in *Topdog/Underdog* is directly tied to a search for identity and a sense of belonging in an overwhelmingly Anglo, hegemonic culture. Parks “is deeply concerned with identity, and how the presence of the Other helps to both define and obscure that identity” (Brustein 219). As Foster points out, in the context of *Topdog/Underdog*, this reality is directly tied to the “inheritance” left to each brother by their parents: “The more intellectual, sober, rational Linc [sic] inherits his money from his father, whom he connects in his mind with Abraham Lincoln” (34). And while Link spent his inheritance long ago, Booth is unable to let go of his; in fact, his inheritance, as it were, is never actually verified. “The stocking remains unopened, its contents unknown,” which symbolically represents Booth’s disconnect from his heritage (Foster 34).

Linc [sic] and Booth, cut off from their past (their parents), attempt to remember their history, sometimes making it up (as in Linc’s clichéd reference to selling lemonade “on thuh corner”), sometimes relying on the uncertain documentation represented by the “inheritance” in the stocking or the photo album. But even though they are cut adrift from their own history, they cannot get away from the tradition of American history in which their own is imbricated. Booth must always kill Lincoln. It seems that this is their true inheritance...Linc and Booth are condemned to relive a representation of history they do not know how to remake. (Foster 35)

Alternatively, there are several devices in the play that suggest a conscious effort on the part of the playwright to capitalize upon “the power of spectacle to defamiliarize whiteness and challenge assumptions regarding white invisibility and power” (Carpenter). As Dietrick points out:

Lincoln...problematizes distinctions between two ways of thinking about identity and about race: as “essential” or as “performed.” Dressed as the President and wearing whiteface, Lincoln is an uncanny reminder of the performativity of

identity. At the same time, the Abe Lincoln “get-up” makes us (and apparently would make Lincoln) intensely aware of Lincoln’s (and the actor’s) “blackness.” (57)

Here we see the racism implicit in the Lincoln act, which reduced Link to an “invisible” entity (Larson 185). For instance, Link’s ability to take advantage of the boy on the bus is predicated by the boy’s inability to see race: “this boy’s fluid and unstable version of historical knowledge, sanctioned by his whiteness, renders Lincoln’s blackness – and thus a defining element of his identity – insignificant, or rather, invisible” (185). Further, as Larson astutely observes:

[T]he play explores a variety of motivations for shooting a black man dressed as Lincoln-the-President. The businessmen come in “dress shoes,” implying wealth and formality or power; killing Lincoln, for them, kills competition from African American business or businessmen. This wealth, formality, and power also highlight the disparity between Lincoln’s socioeconomic status and their own. Children also come, but in “school uniforms” – implying education as well as conformity. Their presence not only reaffirms that children learn a skewed and corrupting view of history in school, as suggested earlier in the play by the boy on the bus, but also that white hegemonic views of race – indeed even the desire to kill a black man – are systematically instilled in American youth...The shooters sanction their desire to kill a black man by disguising it as the desire to participate in a historical re-creation and by shifting Lincoln-the-President’s identity onto Lincoln. The costume transforms him and allows the re-creation of history in addition to the rewriting of it with a new black victim. Even though Lincoln’s blackness removes the authenticity of re-creating Lincoln-the-President, the assassins indeed still participate in historical recreation because, by writing in this black victim, they are essentially becoming members of a lynch mob, lining up to kill a black man. Day after day, they lynch him, killing him by rendering him

everyday more invisible to himself because of his invisibility to them; with each shot, they slowly kill Lincoln by contributing to his transition into the real assassination. (189-90)

In some respects, however, it could be said that this “spectacle” paradoxically allows for the potential elimination of racial constructs. For instance, “By having Lincoln remove his makeup onstage (with cold cream, no less) Parks’s play makes an unusual shift from highlighting the construction of race to emphasizing the *deconstruction* of racial identity” (Carpenter). As Woodworth points out, Parks “reworks” accounts of history and bastions of Western literature, placing “black characters into the narratives where previously they were not represented” (141). While African Americans were certainly represented in the narrative of Lincoln’s presidency, they were often not permitted to represent themselves, and as such, were likely often misrepresented. The brothers in *Topdog/Underdog* are able to subvert the historical narrative in part due solely to the fact that they are active, non-white participants in its re-visioning. As Carpenter points out:

... *The America Play* and *Topdog/Underdog* actively resist the presentation of whiteness as ideal or even normative, encouraging us to recognize whiteness for what it is – a social, political, and economic construct. Furthermore, in exposing the fabricated nature of whiteness, these plays invariably destabilize the notion of blackness as well, thereby prompting us to also interrogate the *intra*-racial and *intra*-cultural dynamics within contemporary African American discourse. In doing so, these enactments of whiteness do much more than simply invert racial representations and/or reify revised racial hierarchies. As revisionist tactics, these spectacles of whiteness complicate how we perceive Others as well as how we perceive ourselves. (Carpenter, emphasis original)

In *Topdog/Underdog*, the subjugation of people of color is clearly tied to economic oppression, both of which are highlighted by the naturalistic leanings of the play. “The brothers

have been forged in a crucible of deprivation that has left them with meager family ties, little education, and few opportunities” (Fanger). Link relays to his brother that when he was offered the job as a Lincoln impersonator, he had to make concessions that his predecessor didn’t: “And as they offered me thuh job, saying of course I would have to wear a little makeup and accept less than what they would offer a – another guy – ” (Parks, *Topdog* 27). Booth, who is unwilling to buy into Link’s whitewashed version of satisfaction in the workplace interrupts him with “Go on, say it. ‘White.’ Theyd pay you less than theyd pay a white guy” (27). In this exchange we see highlighted an instance of institutional racism that at its core, seeks to keep people of color burdened by economic struggle. Further, the fact that Lincoln, as a black man, will work for less pay than a white employee, is further exacerbated by the fact that he is ultimately replaced with a wax dummy. A non-living “impersonator,” in the form of a wax dummy, usurps Link’s position, making it possible for the arcade owner to deprive him of an honest living. In this case, the only thing that will work for less money than a black man is an inanimate object.

It could be said that Booth, however, sees the pervasive institutional racism he experiences as a way to justify stealing: the inequity inherent in his culture allows him to rationalize his less than honorable actions. When he steals the suits for himself and his brother, he tells Link: “Theys stole from a big-ass department store. That store takes in more money in one day than we will in our whole life. I stole and I stole generously” (28). Further, when Link remarks, “You did good. You did real good, 3-Card,” Booth responds with “All in a days work” (26-7), indicating that he equates this thievery with working, much in the same way that pioneering Americans equated displacing hundreds of thousands of Native Americans with progress. Though as earlier discussed, in some respects Booth fulfills the traditional role of the woman in the family structure he creates with his brother, it could also be argued that Booth equates donning this new, “boosted” suit with an assertion of masculine identity. Booth’s desperate attempts to claim an identity are directly tied to his desire to assert himself as a man,

which is inevitably tied to economic success. As Dawkins observes, “Like the Foundling Father, who as a Lincoln impersonator inserts himself into an American script that has excluded him, the brothers in *Topdog/Underdog* adopt exaggerated masculine poses to resist their marginal status and assert their ability to compete within a success-oriented national culture” (92). As Cassandra Chaney points out in “Boys to Men: How Perceptions of Manhood Influence the Romantic Partnerships of Black Men” (2009), “media images have portrayed...a pseudo realistic *and* grossly biased version of Black manhood that was synonymous with immaturity, lack of responsibility for self and family, disinterest in being a sound provider, and lacking self-awareness” (110, emphasis original). It could be argued that Booth is trapped between status as a boy and status as a man: while he does not earn a living, he provides by stealing. For instance, “In the course of the play, Booth steals clothing, magazines, food, and fancy tableware. We neither see nor hear of his purchasing anything” (Dietrick 54). He is not particularly interested “in being a sound provider,” preferring a life of crime to an honest day’s work, but we get the sense that he is willing to do whatever it takes to win Grace. Booth’s self-awareness, “which speaks to the need...to be self-sufficient, self-efficacious, and economically independent” (Chaney 118), is directly tied to the image he hopes to project by dressing a certain way, behaving a certain way, and even changing his name to 3-Card in hopes of becoming a successful card hustler. In this respect, “Booth is essentially shopping (or shoplifting) for new identities, and his true identity remains mysterious” (Larson 195). Further, as Dietrick points out,

A marker of the dismemberment of the family, money also paradoxically holds the promise of reunification: first, through the brothers’ attempt to create a kind of simulacrum of the traditional American nuclear family with Lincoln as the sole “bread-winner,” and second, through the younger brother Booth’s desperate attempts to convince Lincoln to go into “business” with him as a three-card monte hustler – a life Lincoln once lived and now desperately tries to resist. (48)



Additionally, “Since Black men do not share the same social standing as White men in terms of education and income, it could be reasonably argued that race, racism, and power work together to influence how Black men construct their social and familial worlds” (Chaney 111). We see this reality reflected in the characters of Booth and Link, who use the resources they have at their disposal to get by. It could be argued that this gap in social standing is directly tied to a search for identity, and as Larson points out, in the context of *Topdog/Underdog*, is represented by the juxtaposition of the image of their own father’s clothes hanging in the closet and the Lincoln costume (195). Further, “in turning immediately from the father’s empty suit to the empty Lincoln costume, the play equates the two absences, suggesting that ‘The Great Emancipator’ is also missing, or has left the brothers specifically and black America in general” (195).

