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THE GOOD CUT: THE BARBERSHOP IN THE AFRICAN AMERICAN LITERARY TRADITION

by

Terry Bozeman

Under the Direction of Thomas McHaney

Abstract

Few African American males do not have at least one memory of a barbershop. The barbershop is a space that finds a home in virtually every community in which you find Black males. To some degree, virtually all genres and periods of African American literary expression have situated the barbershop as a mediating space in the formulation of a Black masculine identity. The barbershop as mediating space allows Black males the opportunity to view themselves and also critique the ways in which they are gazed upon by the literary imagination. African American authors, through the use of the barbershop, bring to the center the construction of this space in Black masculinity identity formation.

Although a common presence in African American literature, the barbershop has not received any serious, i.e. book length examinations in literary analysis. I argue that the historical portrayal of the barbershop as mediating space problematizes the intersections of ancestor, culture, history, memory and literary imagination to reveal the intricate relationship between Black males and the space.

I seek to address the gap in coverage of the literary treatment of the African American barbershop as mediating structure in the formulation of a black masculine identity. My research will show that we cannot fully understand the literary formation of Black masculine identity *unless* we attend to the barbershop as a formative mediating space.

INDEX WORDS: Barbers, Barbershop, Black Masculinity, Hush Harbors, Safe Spaces

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by

TERRY BOZEMAN

A Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
in the College of Arts and Sciences
Georgia State University

2007

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2007

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TERRY BOZEMAN

Major Professor: Thomas Mchaney
Committee: Mary Zeigler
Carolyn Denard

Electronic Version Approved:

Office of Graduate Studies
College of Arts and Sciences
Georgia State University
May 2007

Dedication

For my son Terrence, who provides the inspiration I need to believe in the goodness in the world.

For My Grandparents Sinclair and Rosa Mae Bozeman, whose strength and love for each other gave me all I need to live.

For all the Black men in barbershops who talk, laugh, lie and cry, we do have a voice and it will be heard.

Acknowledgements

There can never be enough thanks to my advisor Dr. Tom McHaney. He was there generously giving of his time, advice, and wonderful insight throughout this journey. I am grateful and honored to have worked with such a wonderful scholar and mentor.

My committee members, Dr. Mary Zeiglar and Dr. Carolyn Denard were both above and beyond great scholars to work with. They both opened their homes and hearts to me and kept me encouraged. Thank you both for your warmth and generosity. Without question, I could not have done any of this were it not for the wonderful and unending support of my Spelman College family in both the English department and the African Diaspora and the World Program. A special thanks to Ms. Opal Moore, Dr. Akiba Harper, Dr. Anne Warner, Dr. Steven Knadler, Dr. Margaret Price, and Michelle Hite. Each of you were wonderful inspirations. Dr. Geneva Baxter and Dr. Tarshia Stanley, I can never say enough thanks to the two of you. Thank you both for sharing your love of God. You both gave selflessly in your kindness and encouragement through it all.

My friends and family members who provided emotional and financial support can share in this wonderful time. Without you and the lessons taught, I could not be here today. Thanks to my mothers, Mildred, Essie, Idell, Patsy, Janie, and Angela. To my mom, Evelyn Slack, thank you for helping me believe I really could do anything I put my mind to. My best friend and sister, Seteria can never know what it meant to have her support. She was there when I couldn’t call anyone else.

And finally, to my Uncles Eddie, James, Eugene, Delois, Emmanuel, and Willie, you were my many fathers who guided me with your words and your wisdom.

A special thanks to Dr. Chaunda McDavis, Dr. James L. Hill, Dr. Marva Banks. Thank You for all the support.