Finally, an examination of the role women play in the context of *Topdog/Underdog* reveals the ways in which women continue to be subjugated by being reduced to sexual objects and/or confined to traditional gender roles. It is important to note in this context that women are never seen in the play; they are only discussed, their experiences filtered through the experiences of the two men in the play. As Larson points out, the women in the play are “always off-stage or remembered – a ghost or specter essentially invisible” (187). However, “although women are absent from the stage in the play, women’s impact, influence, and valuation are not” (196). As previously discussed, Link was often unfaithful to his ex-wife, Cookie, and it could be argued that Booth slept with Cookie as a way to get back at his brother for quitting his successful work as a 3-card monte hustler. We see a similar situation in *The House of Yes*, in which Anthony gets back at Marty for leaving him out by sleeping with Lesly. In this respect, it could be said that women are merely pawns in the world of these two men. However, Booth, who sexualizes Grace by inventing a story about having “dogstyle” sex with her “in front of a mirror” and with “no rubber” (Parks, *Topdog* 39), is ultimately rejected by the object of his affection, provoking him to murder her. We see the violence and manipulation inherent in

Booth's relationship with Grace (and perhaps with all women) within the context of both the reality of the situation and the embellished stories that Booth tells about Grace. Further, in relaying to his brother the situation in which he slept with his wife, Cookie, Booth reveals that though she came to him, "just like that, she changed her mind" (Parks, *Topdog* 92). However, he says:

But she'd hooked me. That bad part of me that I fight down everyday. You beat yrs down and it stays there dead but mine keeps coming up for another round. And she hooked the bad part of me. And the bad part of me opened my mouth and started promising her things. Promising her things I knew she wanted and you couldnt give her. And the bad part of me took her clothing off and carried her into thuh bed and had her, Link, yr Cookie. It wasnt just thuh bad part of me it was all of me, man, I had her. Yr damn wife. Right in that bed. (92)

We see here that a fundamental emotional violence and manipulation in Booth's relationships with women is in some respects something he believes to be beyond his control, and manifests not only physically and sexually, but emotionally as well. Further, it could be argued this violence is clearly connected to anger regarding his own insufficient initiation into manhood, something in which he never received any true guidance. After all, he was 13 when his father left, typically a time of transition for young men. It could be said that because his father left at such a crucial time in his life, in many respects, Booth is still a child, struggling to assert himself as a man. This anger is perhaps misdirected at Link, who, while he is certainly a surrogate father, is truly not Booth's father and wasn't much older than Booth when their own father abandoned them. As Chaney points out, "Since the introduction of slavery, black men have inherited personal and collective conceptualizations of manhood that are generally at odds with the values of the dominate culture" (110). Booth's confusion around what it truly means to be a man is affected by his situation, his heredity, and the unavoidable double-consciousness that come with being an African American. Further, as Larson points out, "Lincoln, in spending his

paternal inheritance, has at least started the process of dissociating himself from his father's legacy. Booth, in keeping the mother's money-filled(?) stocking, unsure of the monetary value of its contents, still defines himself in connection with his inheritance and, subsequently, his mother's abandonment" (197). For this reason, it is likely that Booth's relationship with his mother affects his relationships with other women: though he knew her to be unfaithful to his father, it is possible that he developed an Oedipal bond with his mother that makes it impossible for him to see her failings (Dawkins 91). He holds her above all others, blameless, and as such, no other woman will do, and some critics assert that his "fatal encounter with Lincoln represents an Oedipal struggle for authority, with elder brother Lincoln standing in for the siblings' absent father" (91). Further, Booth's murder of Grace, whose very "name implies salvation," is indicative of the murder of "his hope and his capacity to forgive," propelling the action forward to the inevitable assassination (Larson 188, 198).

We also see the ways in which traditional gender roles affect women in the world of the play based on what the two male characters say about the women they encounter. For instance, we know that the brothers' mother was a housewife; in scene five, Link says: "...thuh thing Moms was struggling against, it would see the food on the table every night and listen to her voice when she'd read to us sometimes, the clean clothes, the buttons sewed on all right and it would just let her be. Just let us all be, just regular people living in a house" (67). But the thing the brothers' mother "struggled against" wouldn't "let her be," and she left, giving Booth a nylon stocking full of \$500 and making him promise to take care of his older brother. It could be said that the traditional role of wife and mother, her role as a "regular person living in a house" was not satisfying for her, and as such, she left it behind her. Booth also reveals that the man she was having an affair with had gotten her pregnant and that she had wanted an abortion, further indicating her dissatisfaction with her role as mother. Likewise, Link, in talking about his customers, reveals that he can see their reflections in a circuit box on the wall in front of him, noting that some of them are "Housewives with they mouths closed tight, shooting more than

once” (Parks, *Topdog* 48). We clearly see here another instance of women dissatisfied with their traditional gender roles, desiring to shoot a patriarchal figure repeatedly in the back of the head. It could be said that this speaks to a desire on the part of these women to assassinate a dominate narrative that limits their potential by forcing them into traditional gender roles, just as the play as a whole speaks to the need to assassinate a dominate narrative that dismisses the experiences of anyone who does not fit into an overwhelmingly white, patriarchal, hegemonic culture.

### **Is There Room for The American Dream in “a seedily furnished rooming house room?”**

In *Topdog/Underdog*, history and the pursuit of the American Dream are indivisible, converging in a card game in which anyone who is not “inherently capable,” is dealt a losing hand. As Foster notes, “In running his 3-Card Monte game, Linc [sic] understands the importance of knowing the difference between ‘what aint’ and ‘what is.’ But he does not apply this understanding to history” (35). Just as is the case with *The America Play*, the role history performs in the lives of the characters in the play, as embodied in the image of Abraham Lincoln, reveals many complicated layers of truth and speaks to a futile search for identity and sense of belonging. The use of the image of Lincoln as simultaneously the embodiment of the American Dream and the assassinated father of the nation is powerful in this respect, and the inevitable ending of *Topdog/Underdog*, leaves us with the “brutal and powerful image of the aftermath of historical violence” that clearly has its roots in racism, oppression and the failures of capitalism (Geis 125). Further, “Whether viewing Parks’s conception of history as a series of representations or as a retrievable and meaningful heritage, most critics agree that she uses the figure of the black Lincoln impersonator to draw attention to – and correct – the elision of an African American presence in mainstream American History” (Dawkins 83). In this way, *Topdog/Underdog* becomes “a microcosm of black American history, deftly played out through

an acrid and arch symbolism. Lincoln, the Founding Father and great emancipator who, as every good American schoolkid knows, freed the slaves, now shackles an African-American within a cynical game” (Crawley).

As is the case in *The America Play*, several important hallmarks of the American Dream play crucial roles in the lives of Link and Booth. As Dawkins suggests, we see the divisive toll that “rugged individualism” takes on the characters, separating them from familial bonds and communal ideals in the pursuit of financial success (90). In *Topdog/Underdog*, “...Parks deploys the metaphor of fratricide to demonstrate that her characters have lost the African American ideal of brotherhood through assimilation into hierarchical American society – a society based upon capitalistic rather than communal values” (Dawkins 90). Further:

[I]n *Topdog/Underdog*, Parks suggests that the African American communal ideal has become endangered within American culture, inevitably impinged upon by the dominant ethos of competitive individualism. Becoming alienated from their ancestral heritage, Lincoln and Booth internalize this ethos and accordingly take a combative role toward each other as well as toward their black “brothers and sisters.” Their failure to adopt the kinship models of their ancestors estranges them from the African American community and dooms them to isolation similar to that of the Founding Father whose lonely quest to realize the American “pioneer” ideal severs him from a loving and supportive family. (Dawkins 91)

As Jason Bush points out in “Who’s Thuh Man?! Historical melodrama and the performance of masculinity in *Topdog/Underdog*” (2007), this reality is merely a product of the brothers’ history: “Lincoln and Booth were abandoned by their parents at an early age, leaving them to fend for themselves with no links to family or any sort of community” (76). As Tyson points out:

[T]he differences between the strict social order of African culture, in which the welfare of the community always took precedence over individual gain, and the strict social order of American plantation culture, in which the individual gain of

the slaveholder always took precedence over the welfare of the community of slaves that worked for him. *An Afrocentric reading of the trickster tales thus accounts for both the continuity and the transformation of the tales without severing African American culture from its African roots.* (Tyson, *Critical* 367, emphasis mine)

This idea of the “Afrocentric” as it relates to works of African American literature has to do with “the primacy of their relationship to African history and culture” (366). The “trickster,” (a character taken from “African oral traditions” and often portrayed in African American culture as “a small disadvantaged animal,” such as Br’er Rabbit), “rebels against the moral order and, through cunning and deceit, fools the larger, more powerful animals, punishes them, takes their food, and so forth” (366). As Bush points out, Link is in many respects akin to the traditional “trickster,” due to his status as a card hustler:

The hustler may be a kind of trickster figure which subverts portions of the hegemonic capitalistic economy, yet this particular image produces and fetishizes individualism, capitalism and patriarchy in other forms leading to a breakdown of community within urban culture. These discourses are produced in relation, however, to a history of oppression, and social inequalities as well as a devaluing of traditional African-American values within the larger American society. (86)

As earlier discussed, Booth is clearly desperate to reconstitute a familial constellation by partnering with his brother in the 3-card monte con, while Link is resistant to return to a profession that “preys upon impoverished members of his own community” (Dawkins 92). In this respect, “Both Lincoln and Booth...resist the erosion of the communal ideal even as they internalize mainstream capitalist values” (92). However, the conflict between the need for community and the desire to assert a distinct personal identity also clearly emerges, perhaps most notably in the brothers’ competitive and often aggressive banter throughout the play. At

the end of scene five, an angry Booth attacks his brother, asserting his individuality by exclaiming, “Thuh world puts its foot in yr face and you dont move. You tell thuh world tuh keep on stepping. But Im my own man, Link. I aint you” (Parks, *Topdog* 81). Further, in the final moments of the play, after Booth has killed Link, he asserts, “Watch me close watch me close now: Ima go out there and make a name for myself that dont have nothing to do with you” (109), demonstrating his desperate desire to stand on his own as an individual, as separate from the only family he had left. This conflict comes to bear even further just moments later, as the lights fade: “Booth’s anguished cry as he cradles his dead brother in his arms reveals his belated recognition that this most valuable ‘inheritance’ is Lincoln himself – his last ‘link’ to a ruptured family and a lost communal ethos” (Dawkins 96).

It could also be argued that the brothers are desperate to reinvent themselves as successful individuals by divorcing themselves from history, as permitted by the tenets of the American Dream. When Link talks about the possibility of losing his job at the arcade, Booth tells him not to “sweat it,” saying “we’ll find something else” (Parks, *Topdog* 31). Link is quick to assert “Not nothing like this. 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 a phony pistol. I can sit there and let my mind travel” (31). Link likes his job not only because it is easy, but because it gives him the time and space to think, something his previous work did not allow for. Perhaps more telling is Link’s description of his day’s work:

All around the whole arcades is buzzing and popping. Thuh whirring of thuh duckshoot, baseballs smacking the back wall when someone misses the stack of cans, some woman getting happy cause her fella just won the ring toss. The Boss playing the barker talking up the fake freaks. The smell of the ocean and cotton candy and rat shit. And in thuh middle of all that, I can just sit and let my head go quiet. Make up songs, make plans. *Forget.* (31, emphasis mine)

Link's desire to forget, to erase his history and invent himself anew is at the very heart of the American Dream. Arguably, his desire for a clean start mirrors that of generations of men and women who came before him, in addition to predicting a cycle that will continue well into the future. Likewise, Booth's belief that he can reinvent himself simply by changing his name and clothes reflects the cultural belief that what has come before can be erased or ignored in favor of what the future holds. The reality is that "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" (Dietrick 50). When Link offers to put in a word for Booth down at the arcade in case business picks up, Booth replies, "No thanks. That shit aint for me. I aint into pretending Im someone else all day" (Parks, *Topdog* 91). However, it could be said that all Booth does is pretend to be someone else all day, in a rejection of his own confused identity and history, as evidenced by his adoption of a new name. Ultimately, however, their history cannot be denied, erased, or rendered invisible, and it is this inescapable history that marks them for continued subjugation.

We also see within the context of the play the idea of hard work, or "honest work" as it applies to attaining success as defined by the doctrine of the American Dream. While Link admits that part of the reason he likes his job is because it's easy – "Its a sit down job. With benefits." (51) – we also know that part of the reason he clings to his job is because he wants to rise above a criminal lifestyle. He himself says, "I don't gotta spend my whole life hustling. Theres more to Link than that. More to me than some cheap hustle. More to life than cheating some idiot out of his paycheck or his life savings" (54). However, the toll this "honest living" takes on Link is evident. As he reveals:

I'm uh brother playing Lincoln. Its uh stretch for anyones imagination. And it aint easy for me neither. Every day I put on that shit, *I leave my own shit at the door* and I put on that shit and I go out there and I make it work. *I make it look easy*



*but its hard.* That shit is hard. But it works. Cause I work it. And you trying to get me fired.

*(Rest)*

I swore off them cards. Took nowhere jobs. Drank. Then Cookie threw me out. What thuh fuck was I gonna do? I seen that “Help Wanted” sign and I went up in there and I looked good in the getup and agreed to the whiteface and they really dug it that me and Honest Abe got the same name.

*(Rest)*

Its a sit down job. With benefits. I dont wanna get fired. They wont give me a good reference if I get fired. (51, emphasis mine)

While he earlier proclaimed the job “easy,” we see here the reality of his work: it isn’t “easy” in some respects, and the money he earns clearly barely pays for what he and Booth need to survive. Though he works hard, and further earns an arguably honest living, he still struggles. As Larson notes, “Lincoln is making money from this scheme facilitated by the Lincoln costume, but the implications for black identity are grim” (185-6). Further, when Link does lose his job, he spends his entire week’s severance, saying “It felt good, spending it. Felt really good. Like back in thuh day when I was really making money. Throwing thuh cards all day and strutting and rutting all night. Didnt have to take no shit from no fool, didnt have to worry about getting fired in favor of some wax dummy. I was thuh shit and they was my fools. *(Rest)* Back in thuh day” (Parks, *Topdog* 65-6). Link’s memories of the past makes him long for the days of his criminal lifestyle, because it provided economic stability. For these reasons, it could be said that the play underlines a vision of the American Dream that only allows success for African American men who are willing to adopt a criminal lifestyle or impersonate a white man.

Booth, on the other hand, rejects the idea that he should work to attain success, preferring shoplifting to shopping, and the idea of a get rich quick scheme, like 3-card monte, to earning an “honest living.” He credits his childhood abandonment for this belief, justifying his

parents' exit from his life, saying, "Like thuh whole family mortgage bills going to work thing was just too much. And I dont blame them. You dont 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" (67). We see indicated here that the fulfillment of the American Dream was unbearable for the two brothers' parents, who ultimately rejected the shackles of their responsibilities in order to live more freely. It could be argued that these responsibilities made the achievement of happiness impossible, something we see reflected in the brothers' lives. Link reinforces the idea that family, a home and commitments, as envisioned in the American Dream, were dissatisfying to his parents, acknowledging the potential that they viewed their children in particular as a burden. He comments:

I think there was something out there that they like more than they liked us and for years they was struggling against moving towards that more liked something. Each of them had a special something that they was struggling against. Mom had hers. Pop had his. And they was struggling. We moved out of that nasty apartment into a house. 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 and them things, them two separate things each of them was struggling against, would just leave them be. Them things would see thuh house and be impressed and just leave them be...Just let us all be, just regular people living in a house. That wernt too much to ask. (66-7)

We see clearly reflected here the fact that the responsibilities inherent in attaining the American dream often become more burdensome than fulfilling. Further, when Booth remarks, "That's a fucked-up job you got," Link replies with "It's a living" (Parks, *Topdog* 33). Booth is quick to retort, "But you aint living," pointing to an essential dilemma of the American Dream: the idea that all work and no play does not lead to satisfaction or happiness. Booth sees the 3-card

monte scam as an easy way to make money, and resents his brother's refusal to partner with him, saying:

Here I am interested in an economic opportunity, willing to work hard, willing to take risks and all you can say you shiteating motherfucking pathetic limp dick uncle tom, all you can tell me is how you dont do no more what I be wanting to do. Here I am trying to earn a living and you standing in my way. YOU STANDING IN MY WAY, LINK! (19)

At the end of the play, when Link does agree to teach Booth how to throw the cards, he bilks him for all he's worth, saying:

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 the first move that separates thuh Player from thuh Played. And thuh first move is to know that there aint no winning. It may look like you got a chance but the only time you pick right is when thuh man lets you. And when its the real deal, when its the real fucking deal, bro, and thuh moneys on thuh line, thats when thuh man wont want you picking right. He will want you picking wrong so he will make you pick wrong. Wrong wrong wrong. Ooooh, you though you was finally happening, didnt you? You thought yr ship had come in or some shit, huh? Thought you was uh Player. But I played you, bro. (106)

The fact remains, that neither brother can win. The grim reality is that "In 3-Card Monty, Lincoln can win, but in life, he cannot. Racial discrimination has reduced him to poverty and lawlessness. White America, the play implies, is playing with a stacked deck, especially economically" (Larson 199).