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Introduction

Remembering the Cut: The Barbershop as Site of Memory

> "A southern gentleman took a seat for his shave, drew his revolver, and told the black barber that if he were to cut him, he would shoot him. After getting his shave without a nick, the gentleman asked the barber how he had remained so calm during the operation. The barber replied that he had planned to slit the gentleman's throat if necessary" (52).
>
> Cyprian Clamorgan, *The Colored Aristocracy of St. Louis* (1858)

> "There is no place like a Negro Barbershop for hearing what Negroes really think. There is more unselfconscious affirmation to be found here on a Saturday than you can find in a Negro College in a month or so it seems to me" (9).
>
> Ralph Ellison, *Shadow and Act* (1953)

> "The ironclad façade of cool pose is a signature of true masculinity, but it is one-dimensional. If it fails, masculinity fails. Coolness and manhood are so intricately intertwined that letting the cool mask fall, even briefly, feels threatening. This is the façade that provides security in an insecure world."
>
> Richard Majors and Janet Mancini Billson, *Cool Pose* (1992)

Published in 1858, Cyprian Clamorgan's *The Colored Aristocracy of St. Louis* captures the historical essence of Black men's use of the barbershop as a mediating space within the historically prescriptive racial dynamics of America. Clamorgan's text examines the thin line between the racial identities of those men caught between the worlds of Black and White. This world that created the need for the dual function of the Black barbershop as both mediating space and functional place left in its wake an institution enshrined in the psyche of Black masculine identity that, while it continues to evolve, remains true to its historical roots. While they have evolved in America, Black males are still potentially faced with situations that balance on the edges of violent eruption, though often these are now increasingly threats from within the community.

Whether literal or figurative, life on the edge for many Black males is heavily girded by the cultural embracing of a specific type of masculinity. It is a type of hyper-masculinity known as "cool pose." Richard Majors and Janet Mancini Billson in *Cool Pose: The Dilemmas of Black Manhood in America* (1992) describe cool pose as a ritualized performance of masculinity utilized as a system of impression-management to thwart social and psychological constructions and deconstructions of Black males (4). In other words, while it may not always be articulated, cool pose is very real. Through its commission, some Black males are able to find agency in their lives. According to Majors and Mancini Billson, "as a response to a history of oppression and social isolation in this country, coolness may be a survival strategy that has cost the black male – and society – an enormous price" (xii). The price has been an expensive one for many Black men. While it is key to point out Majors and Mancini Billson's observation that cool pose is not inclusive of all Black male experiences and coping strategies (xii), it is important to stress that cool pose itself is neither all good or all bad; it simply is what it is and that is one means of survival Black men have access to. When taken to its extremes, cool pose can be very problematic. Yet its value on a day-to-day scale saves countless lives as it allows survival through the smallest acts of resistance. Yet cool pose for some Black men can often be a "relentless performance for the main-stream audience and often for each other. Creating the right image – the most impressive persona – is part of acting in a theater that is seldom dark" (4). But for some, the performativity of a cool pose stance provides for them a level of visibility that allows the perception of agency.

The fusions of conversations surrounding a history of Black masculinity and public spaces have become an intriguing lens through which to chart the literary

evolution of a Black male identity and subjectivity in America. As the texts examined in this study will reveal, the intrinsic nature of the relationship Black men have with the barbershop as mediating space and their embracing of "cool aesthetic" in their quest for an American masculine identity proves to validate the need for such spaces. This need primarily rests in Black men needing to shape their own sense of masculinity against and /or as refutation of a negated masculinity in a hostile society. While many of the texts discussed in this study are not cornerstones of the African American literary canon, they share an unmistakable theme of tracing the development of Black men in their own space within the larger community that forces them to be on edge in preparation for any open or clandestine acts of hostility against them.

Each of these chapters examines works that utilize the reader as participant / witness to the interior spaces of the Black barbershop. When placed individually out of the context of the whole, no single text can chart the entire experience of the space itself. However, as a collective, the texts discussed, in addition to those listed, represent an enriching look into the intimate and often impenetrable world of Black men that no other social space can offer. Though the authorial strategies vary from text to text, the one constant among all representations during the one hundred plus years covered is the inescapable reality of Ralph Ellison's statement that the barbershop is one of the crucial spaces to help understand and know what Black men are thinking. The shared element of each representation of the barbershop as mediating space manipulates and transforms the reader into a witness and participant. Thus the texts allow the readers to de-center themselves and step into the barbershop as an equal participant, victim, conspirator, and

ultimately agent of knowledge who can step out of their chair back into the world having known the unknowable Black male in *his* space. What more can one ask of a good cut? As authors make the reader a participant, the reader too must assume the responsibility in negotiating one's own subjectivity within the space itself. While a given text may allow one to feel victim, the next may invariably indict. Such is the day to day reality of the interactions within the Black barbershop. Identity in this space is as fluid as one's ability to create and sustain this position of being known and knowing each time he enters the space.