Further, the role fate or destiny plays in the lives of Lincoln and Booth is important to note. In an interview, actor Jeffrey Wright commented, "The play is perched on top of historical inevitability. Suzan talks about it as an existential question. At the end of the play, is their

destiny fulfilled, or were they supposed to do something different and they missed?" (qtd. in Shewey). The idea of "luck" as a facet of fate or destiny plays a very prominent (and ultimately ironic) role in the two men's lives: the bar the two men frequent is called Lucky's, Link remarks that his job as a Lincoln impersonator "is the first lucky break I've ever had," and his fortune cookie reads "Your luck will change!" (Parks, *Topdog* 10, 16, 33). The irony inherent in this view of fate is evident. For instance, Link was drinking at Lucky's when his wife Cookie came looking for him and ended up sleeping with Booth. Further, while his fortune proclaims a change in luck, what it doesn't indicate is that the change will be for the worse: that Link will lose his job, and ultimately, his life. When Booth proclaims that Link "was lucky with thuh cards," Link sets him straight, saying "Aint nothing lucky about cards. Cards aint luck. Cards is work. Cards is skill. Aint never nothing lucky about cards" (33). In this respect, "Lincoln is aware of the urgent need to escape the life of scamming and hustling that circumstance has mapped out for him – but fate, in the form of the loss of his meager foothold on respectable employment, kicks him back down" (Isherwood, "Uptown Move"). Early in the play, Link plays guitar and sings a blues song that he thought up at work, the final lyrics of which are "My luck was bad but now it turned to worse/My luck was bad but now it turned to worse/Dont call me up a doctor, just call me up a hearse," foreshadowing the turn his luck will ultimately make (Parks, *Topdog* 21). Later in the play, when Link has returned to his lucrative life as a card hustler, he ironically remarks "Cant take too many fools in one day, its bad luck" (83). Link's "bad luck" catches up with him just minutes later, when he takes one more fool for his money: Booth.

Finally, it could be argued that the fact that Link is inevitably replaced in his role as Lincoln by a wax dummy is a further commentary on capitalism in America. When Link considers returning to the arcade to plead for his job, Booth responds, "Link. Yr free. Dont go crawling back. Yr free at last!" (Parks, *Topdog/Underdog* 61). As Larson points out:

By evoking the Emancipation Proclamation and the words of Dr. King, the play makes Lincoln's struggle timeless and equates his struggle with the Lincoln

costume to a struggle for civil rights and personal freedom. But as in Dr. King's speech, these rights and freedoms, at least for Lincoln and Booth, are still just a dream. The brothers are bound by all that the [Lincoln] costume signifies: revisionist history, slavery, racism, double-consciousness, poverty, and even their own personalities. (193-4)

Further, as Bush observes, despite their conflicts, the brothers are ineluctably bound to each other by history in ways that are both metaphorically symbolic and immediately personal (76). Notably, "The 'topdog' needs the 'underdog' to continually define and redefine his dominance. The 'underdog' needs the 'topdog' to complete that ever present Davidian American narrative of the underdog rising to the top against all adversity" (76). This need speaks not only to the brothers' situation, but also to larger socio-cultural trends based on the tenets of the American Dream, which perpetuate an inevitable cycle of oppression and violence. As Achilles observes:

As in moments of historical and mythical catastrophe, such as the murder of Abel by Cain, Abraham Lincoln by John Wilkes Booth, Martin Luther King, Jr., by his assassin, scenarios of domination and rebellion, superiority and inferiority, topdog and underdog seem to repeat themselves ineluctably in a Hegelian dialectics of master and servant. (120)

In much the same way, the cycle of violence we see enacted in *Topdog/Underdog* speaks to a need to assassinate a dominant narrative that oppresses those who are not "innately capable."

### Conclusion

Because the brothers in Suzan-Lori Parks's *Topdog/Underdog* are doomed to repeat a cycle of violence that arguably serves to further reinscribe historical oppression, it could be said that the play is the least optimistic of those discussed in this study. While "*The America Play* and *Topdog/Underdog* are companion pieces that use different dramatic forms to address

similar historical issues...they...inevitably, come to very different conclusions” (Foster 26). *Topdog/Underdog* “is at heart about the brothers’ quietly desperate attempts to outrun the legacies of their personal history – and by extension American history” (Isherwood, “Uptown Move”). However, they eventually come to realize that history, and all the baggage that comes with it, is not something they can “outrun.” In this respect, the play is less reassuring than its companion piece, *The America Play*. As Dawkins points out, “Parks’s hopeful view of the African American family in *The America Play* appears to shift in *Topdog/Underdog* to a bleak, disturbing vision of familial disruption and devastation in black urban America” (90). This can be attributed in part to the fact that “Lincoln and Booth have lost access to [their] historical past and have accordingly inserted themselves into the Western patricidal script” (Dawkins 91). Further, it can be attributed to the trauma, both directly experienced and inherited, that the brothers endure (Dawkins 95). In this respect, “Unacknowledged or repressed grief – the weight of personal loss as well as of traumatic personal memory – becomes, in the absence of mourning rituals or communal connection, diverted into performances of self-destruction” (Dawkins 95).

As Foster asserts:

The two plays have a common theme: the exclusion of African Americans from American history. The joyously innovative dramaturgy of *The America Play* at once enables and performs Parks’s revision and recreation of this history, while the naturalism and the metatheatricality of *Topdog/Underdog* determine and enact the later play’s all too predictable repetition of the received history. (35)

This “received history” speaks not only to the cycle of violence that the brothers are doomed to enact, but the inequities that continue to shroud the narratives of freedom that the founding fathers of the United States espoused. Further, it speaks to larger issues of identity and a sense of belonging for those who continue to be written out of that narrative. The use of the Lincoln image serves to drive this metaphor home: “...Suzan-Lori Parks uses Abraham Lincoln as a masking device that helps to unveil truths about the fabrication of our layered, most sanctified

narratives” (Carpenter). It is important to note that “Born in a log cabin, shot in a theatre and resurrected in a million unforeseeable guises, Lincoln...is malleable, a symbol of the people, by the people and for the people” (Crawley 14). As Gardner observes, the antagonistic relationship between the brothers is “reinforced by the constant reminder of President Lincoln’s mixed legacy,” which ultimately leads to an attempted assassination of all that “Lincoln’s mixed legacy” implies. In this respect, it is more than just the image of Lincoln that Parks resurrects: it is the image of his assassination (Shenk). In an interview, Parks remarked, “It’s like Lincoln created an opening with that hole in his head...We’ve all passed through it into now, you know, like the eye of a needle. Everything that happens from 1865 to today, has to pass through that wound” (qtd. in Shenk).

While Parks, as Foster points out, “is less interested in judging Lincoln in her plays than in “the way he shows up in the lives of her characters”” (31), a great deal has happened from 1865 to today, including the election of Barack Obama as the first African American President in the history of the United States of America. It’s likely that at the time *Topdog/Underdog* was written and first produced, most Americans would never have dreamed that an African American president would be a reality just a few years later. However, despite progress made in the direction of equality, scholars like Tim Wise caution us not to write off the work yet to be done towards obtaining freedom and equality for all:

Nothing could be more dangerous than for us to fall prey to the irrational exuberance that often characterized public reaction to the Obama campaign. While there are many reasons to be excited about his candidacy, statements by persons like Oprah Winfrey to the effect that Obama was the “fulfillment of Dr. King’s dream,” or something along those lines, couldn’t be more absurd. To hear Winfrey and many others tell it, Dr. King’s dream was merely one in which individuals would be judged “on the content of their character” rather than on the basis of skin color, and thus be able to rise to the ranks of the presidency, or, in

her case, build an entertainment empire of dizzying proportions. But King's dream was never this individualistic or limited in scope. To suggest such a puny vision on his part is to capitulate to the safe, marketable image of King peddled for at least two decades by those who can't afford the radical Dr. King to be spoken of, let alone celebrated: the King who called the United States the "greatest purveyor of violence in the world today," who came to conclude that traditional capitalism is an inherently destructive system inconsistent with democracy and who called for hundreds of billions in reparations, not only for the black and brown victims of racial injustice, but for the poor of all colors, immiserated by an economics of exploitation. That part of King's dream was never mentioned by candidate Obama, and as such, will not likely be fulfilled by him. (Wise, *Between* 114-15)

In some respects, *Topdog/Underdog*, too, is a cautionary tale, in that it clearly illustrates the ways in which the American Dream has failed to become a reality for millions of people who continue to be written out of the dominant narrative. By juxtaposing the legacy of Lincoln with the brothers' own complex history, the play clearly illustrates the ways in which the distinctly American focus on individual success, which devalues communal experience, can fracture and ultimately devastate a family and a nation. Further, it illustrates the trauma of oppression, a loss of identity, and the deterioration of a culture that values the capitalistic accomplishments of individuals over the needs of the larger community. Parks makes these points clear through her re-visioning of the ritualistic assassination (including the key element of costuming), her hallmark "rep and rev" philosophy (displayed both in word and action), and her use of metatheatrical devices, highlighting the ways in which we carefully construct (or reconstruct) our identities, experiences and histories. In this way, the attempted assassination in *Topdog/Underdog* is that of a dominant narrative that serves to further oppress. The attempt,



however, ultimately fails, serving, I believe, as an intentional warning against a cycle of violence that the dominant culture perpetuates, by enacting it for a room full of captive witnesses.