Likewise, because Ralph Ellison's declaration of the significance of the Black barbershop carries the weight of undeniable truth, a literary treatment of the barbershop allows for a comprehensive analysis of the evolution of Black masculine identity and the creation of the Black male self inside the barbershop as depicted in the literature. Therefore, as an explicit declaration, I focus on the notion of a *self* in relationship to the Black barbershop because this space allows the individual Black man some sense of being able to look at his own body, his own self, precisely in relation to others that in a very tangible way experience the world in much the same way that he does. Consequently, in a space that is very much a creation of Black male identity, even if he is not conscious of his own individual body in the mirror, the individual Black man in a barbershop is at least aware that there are others in that mirror that may see him. And because they may *see* him, there is an acknowledgement of the unspeakable double consciousness that in *Souls of Black Folks* (1903) Dubois argues exists in their lives as a result of their Blackness in America during the twentieth century. As a representation of the conditioning inherent with being Black and male in America, the idea of a double

consciousness holds critical merit when applied to the Black barbershop and the men who depend on it for support. This space is fundamentally a creation directly the result of the history of America. Even as Dubois formulates his ideas concerning the body of Black folks, the need for tangible spaces to function is warranted as well in order to allow for the merging of the "two warring souls" (Dubois 9). These "two souls" are at war because of the very fact of American history that necessitates the need to be both visible and invisible for Black men. Black men were involuntarily obliged to evolve in this country through a forced awareness that they were initially nothing more than property. They were forced to build a country that would allow White males to reap the benefits of declaring themselves men when they, as enslaved chattel, were denied the opportunity to express themselves as men. Yet, as history has also shown, these men fought tooth and nail for their own identity and consequently created themselves *within* America. Dubois argues that in this merger of identities he [the black male] created a more complete sense of himself:

> In this merging he wishes neither of the older selves to be lost. He would not Africanize America, for America has too much to teach the world and Africa. He would not bleach his Negro soul in a flood of white Americanism, for he knows that Negro blood has a message for the world. He simply wishes to make it possible for a man to be both a Negro and an American, without being cursed and spit upon by his fellows, without having the doors of opportunity closed roughly in his face. (9)

Yet as the excerpt from *Cool Pose* shows, the result of this history has necessitated survival mechanisms for Black men within the spaces in which they could function and survive. For the individual Black men and the barber especially, the barbershop allows them to make the doors of opportunity for themselves that society denies.

Inescapably, each of the texts in this study confronts the idea of Black masculinity as an act of double consciousness in a way that celebrates the resiliency of Black men in their history in America. They also show the prevalence of cool pose as a critical juncture in the lives of these men. When the subject turns to the Black barbershop in literature, it really becomes a conversation of being and nothingness in America. Specifically, this subject functions as a conversation about space and how America defines space and who has access to the spaces of an American identity. Secondly, the conversation questions how the Black male body functions in relationship to these spaces as *Other* to the normed American body politic in an historical sense.

Ronald Jackson points out in *Scripting the Black Masculine Body: Identity, Discourse, and Racial Politics in Popular Media* (2006) that the Black male body gets read as a political script. Throughout this scripting of the Black male body, one must examine the ways Black men and the barbershop function in the interstices of identity politics in America. Jackson argues that because of an historical "scripting" of a Black body politic in the popular media, the end result more often than not produces a "public game of charades in which all interactants are subjected to subliminal vagaries of the mind" (50). Within the I / Other paradigm of Black masculinity, Jackson argues that Black bodies may be understood not necessarily as "dystopic structures or delinquent nobodies, but marginalized identities seeking agency, affirmation, conjoinment, and

recognition within an unfamiliar place" (55). In this marginalized identity, Black men, through the barbershop, can "co-define" themselves so that the "unfamiliar" becomes familiar. Thus as Black men seek their "self," it's vital to frame this engagement within the discourse of Cultural Studies, specifically Black Masculinity Studies and how the notion of cool pose is vital to their lives.

This relationship between Black men and the barbershop is long lived. As indicated in Clamorgan's text, the history of the Black barber and the barbershop is verily tied to American history from the era of slavery. As America grew both physically and ideologically, the Black barber was there to shape the whiskers and minds of some of the most powerful molders of this country.

This search for the familiar has historical relevance. Douglas W. Bristol, Jr., in his dissertation on the history of the African American barbershop, "From Outposts to Enclaves," (2002) argues that as early as the 1840s the African American barbershop functioned as a battleground from which to define and defend African American men in American society. According to Bristol, this "independent system of economic cooperation" (3), allowed Black barbers to hold a respectable percentage of the barbering business, even during the antebellum period. Bristol points out that the nature of these Black businesses – which tended to advocate for "community improvement" - had roots in the communal values expressed in traditional Afrocentric paradigms (4). As shown in the excerpt from Clamorgan's text, the Black barbershop has served historically as that line of divide between the races in America, a line that was often potentially violent while at other times therapeutic. Nevertheless, even as the barbershop served as an "outpost" for Black businessmen, because the customers were all White "the commercialization of

service failed to alter the power relations between servants and those served" (8). That dynamic disappeared, according to barbershop scholar Vorris Nunley, in the late nineteenth century, when the racial politics of America shifted and forced the transition towards a more "racially homogeneous" and class heterogeneous" situation (Nunley, "Barbershop" 94).

Though the post-Emancipation race relations of the U.S. changed politically, there were very few immediate changes in the social interactions of the races. Some Whites still grudgingly held to their racist ideology by demanding that the Blacks around them continue to fill subservient roles. Therefore, the seemingly innocuous space of the barbershop became the plane through which to traverse the racial identity-politics of America. Interestingly, the barbershop as paradigm to explore America subverts the master-slave dialectic established in the foundation of America's building blocks by allowing a level of resistance against oppression where it became critical that Black men could have a place to speak for themselves amongst one another.

Yet, even through the most horrendous of circumstances that Black men endured, there survived among the enslaved not only the will to live and thrive in this country, but also the will to remember their old ways, if only partially. It was the barbershop that allowed this continuation to happen. According to research compiled by Ayana Byrd and Lori Tharps in *Hair Story: Untangling the Roots of Black hair in America* (2001), during the antebellum era, barbering for White clientele proved prosperous for many free Blacks (73). Even within the institution of slavery, those men who had the skills of a barber held status just below, or equal to, that of butlers, maids, and cooks (Byrd and Tharps 75). One of the realities of Emancipation for the newly freed Black man was that the means of

servitude he had endured would now be both his bane and his means of livelihood. On the one hand, the barbershop's financial success in a post-emancipation environment necessitated that Black barbers allay any concerns held by White clientele that they may be getting too familiar with the ideas inherent in freedom and racial interactions. Though the institution of slavery had been dismantled, very few of its realities immediately disappeared. On the other hand, the post-emancipation barbershop provided a sort of de-militarized zone for racial interactions. While there was an air of continual deference by the Black barbers, the barbershop did give them new avenues of opportunity from which to start a new life. For centuries, Black men in America had been subdued by an identity synonymous with servitude and squalor that for all practical purposes had been constructed to deny their humanity and personal culture. Emancipation, and the subsequent (re)construction of Black masculine identity, provided an almost overnight realization for those that were newly freed that they could now in a sense *choose* an identity. As a result, one of the industries that grew after Emancipation was the barbering industry, which, because it offered service, allowed White men to momentarily feel as though real change had not occurred while providing Black men some commercial agency.

Fundamentally, it was because of their experiences during enslavement, that post-emancipation Blacks understood the importance of mediating spaces such as the barbershop in providing a sustaining power in their daily lives. However, along with allowing for the fulfillment of financial needs, the barbershop itself allowed Black men an avenue of power, self-respect, and agency as they both consciously and unconsciously made transgenerational / transcontinental links to the tradition of the griot cultures of