## CONCLUSION

“A man may die, nations may rise and fall, but an idea lives on.”

- John F. Kennedy

On November 17, 2011, Oscar Romero Ortega-Hernandez was charged with attempting to assassinate President Barack Obama by “spraying bullets from an assault rifle at the residential floors of the White House” the previous week (Savage). Friends of Ortega-Hernandez stated that the young man “believed the President was the ‘Antichrist’...and that he ‘needed to be taken care of’” (Savage). The President and First Lady were not at home when the attempt was made, and while “Officials have said that reinforcements on the building and its windows stopped the bullets from penetrating the interior...one of the bullets apparently struck a window overlooking the Truman balcony, where the Obamas sometimes go outside to relax” (Savage). The implication here is that had the President been on the Truman balcony on the evening Ortega-Hernandez opened fire, he could have been struck and killed (Savage).

On January 8, 2011, less than a year before Ortega-Hernandez’s assassination attempt on the president, Congresswoman Gabrielle Giffords of Arizona was the victim of an assassination attempt that left her critically injured by a gunshot wound to the head (Grady and Medina). Six people were killed in that same attempt, “including the chief federal judge in Arizona and a 9-year-old girl,” and 13 others, including Giffords, were injured (Barry). According to his friends, the assassin, Jared Loughner, was “contemptuous of women in positions of power” and psychiatrists maintain that he clearly “struggles with a profound mental illness” and likely suffers from paranoid schizophrenia (Barry). Dan Barry, in an article for the *The New York Times* (2011) noted “that [Loughner’s] recent years have been marked by stinging rejection — from his country’s military, his community college, his girlfriends and, perhaps, his father,” and “that he, in turn, rejected American society, including its government, its currency, its language,

even its math. Mr. Loughner once declared to his professor that the number 6 could be called 18.” Arguably, Loughner’s extreme rejection of American society and his assassination attempt on Congresswoman Giffords suggests a desperate desire to assassinate a dominant narrative that he believed excluded him, a desperation that was likely magnified by a psychological disorder. According to a recent report, “Loughner has pleaded not guilty to 49 criminal charges, including multiple counts of first-degree murder and the attempted assassination of Giffords” and is currently awaiting trial, which continues to be delayed due to questions of mental competency (Schuman). Though Giffords is recovering from her injuries, on January 25, 2012, she formally resigned her congressional seat in order to focus on her recovery (Cassata).

Following the assassination attempt on Congresswoman Giffords, John Moore, theatre critic for *The Denver Post* wrote, “In times of sudden national tragedy, theater isn’t the most immediately responsive of art forms...it can take years for playwrights to gather and present their thoughts before a live audience” (Moore, “What we can learn”). Despite the fact that the process of creating a work of art that directly examines a national tragedy can take years to complete, playwrights who embark on such an endeavor arguably do so to challenge public perceptions by placing the tragedy within the context of personal experience and relationships. Further, distance from the event arguably makes an audience more willing to accept the creative license sometimes necessarily employed in fictionalizing events that have a cultural impact on the level of a presidential assassination. By juxtaposing the national tragedy of the assassinations of John F. Kennedy (as seen in *The House of Yes*) and Abraham Lincoln (as seen in *The America Play* and *Topdog/Underdog*) with a personal trauma, playwrights Wendy MacLeod and Suzan-Lori Parks provide clear insight into how tragedies such as these have lasting repercussions that continue to effect the people and dreams of a nation for generations to come. Further, their respective characters’ efforts to re-vision these assassinations speak to a clear desire to assassinate a dominant narrative that confines them to a life of subjugation.

Each of the plays in this study presents a radical re-visioning of presidential assassination that is clearly tied to the characters' need to challenge the dominant narrative. Further, each play presents a member of a historically underrepresented and subjugated group as a key player in the re-visioning of the assassination. In *The House of Yes*, the least broadly studied of the three plays in this exploration in the realm of scholarship, the assassination of John F. Kennedy is re-visioned as an attempted assassination of a narrative that relegates women to the domestic sphere. Jackie-O, arguably the central character and ultimately the assassin, struggles with mental health issues. It could be argued that her obsessive love for her twin displays a narcissistic bent, but as Phelan points out, "Narcissism emerges not out of an excess of self-love as is commonly assumed, but rather as a 'militant' acknowledgement of loss" (Phelan, *Mourning* 130). Jackie-O's loss is multi-faceted; as we discover, it's likely that her mother murdered her father. Therefore, Jackie-O and her siblings have known profound loss for most of their lives. But Jackie-O's loss is heightened by the juxtaposition of the loss of Kennedy, the loss of Marty, who has left the family for a life in New York, and ultimately, a loss of control. While it may be possible for Jackie-O, and even Mrs. Pascal to control the narrative within the walls of the Pascal home, their power stops there. Ultimately, they are not able to control a narrative that leaves no room for women to assert any real power, and therefore, Jackie-O, in a repetition of her mother's behavior years before, attempts to assassinate that narrative through a re-visioning not only of Kennedy's assassination, but of her father's assassination.

Likewise, in both *The America Play* and *Topdog/Underdog*, the assassination of Abraham Lincoln is re-visioned as an attempted assassination of a dominant narrative that perpetuates the historical exclusion African American voices and experiences, and to a lesser degree, the omission of the voices and experiences of women. As Lee points out, playwright Suzan-Lori Parks

deploys...an anti-essentialist strategy of minority politics that questions the validity of such grand narratives as history and the liberal humanist subject.

Thus, when she creates plays to participate in rewriting the history of black people as well as black identity, she positions neither narrative nor her vision of the black subject as the truth. In fact, she points out the opposite – the artificiality of both...As her plays' constructedness evinces, history and identity are artificial, formed by the self, the other, and cultural forces, and it is within this context that Parks imagines ways to counter oppressive histories and ideologies that have systematically subjugated black people. (6-7)

Further, as Dawkins notes, both *The America Play* and *Topdog/Underdog*, by presenting an African American "Abraham Lincoln impersonator who is repeatedly shot by customers firing blanks in an enactment of John Wilkes Booth's murder of the President,...scrutinizes American history as both a mortal wound and theatrical performance" (83). This notion of the performance of history plays a crucial role in the context of all three plays explored in this study, especially as it pertains to the ritualization of the assassination reenactment, replete with costumes, and mimetic action that simultaneously subverts and reinforces the dominant narrative of history. For instance, the iconic pink Chanel suit and a replication of Kennedy's movements and gestures in the moments just before, during and after his assassination play a key role in the re-visioning of the presidential assassination we see in *The House of Yes*. In much the same way,

Parks self-reflexively calls attention to certain devices of the theatre – costume, role-playing, and performing – in order to lay bare the process of making history and forming historical subjects. The plays reveal these processes to be performative: history constructed through iteration and citation, and identity constructed through the subject's participation in historical scripting. (Lee 7)

The repetition inherent in each play suggests "that history perpetuates itself through simulacra, and that each generation is called upon to imitate the previous one without questioning the nature of the falsehoods or performances involved" (Geis 109).

Repetition plays a crucial role in the ritualization of assassination in each play. This ritualization is further aided by the use of costuming. For instance, in the case of *The House of Yes*, Jackie-O's donning of a replica of Jackie Kennedy's pink Chanel suit spurs the action of the reenactment. Likewise, in both *The America Play* and *Topdog/Underdog*, the search for and reclamation of identity is strongly juxtaposed with the Lincoln costume, replete with fake beard and stove pipe hat. As examined, the small deviations from complete and total historical accuracy with regard to costuming in each play is directly tied to the character's own desire to disrupt a dominant narrative by inserting pieces of his or her own personal narrative into the reenactment in question. The use of these costumes further highlights the metatheatrical nature of the assassination reenactments within the context of each play, in addition to providing a commentary on the highly personal nature of the American public's investment in political celebrity as well as tragedy surrounding political figures.

Additionally, each play juxtaposes an absent father figure with the image of an assassinated national patriarch, thus highlighting betrayal and trauma in such a way that suggests a blurring of lines between the individual and the collective. Likewise, each play points to the personal and national implications of violent acts such as assassination, suggesting a desire to correct or heal through repetition. However, while the fathers in *The America Play* and *Topdog/Underdog* voluntarily left their families behind (as we saw in Chapter One), the same is not true of Mr. Pascal, the absent father in *The House of Yes*: it is more likely that he was gunned down by his wife before he had the chance to walk out on his family. Further, it is likely that he was buried in the backyard, and Jackie-O attempts to exhume the truth is a theme echoed in both of Parks's plays. Parks's Foundling Father and Brazil literally dig to uncover their identities and histories, piecing their existence together from knick knacks and echoes left behind by their forefathers, their "foe-fathers," their "faux-fathers." Parks's "rep and rev" of *The America Play* and *Topdog/Underdog* presents us with characters who mine the depths of their memories to construct identities for themselves. When this proves a futile task, they find

whatever means possible to define themselves, including wearing “boosted” suits, changing their names, and ultimately destroying each other.