Africa. In his entry on “Black Business” in the *Encyclopedia of Southern Culture* (1989), Walter B. Weare states that many different sites are now identified as the acknowledged sacred spaces within the African American folk community network. These places - the church, the porch, the cemetery, dance halls, juke joints, fraternal orders, and, of course, the barbershop - were important because they were public enough not to draw too much attention yet private enough to provide a level of protection. These places became what are known as hush harbors. According to *The Greenwood Encyclopedia of African American Folklore* (2005), hush harbors are “informal, unofficial meeting places” that are more often than not “quasipublic sites that functioned under the radar of general public surveillance.” In other words, these harbors were communication safe zones where African Americans could freely communicate in ways forbidden to them in fully public domains. Contrary to outside places, these places were “critical spatialities of rhetorical education and knowledge in which everyday talk and discourse reflecting African and African American imaginations, aspirations, subjectivities, and worldviews are taken seriously” (Nunley 651 – 652). As hush harbors barbershops were very critical throughout African American history. For example, these spaces to some degree catered to the specific needs of the community trying to survive in the hostile environment of America. As each one had and continues to have its target audience of men who feel welcome at a particular moment, the barbershop’s audience / clientele can be mutually inclusive of all members in the other spaces.

Engaging the barbershop in African American history and literature, it’s important to acknowledge the legacy of barbering in African cultures and not treat it as a phenomena brought about during enslavement in America. This legacy is unknown in

contemporary circles simply because it is overlooked and underappreciated. The significance of barbering in African traditions has been indelibly marked on American culture for some time. In West African traditions hair and its patterned styles were deeply ingrained means of communication within tribes such as the Wolof, Mende, Mandingo, and Yoruba, among others (Byrd and Tharps 2). Within these traditional cultures, one's hairstyle indicated wealth, martial status, societal rank, clan affiliation, and much more. The hair and hairstyles a man or woman displayed was as important as the name he or she went by. As a result, within these societies, a person's hair was considered sacred and, as such, one took special care of it. To that end, not everyone was allowed the *honor* of working with hair. Columbia University historian Mohamed Mbodj writes that these cultures put such emphasis on hair culture that it was seen as divine. Hair was thought to be so special in these cultures that "the only people allowed to work on hair were the griots and the ironworkers. Anybody who is working at creating life with dead material, like melting iron and making it into something new, those are the people who have the exclusive right to work on people's hair" (qtd in Byrd and Tharps 7).

Knowledge of these traditions provides a starting point from which to explore the way the Black barber performs as representative evolution of the griot hair-cutting tradition in African American literature. The tradition of the griot, when translated onto the role of the barber, reveals both as links between the past, present, and future in African American literature where one witnesses both the (re)construction of Black male identity inside the barbershop and a manifestation of the desire to remain in touch with their ancestors.

Because Black masculine identity often gets shaped by spaces like the church, the street corner or the porch, the barbershop's role in this construction is critical. Yet, the barbershop's relationship to the literature of African Americans, specifically how it has helped to shape identity, has not yet been thoroughly examined in recent scholarship like those others spaces. Among the scholarship written on the barbershop in African American literature is Trudier Harris' "The Barbershop in Black Literature" and Hortense Thornton's "The Barbershop and Beauty Parlor in Afro-American Literature." Both articles, published in 1979, address African American authors' use of barbershops as a safe haven for Black men and thus as a good setting for dramatic writing and fiction. Since the publication of these two texts, scholars have tended to treat only text specific coverage of the role the barbershop has played in African American literature. This project bridges that gap to provide a comprehensive survey of how authors have presented the impact the barbershop has had on African American literature. In addition to these, recent scholarship regarding the African American barbershop includes Melissa Harris-Lacewell's *Barbershops, Bibles, and BET: Everyday Talk and the Development of Black Political Thought (2004),* Craig Mayberry's *Cuttin' Up: The Wit and Wisdom from Black Barbershops (2005),* and Vorris Nunley's as yet unpublished dissertation "African American Hush Harbors."

Identifying the writer as cultural informant, James P. Spradley in *Culture and Cognition: Rules, Maps, and Plans* (1972) explains:

> The writer must carefully observe and record situations, events, behavior, and ideas. Most of all, his characters and their actions must be believable. They must make sense to the person who knows the culture the author is

> writing about. A good writer is able to convey to the reader the meaning of all those taken-for-granted aspects of experience. He [or she] must, in other words, have an understanding of the culture his characters are using to organize their behavior. (4)

Building upon Spradley's analysis, I explore the Black barbershop, portrayed in fiction, drama, and poetry written by African American writers, as another cultural space that helps to shape Black masculine identity through an embrace of cool pose aesthetic. This study therefore serves as an ethnographic process testing the "accuracy" of the fictional accounts. Specifically, this project engages the literature as a platform that supports the discussion of the barbershop as both an historical space for culture building and a literal site of memory for African American males in the construction of their identity as witnessed and achieved through defense mechanisms such as cool pose.