The role of the ideology of the American Dream in each play is undeniable. Each play presents a subjugated “other” who must inherently struggle in their pursuit of life, liberty, and happiness. While MacLeod’s clear contrast between the Pascal family and Lesly in *The House of Yes* provides an explicit indicator of the damage that privilege continues to inflict on American culture, her re-visioning of assassination, which casts a female character as assassin, reveals the ways in which the American Dream is denied to women. Likewise, by casting an African American man in the role of Abraham Lincoln, particularly in a scenario in which he is “assassinated” repeatedly in order to earn a living, Parks calls into the question the validity of the American Dream for African Americans. We see in each play the human desire to remember, to uncover an authentic if bloody history, juxtaposed with the demand inherent in the flawed ideology of American Dream that we forget the past and look only to the bright possibilities of the future. In this respect, each play presents a complicated view of the American Dream, revealing the powerful and often dangerous ways in which it is embedded within our culture.

Modern national tragedies continue to reveal the ways in which the American Dream is hindered by racism and therefore reserved for an exclusive group of Americans. For instance, when Hurricane Katrina hit the Gulf Coast in 2005, the widespread devastation and lawlessness that ensued was arguably largely a result of the Federal government’s failure to adequately mobilize and evacuate the area, especially areas like the Lower Ninth Ward, which was largely populated by poor African Americans. Further, during a fundraiser for Hurricane Katrina victims broadcast live on NBC, prominent rapper Kanye West singled out President George W. Bush for the Federal government’s mismanagement with regard to response to Hurricane Katrina, declaring, “George Bush doesn’t care about black people” (qtd. in de Moraes). West’s remarks struck a chord with many Americans, as the gross mismanagement in the wake of one of the

nation's most devastating disasters became increasingly evident. As Robert Vorlicky points out, "The majority of the people displaced by Katrina are black. The majority of neighborhoods that may not be rebuilt are black. And the majority of people who appeared in the indelible images that have slipped into America's collective (un)conscious are black. Their sounds, words, and bodies continue to echo" (288-89). In much the same way, the re-visionings of assassination in the three plays that comprise this study reveal the ways in which "sounds, words, and bodies continue to echo" in the wake of national tragedy, regardless of our geographical or historical distance from said tragedy; the effects of tragedies such as Hurricane Katrina will likely be felt for generations to come, just as the effects of the assassinations of Abraham Lincoln and John F. Kennedy continue to be felt.

While Parks's work garners far more critical and scholarly attention than MacLeod's, the popularity of *The House of Yes* cannot be denied. Arguably, the American public feels a keener and more sentimental relationship to the Kennedy assassination. This is due in large part to our distance from Lincoln's assassination, which happened 100 years before Kennedy's, rendering it less immediately relative. In this respect, it could be said that MacLeod's willingness to tackle Kennedy's legacy by re-visioning his assassination, especially in the context of a comedy replete with an incestuous storyline is riskier than Parks's re-visioning of Lincoln's assassination. Future scholarly investigation of this work, especially as it pertains to the role of women in a patriarchal culture, has the potential to be extremely valuable. Likewise, an in depth study of the lasting iconography of the Kennedy family and the ways in which it continues to be reflected in American culture and affect sentiment could prove worthwhile in an overall understanding of American culture and values.

It is perhaps telling that the assassinated presidents resurrected in the plays explored in the study presided over a nation divided: in the case of Lincoln, a nation divided over freedom, and in the case of Kennedy, a nation divided over equality. Just as the Civil War raged during Lincoln's presidency, the Civil Rights Movement raged during Kennedy's tenure. The fact



remains that “The assassination of John F. Kennedy reveals some interesting parallels to the Lincoln assassination, especially in the reactions of the people. The feelings of sorrow and vengeance and the irrational behavior were all quite similar” (Turner xii). An exploration of these reactions and a comparison of the tenuous and ongoing struggle for freedom and equality in our nation’s history, especially as it relates to each President’s stance on these issues could prove beneficial, especially in light of the fight for equality in the LGBT community, a struggle that continues to prove controversial.

The legacies of Lincoln and Kennedy provide an interesting comparison. As Lee points out:

The idea that Lincoln as a quintessential American who embodies liberty and justice is a founding father creates a myth of America that is equally idealistic. It also creates a particular narrative of post-emancipation America as unquestionably democratic, wholeheartedly embracing equality and freedom. This idea of the newly emerged America is the reason that Lincoln’s death is shrouded in pathos; supposedly, the violence was not only against the president but also America and her values – a monstrous mind created an anomalous event during America’s progressive years. (10-11)

We see here an image of Lincoln as pioneer, as well as a vision of violence for which we as a nation bear ultimate responsibility, a sentiment that as we saw in Chapter One, was echoed with regard to Kennedy’s assassination. The legendary status of both Lincoln and Kennedy continues to feed the American imagination. As Piereson notes:

The Kennedy legend, however, was different from the legend that grew up around Lincoln, who was understood more as a hero of the common man, Whitman’s rough-hewn leader off the frontier, melancholic and deep, paternal savior of the nation in a time of ultimate peril, “Father Abraham” to his loyal troops and, after his death, to his people in general. In a new nation, without a

long history of heroes and legends, Lincoln was an original, the nation's first martyred hero. As Whitman wrote, Lincoln by his death filled a void in the folklore of the nation. He provided a flesh-and-blood symbol for Union and liberty, thus proving that even democracies committed to reason and progress have need of heroes, martyrs, and legends. Kennedy, the second of our martyred leaders, was something different – youthful, vigorous, sophisticated, glamorous, modern, idealistic, more princely than paternal. Lincoln's was the death of a father, Kennedy's of a brother...Both deaths – Lincoln's and Kennedy's – elicited profound national grief, though (as has been said) the one death helped to unify a nation, the second to divide it against itself. (181-2)

Further, Kennedy's long-standing legacy as a womanizer could prove a compelling investigation as it relates to the relegation of women to the domestic sphere in *The House of Yes*, especially in light of recent claims made by former White House intern Mimi Alford of an 18 month affair with the President (Negrin). In her book *Once Upon a Secret: My Affair with President John F. Kennedy*, published in 2012, Alford, who was 19 when she claims to have lost her virginity to Kennedy, claims that the president "seduced her in the first lady's bedroom...in the summer of 1962," and that the affair continued until Kennedy's assassination (Negrin). Further, Alford claims that Kennedy often asked her to perform sexual favors for other men who were "tense," and that on at least one occasion, she complied with such a request while the president watched (Negrin). The treatment of Alford in the media itself speaks volumes about the place of women and female sexuality in contemporary American culture: even the headline for Matt Negrin's *ABC News* article about Alford's book, "JFK's 'Innocent' Ex-Intern Writes a Book About Alleged Affair" (2012), belies a cultural belief that Alford was equally responsible, and therefore is equally tarnished, as indicated by the use of quotations around the word "innocent." The implication of this use of quotations is that Alford was far from innocent, despite her age, inexperience, and status at the time of the "alleged affair." Arguably, if Alford's

allegations are true, they reveal a gross misuse of a position of power on the part of Kennedy, as well as an inexcusable treatment of women as mere sexual objects, and could therefore prove gripping when explored within the context of the role of women in *The House of Yes*.

The racism inherent in American politics continues to become more and more blatant as the 2012 presidential election looms on the horizon. Arguably, claims from conservatives on the extreme end of the spectrum that President Barack Obama is a Muslim, as well as demands that he prove his citizenship by releasing his birth certificate, followed by claims of document falsification, reveal a level of racism that is troubling to say the least. As the United States of America was founded on an ideal of religious freedom, it shouldn't matter whether or not an elected official is Muslim. However, in the wake of the September 11<sup>th</sup> terrorist attacks, the need to scapegoat anyone who identifies as Muslim (or even anyone who appears to potentially be Middle Eastern or has a Middle Eastern name) has emerged as a socially acceptable form of discrimination in some sectors of American culture. Further, this discrimination is based just as heavily on perceived "race" as it is on perceived "faith." Despite the fact that Obama has refuted claims that he is a follower of the Muslim faith and that those who claim otherwise have no proof of such, a 2010 poll showed that almost 1 in 5 Americans believe Obama to be Muslim (Green). Further,

The survey found there was a clear link between how people viewed the president's faith and how they viewed his political performance. Those who view Obama as Christian tended to have a very positive assessment of his job performance. Those who don't know his faith are split in their job approval ratings. And those who say the president is a Muslim give him a negative job approval rating. (Green)

Likewise, despite the fact that he has made his birth certificate available, a document that clearly shows he was born in the United States, conservatives on the far right continue to insist that he is not an American citizen, some going so far as to suggest that he is a terrorist. In this

respect, the racism that continues to emerge in contemporary American society suggests that as a nation, we have a great deal further to go, despite the fact that Obama managed to become the first person of color elected President of the United States.

Wise points out that shortly before John F. Kennedy's assassination, most Americans believed racial equality in the United States was a reality (*Between* 33). For example:

[I]n 1963, roughly two-thirds of whites told Gallup pollsters that blacks were treated equally in white communities. Even more along the lines of delusion, in 1962, nearly 90 percent of whites said black children were treated equally in terms of educational opportunity. All of which is to say that in August 1963, as 200,000 people marched on Washington, and as they stood there in the sweltering heat, listening to Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s famous "I Have a Dream" speech, most whites seeing the news that evening were, in effect, thinking to themselves, what's the problem, exactly? Dream? Why dream? Everything is just fine now. (33)

Of course, everything was not fine for non-white Americans in 1963. In much the same way, the election of Barack Obama was seen by many as an indication of "racism's eradication" in America (Wise, *Between* 32). However, at the 2012 Iowa Caucus, Republican hopeful Rick Santorum stated "I don't want to make black people's lives better by giving them somebody else's money" (qtd. in Condon). The reality is that "in Iowa...9 percent of food stamp recipients are black and 84 percent are white," and as Todd Jealous, CEO and President of the NAACP stated, "Santorum's targeting of African Americans is inaccurate and outrageous, and lifts up old race-based stereotypes about public assistance" (qtd. in Condon). Santorum went on to a narrow primary victory in Iowa, and remains one of the Republican frontrunners, along with Mitt Romney, who shortly after winning the Florida primary declared, "I'm not concerned about the very poor" (qtd. in Collins). Arguably, Santorum, (who notably vociferously opposes rights for gay Americans, an issue that continues to be extremely contentious in much the same way that

Civil Rights were in the 1960s), has an edge over Romney in some respect: many conservative voters cite the fact that Romney is Mormon as a reason that they would hesitate to vote for him (Blake). While Romney's faith would likely prove advantageous in states like Utah and Nevada, which have higher Mormon populations, the evangelical Christian population in middle America and the American South could make a win for Romney more difficult (Blake). In some respects, because of his religious beliefs Romney faces a challenge similar to that of John F. Kennedy, the first and only practicing Catholic ever elected President of the United States. Regardless, we see in both Santorum and Romney indications of a disdain for the "other" in some respect – for the poor, for African Americans, for women, for members of the LGBT community. In this respect, a socio-political comparison of the 1960s and contemporary American could prove a dynamic exploration if juxtaposed to the political atmosphere of the Pascal household. Further, a more in-depth exploration of Lincoln's legacy in the age of Obama could prove interesting in the context of an exploration of race relations in both *The America Play* and *Topdog/Underdog*.

The continued relevancy of the three plays examined in this study is obvious in some respects. Assassination attempts have been made on the last eight American Presidents: Barack Obama, George W. Bush, Bill Clinton, George H. W. Bush, Ronald Reagan, Jimmy Carter, Gerald Ford, and Richard Nixon, making any study of the political and personal motivations behind such attempts, as well as the repercussions and implication of such events, valid. Further, the flaws inherent in the ideology of the American Dream continue to allow for the oppression of certain groups of people and therefore incite violent acts such as assassination attempts. For instance, "The American Dream is in many ways a story of omissions, and few omissions have been more glaring than that of the place of women in our society" (Cullen 119), a reality we see reflected in each of the three plays in this study. Likewise, "The struggle for black equality is one of the great dramas of our national history, and its course and outcome remain an object lesson for those waging parallel struggles for equality in other, almost inevitably entwined, arenas of our national life," a truth that emerges in both of Parks's plays

(Cullen 110). Arguably, any play which presents a character who seeks to disrupt a dominant narrative that continues to oppress the voices of women, people of color, and as we see emerging more and more, members of the LGBT community - such as Diana Son's *Stop Kiss* (1998), Alexi Kaye Campbell's *The Pride* (2008), and Philip Dawkins's *The Homosexuals* (2011) - begs a comparison with each and every play examined in this study.

Meanwhile, Wendy MacLeod and Suzan-Lori Parks continue to write plays that reflect the cultural struggles of "other" Americans. On January 12, 2012, a new adaptation of DuBose Heyward and George and Ira Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess* (1935), a story of the African American experience in early 20<sup>th</sup> Century South Carolina with a new book penned by Parks, opened on Broadway after a run at the American Repertory Theatre in Cambridge, MA (Als). Parks, along with director Diane Paulus and composer Dierdre Murray have stated that one of the primary goals of the adaptation of the Gershwin classic *Porgy and Bess*, including "creat[ing] scenes, invent[ing] biographical details and, in their most radical move, add[ing] a more hopeful ending" is to make the work more attractive to a contemporary audience by "modernizing without disturbing" (qtd. in Healy, Shea). In an interview with American Repertory Theatre dramaturg Ryan McKittrick, Paulus stated "We are trying to create a more dramatically complete version of *Porgy and Bess* that will be the most powerful experience in terms of story and character for a twenty-first century audience" (qtd. in McKittrick). Representatives of the Gershwin estate are backing the adaptation, stating in an interview that "they had long wanted a musical version of "Porgy and Bess" that would be as popular as the recorded Gershwin score and that would draw large numbers of African-American theatergoers" (qtd. in Healy). Likewise, "Albert Cardinali, a trustee of the DuBose and Dorothy Heyward Memorial Fund" voiced his support for the adaptation, stating "It's about balancing the original work's intentions with a story that is maybe more realistic for a present-day audience" (qtd. in Healy). The update includes a focus on presenting a less stereotypical portrayal of African Americans as well as presenting a stronger characterization of Bess, "whose motives and viewpoints are muddled in the opera,

where she is largely an appendage of Porgy or Crown,” the two primary male characters (Healy). In this respect, we see Parks continuing to actively pursue stronger characterizations of both African Americans and women on the American stage.

However, not everyone is thrilled by the idea of an adaptation of what “is considered by many to be America’s greatest opera” (Healy). Musical theatre giant Stephen Sondheim, who just happened to pen the musical *Assassins*, as discussed in the introduction, wrote a letter to the editor of *The New York Times* to protest any “updating” of the Gershwin/Heyward opera, challenging the idea of weaknesses within the original version that would render it in need of updating (*New York Times*). However, in a review of the A.R.T. production, critic at large for *The New Yorker*, Hilton Als, in response to Sondheim’s letter, points out that “Paulus and Parks’s approach ultimately has much less to do with the self-serving manipulation of a classic than it does with humanizing the depiction of race onstage,” stating further that though “Sondheim is one of the chief architects of the contemporary American musical, and a genius with a fascinating interest in marginalization...the stories he tells involve white characters, and his professional world is a white one.” Als goes on to praise the production, citing strong performances and lauding Paulus and Parks for creating a “profound” adaptation of the original opera that presents the characters as “human beings who are not defined by their race.” However, Anthony Tommasini for *The New York Times* praised the performances, particularly those of the leads, but blasted the adaptation, stating that “perplexing elements of this thinned-out, reorchestrated and heavily cut adaptation...undermine the stated goals.” Tommasini further complained: “In striving for a streamlined ‘Porgy and Bess,’ a version that might seem more urgent, intimate and dramatically lucid, the new adaptation just makes the piece seem slighter.” Likewise, Ben Brantley, also in a review for *The New York Times*, couldn’t praise star Audra McDonald enough, asserting that it is through her performance that the production “realizes the ambition of Ms. Paulus and company to bring fresh psychological complexity and visceral

immediacy to a classic" ("A New Storm"). He goes on to say, however, that "Ms. McDonald's Bess is — in a word — great; the show in which she appears is, at best, just pretty good."

The evening after Parks's adaptation of *Porgy and Bess* opened on Broadway, MacLeod's new play about the music industry, *Find and Sign* (2012), opened in Salt Lake City at Pioneer Theatre Company (Bannon). The play, which centers on the relationship between Julia, a young high school teacher in the Bronx, and Iago, an ambitious, white, hip-hop record executive (Bannon), deals with issues of race, privilege, and celebrity in contemporary America. Mac, an African American student Julia has been mentoring, is forced to "choose between a scholarship to Columbia University and a lucrative career as the newest hip-hop star" when Iago offers him a recording contract (Bannon). In an interview published in *Catalyst*, MacLeod stated that seeing a production of *Othello* staged in England a few years ago made her question the motives of Emilia, who betrays Desdemona (Rapier). She remarked "I was interested in foregrounding a woman character, one that is peripheral in Shakespeare's OTHELLO, and in exploring race and romantic love in a contemporary context" (qtd. in Rapier). Of the play and her work in general, MacLeod said, "It did occur to me that my plays often concern 'outsiders' and 'insiders' and in FIND AND SIGN race is just another permutation of that theme. (Only Iago, the white guy, is arguably the outsider here)" (MacLeod, Personal Interview).