In "Stimulating the Past: A Method for Using Ethnosemantics in Historical Research" (1972), John Caughey argues that historians in many ways are detached from the community they study whereas the ethnographer enters the community and interacts with the people being studied. African American authors through their works of fiction are able to transcend, in many ways, the restrictions of an historian. They are free to construct a three-dimensional look at a community within its historical moment. Such freedoms granted by fiction writing do often prove to be a valuable perspective through which to engage the moment. My investigation reinforces Trudier Harris' earlier claim that the barbershops depicted in the literature accurately reflects the real shops ("Barbershop" 112). But, since its audience is potentially wider than those familiar with

the culture of the barbershop, this project seeks to open a critical conversation into the qualities of this space for any audience to appreciate.

This awareness of wider audience became more compelling when MGM's 2002 release of the movie *Barbershop* opened the doors for those who may have been unfamiliar with the culture of the Black barbershop and its role in the shaping and maintenance of Black masculinity. Many within the community, as well as those outside the community, took notice of this space in the film. Starring rapper turned actor Ice Cube and comedian Cedric the Entertainer, the film and its subsequent controversies regarding statements concerning Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and others of the Civil Rights era left barbershop insiders on the defense as those outside the Black barbershop culture took issue with certain characterizations and statements made in the film. The responses to this movie reflect the general understanding of the relevance of this space in the African American community and its nature as an in-culture counterculture as well as a site of memory, respect, tradition, and independence. These responses also show how it has historically helped to shape Black male cultural identity. The subsequent focus on the Black barbershop in pop media made the issue of the barbershop in literature even more pressing. While the film gave millions a wake-up call to the importance of the space, the written texts had been there charting this importance all along.

In deference to Blacks who "made history" all along, Genevieve Fabre and Robert O'Meally point out in their introduction to *History and Memory in African American Culture* (1994) that sometimes it is necessary to look past the "professional historians" to those "watchful people, a people who could not not know: a people of long memory" – the common people who unselfconsciously preserve folk legacies (5). Examining the

Black barbershop, through Pierre Nora's "twin matrices of history and memory" (Fabre and O'Meally 5), one witnesses how African American fiction writers position the barbershop strategically in terms of its significance within the community. Fabre and O'Meally distinguish history and memory based on the premise that memory is "by definition a personal activity, subject to the biases, quirks, and rhythms of the individual's mind," whereas history is a science that "insists on proofs and corroborating evidence" (5). African American authors who explore the correlation of folk history and memory of men in barbershops become historians dramatizing the legacies of some of the "first black American historians." According to Fabre and O'Meally, these historians bore "eyewitness accounts of remembered experiences but also a set of worldviews with interpretations, analyses, and historical judgments" (6). A study of fiction by African American authors, most of them undoubtedly initiated and informed by those accidental historians in community barbershops, provides a critique of conventional historical methods and shows how a community's collective memory also allows the average person's voice to be heard as well.

Through the destabilization of a more or less monolithic African American identity the communities of African Americans have been opened up for individual histories. The consequences of these changes in African American cultural memory stemming from historical evolutions have led to a new set of values in the community. These new values in turn have necessitated evolving mechanisms for survival:

> Such cultural shifts signal the end of societies that had long assured the transmission and conservation of collectively remembered values, whether through churches or schools, the family or the state; the end too of

> ideologies that prepared a smooth passage from the past to the future or that had indicated what the future should keep from the past – whether for reaction, progress, or even revolution. (Nora 284-85)

Consequently, as each post-Emancipation day brought greater distance from the collective experience of enslavement for African Americans, some of the communal values derived from those memories of African life began to fragment or disappear too. At the same time, others evolved to meet the new realities of the newly freed, newly dispersed people. Part of this evolution on the part of African American authors now generations removed from enslavement is to continue the tradition of allowing the written text to function in an oral capacity to challenge notions of historical identity as well as racial memory. Therefore, the spaces where these dialogues take place become central to the texts themselves.