Notably, a review of the world premiere hailed the play as an "interesting fusion of comedy of manners and social commentary [that] allows it to function on deeper levels," further commenting that "One of the satisfactions of 'Find and Sign' is watching the way MacLeod transitions between the play's surface humor and its more serious undertones" (Bannon). Further, Bannon asserts that the play "is a satisfying combination of wit and insight that throws a penetrating light on the paradoxes that inform contemporary relationships." Arguably, the same could be said of *The House of Yes*, in which we see a similarly darkly comic treatment of serious subject matter including assassination and incest, treatment which belies a much more sober reality. Another review notes:



On the heels of Martin Luther King Jr. day, it's easy to imagine that in 2012, we've all moved beyond racism, and that, at least in our own circles, it doesn't exist at all. "Find and Sign," the latest work by playwright Wendy MacLeod, challenges those beliefs while offering a fun, romantic comedy-type story, set in the modern-day New York City hip-hop scene. (Hansen)

While Hansen noted that there were a few moments that were heavy-handed for her taste, overall, she praised the production, noting "MacLeod's script is fast-moving and wonderfully conversational." Yet another reviewer remarked, "Plenty of writers have done plenty of things to Shakespeare over the years, twisting and molding the Bard's timeless premises to fit a variety of contemporary ideas. But I never would have expected a wonderfully funny and insightful romantic comedy to emerge from the framework of *Othello*" (Renshaw).

Clearly, MacLeod and Parks continue to push the envelope, creating works that explore issues of race, gender, privilege, class structure, and the role of the "other" in contemporary America. This is no small feat for female playwrights in a nation where, as MacLeod points out in an essay penned in 2010,

As recently as last season, theaters produced six plays by men for every play written by a woman. (Plays by women in which the leading character is a man have a slightly higher chance of being produced.) Only one in eight plays on Broadway is written by a woman, despite the fact that the plays by women made 18 percent more money. The numbers are similarly lopsided for female directors, set designers, and other stage professionals. (MacLeod, "Why Don't")

As evidenced in her interviews and essays, MacLeod is clearly interested in exploring the oppression of certain groups of Americans, and the same is certainly true of Parks. However, as Wiltz points out, Parks fiercely rejects being assigned the moniker of "black playwright," saying "It irritates her, the notion that the only valid black theater is the exploration of some oppression at the hands of the white man. Racism is a valid thing to talk about in plays, but it is not the only

thing she's interested in exploring." Parks, who asserts that she is just as interested in presenting the perspectives of women as African Americans, stated in an interview for the documentary *The Black List* (2008) that "Women are less fearful of being in the margins 'cause we *are* in the margins, and if you're an African American woman, you're in the margins of the margins of the margins of the margins" (*The Black List*). For these reasons, further scholarship on the works of both playwrights is necessary, especially within the scope of the exclusion, contributions, and hard-won triumphs of female playwrights in American theatre.

I believe that human beings create narrative wherever possible. This subjective narrative emerges as storytelling, as creative accounts of the exploits of fictional characters, and as accepted fact labeled as "history." Further, as Schechner notes, "History is not what happened but what is encoded and transmitted" (Schechner, *Between* 51). The reality is that,

In any remaking of social orders and power relations, there must be two stages: first, the telling of stories (the creation of myths) that make it possible to think new things, and then the painstaking transferral of the thoughts into actions. At some point in the process a certain key question arises: who will gain and who will lose power in the projected restructuring? (Torgovnick 69).

The mythic status of the stories of both Abraham Lincoln and John F. Kennedy in the annals of American lore allow for a radical "transferral of thought into action" and in *The House of Yes*, *The America Play*, and *Topdog/Underdog*, enable the presentation of a juxtaposition and ultimate blurring of lines between national and personal tragedy, between collective and individual experience. Further, "History so-called is not 'what happened' but what has been constructed out of events, memories, records: all shaped by the world view of whoever – individually or collectively – is encoding (and performing) history. To 'make history' is not to do something but to do something with what has been done" (Schechner, *Between* 50-1). In this respect, MacLeod and Parks present a radical re-making or re-visioning of history in a way that simultaneously explores national tragedy, the fractured functionality of the American family, and

the flawed idealism of the American Dream. As Shenk points out, the appeal of Lincoln as a “mythic figure” and the apparent duality within his character directly appeals to Parks, just as it appeals to audiences who pay to see her plays. As Lee explains, “History determines what is to be known, and to be known means to have a place in the social world. What [*The America Play*] demonstrates is that in this process history creates a dominant class of those who are known, those who belong in history” (10). The same is true of MacLeod’s *The House of Yes* and Parks’s darker re-visioning of the Lincoln narrative, *Topdog/Underdog*. Arguably, the outcome of each play points to a circular, regenerative narrative, while simultaneously highlighting circumstances that are beyond our control.

The characters in *The House of Yes*, *The America Play*, and *Topdog/Underdog* are haunted by these violent moments in our national history, moments that correlate with personal traumas within the realm of their own, direct experience. As Phelan points out:

Just as physiologists posited the idea of an “after-image” – a shadow of an image which remains on the retina for a brief second after the image has actually vanished from the visual field (a memory that makes the perception of cinematic continuity possible) – so too did psychoanalysts posit that a “trace” of a psychic event remains in the unconscious, Freud’s mystic pad. In other words, the after-image participates in a kind of “optical unconscious” (the phrase is Walter Benjamin’s) – a realm in which what is not visibly available to the eye constitutes and defines what is – in the same way as the unconscious frames ongoing conscious events. Just as we understand that things in the past determine how we experience the present, so too can it be said that the visible is defined by the invisible. (*Unmarked* 14)

In each play examined in this study, the characters are driven not only by personal circumstances, but by the “invisible” actions of those who came before them. Further, as Phelan notes, “Mimetic correspondence has a psychic appeal because one seeks a self-image within

the representational frame" (*Unmarked* 5). The characters in *The House of Yes*, *The America Play* and *Topdog/Underdog* futilely attempt to discover identity "within the representational frame" of an assassinated leader, and perhaps even more tragically, seek to uncover "the possibility that something substantial can be made from the outline left after the body has disappeared" (Phelan, *Mourning* 3). The actions of the characters in each play reflects a bleak vision of the American Dream for the characters in these plays, in part because "Visibility politics are compatible with capitalism's relentless appetite for new markets and with the most self-satisfying ideologies of the United States: you are welcome here as long as you are productive" (Phelan, *Unmarked* 11). The requirement that one be "productive" is clearly tied to the "innate capability" that James Truslow Adams espoused as a requirement for attaining the American Dream: in order to be "productive," to contribute to commerce by becoming a member of the work force, one must possess the "innate capability." However, this view of productivity doesn't take into account access to opportunities in a culture that continues to struggle with institutional racism, sexism and other virulent strains of discrimination.

In some respects, the characters' need to be "productive" within the context of each play points to our own complicit responsibility in tragedies such as those they re-vision, arguably highlighting a strident and highly contagious sickness of "forgetting" or "misremembering" within American culture, an illness that has yet to be fully diagnosed or recognized. However, "To survive in the next century, the American Dream must be more than an excuse to ignore or forget" (Cullen 129). Each play also points to a desperate desire to exhume or reclaim identity, to uncover some truth or reality that has been obscured by years, decades, centuries of creative "re-visioning" at the hands of historians, family, and a domineering, white, patriarchal culture. As Phelan notes, "Self-identity needs to be continually reproduced and reassured precisely because it fails to secure belief. It fails because it cannot rely on a verifiable continuous history. One's own origin is both real and imagined" (*Unmarked* 4). While the characters in each play deliberately re-vision a presidential assassination in an attempt to assassinate a dominant

narrative that continues to “ignore or forget” them, they also do so to discover or remake their own “origins” or “self-identities.” Ultimately, however, these attempts fail. This failure stems in large part from the means by which the characters attempt to upend a dominant narrative: by appropriating the violent tools of the oppressor, they continue the cycle of bloodshed and oppression. In this respect, the characters succeed primarily in reinscribing a cycle of violence that perhaps, as a culture, we are eternally doomed to repeat.

However, their attempts to re-vision their own histories and identities by re-visioning presidential assassination are not futile. These bold attempts demand that we recognize and reevaluate the ways in which we continue to subjugate groups who don't inherently fit into the dominant culture and are thus oppressed by it. In this respect, the plays highlight a clear shift in consciousness, and encourage an audience to recognize their own complicity in furthering an exclusive dominant ideology. Further, the assassination re-visionings in each play highlight a profound, unrelenting desire to definitively destroy any narrative that continues to relegate anyone to a status of “lesser than” through a complete and utter upending of a false, constructed “truth” told over and over again by those with the power to control the narrative. In this respect, while the characters may fail to completely assassinate an oppressive dominant narrative within each play, they do manage to draw attention to these narratives, arguably allowing for the sort of recognition that can lead to positive social and cultural change. MacLeod notes that when she was a graduate student at Yale, “Plays about men—their wars, their politics, their violence—were always considered more ambitious in scope” (MacLeod, “Why Don't”). Perhaps ironically, MacLeod and Parks's most well-known works center on this very topic: the wars, politics, and violence surrounding men such as Abraham Lincoln and John F. Kennedy. However, their ability to highlight a desire within subjugated groups to eliminate an exclusive, damaging dominant narrative belies the subversive means by which they are able to achieve a very successful end. John F. Kennedy once said, “If anyone is crazy enough to kill a president of the United States, he can do it. All he must be prepared to do is give his life for the

president's" (qtd. in Salinger). In much the same way, the characters in *The House of Yes*, *The America Play*, and *Topdog/Underdog* reveal through decisive action the sort of sacrifice that must be made in order to initiate a crucial and dynamic shift in American consciousness.

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