Fortunately, African American literature has always presented a different examination of this history, a different memory than that of mainstream America. This history has long been supported by an oral culture framed within a tradition of hush harbors and cool pose strategies. For example, the obvious hypocrisy of Independence Day is clearly evident in Frederick Douglass' 1852 speech, "What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July?" As a seminal literary figure, Douglas argues the question concerning Black male agency and the need for critical spaces in which to engage this conversation. He argues the question:

> Why am I called upon to speak here to-day? What have I, or those I represent, to do with your national independence? Are the great principles of political freedom and of natural justice, embodied in that Declaration of

> Independence, extended to us? I am not included within the pale of this glorious anniversary! Your high independence only reveals the immeasurable distance between us. This Fourth of July is *yours,* not *mine*. *You* may rejoice, *I* must mourn" (Douglass 141-142).

Douglass' words signify a disparity between recorded American history and African American cultural memory and the role that literature can play. As an acknowledged ancestor in the literary tradition of African Americans, Douglass, through this statement, demands a re-evaluation of these memories and offers a challenge to a scripting masculinity that denies Black males any sense of manhood. Many generations removed, contemporary African American authors continue to raise awareness in addressing the memory of their ancestors and the necessary spaces through which to channel these conversations about Black masculinity.

Thus, within the African American literary tradition, authors had to find place and voice for that "presence of an ancestor" that, according to Toni Morrison in "Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation" (1984) remains central to Black literature (Morrison "Rootedness" 343). The barbershop in African American writing is the actuality of what Morrison characterizes as a place of "timelessness," where authors can connect with their literary ancestors. As a result, because memory is such an important patch in the quilt of African American historical identity, the barbershop allows the writer who portrays it as a site of memory to effect a "visceral, emotional response as well as an intellectual response" from the reading audience, but also to effect an emotional and intellectual response from a larger audience (343).

That Black barbershop that I discuss is more than a physical space where Black men are; on the contrary, to reduce it to such a simplistic space is to assume that four walls make a home. The Black barbershop is aesthetic. It is a certain sound, a certain scent. It's got more going on than loud talking and haircuts. In fact, for many generations of Black males, the barbershop is less about the haircut than it is about a speaking, living, forum of engagement. Morrison points out that the essence of Blackness in things is more than a social construction of that Blackness. She challenges us to remember and relate by what one "does with the presence of an ancestor" (201) in the spaces in which they are encountered. Returning to Morrison's discussion of the ancestor in "Rootedness," one has to acknowledge her warnings against disabling ourselves. In order for there to be a true celebration of an ancestor, there can not always be a singling of male over female. In fact, Morrison says this is a "disability" to guard against (202). In other words, Morrison's reading of an ancestor's importance is that the ancestor can and should never be isolated or pigeonholed within a community. To do so is to weaken the individual and the community. She warns that, "when you kill the ancestor you kill yourself. I want to point out the dangers to show that nice things don't always happen to the totally self-reliant if there is no conscious historical connection" (202). In other words, to protect against a collapse of community, the ties to cultural ancestors must be protected and nourished in secure spaces that are vital to the well-being of the community.

These places, whether physical or ideological, are what Nora terms *lieux de memiore*, which he clarifies as points "where memory crystallizes and secretes itself at particular historical moments." Particularly for Black men in barbershops, these points are vital:

> They offer a look at the turning point where consciousness of a break with the past is bound up with the sense that memory has been torn – but torn in such a way as to pose the problem of the embodiment of memory in certain sites where a sense of historical continuity persists. (284)

The Black barbershop as a site of memory affords observers the opportunity to share in the "decentered microhistories" of African Americans (Fabre and O'Meally 7). In this way, authors seek to fill in those moments where traditional history will not accommodate or address an understanding of the African American experience, particularly for African American males (Fabre and O'Meally 7). Because of its inherent exclusivity as a male space, Black barbershops provide a parallel history of Black men with that of African American history. It is a history that they can tell through their own eyes, with their own inflections, and one that allows them to make themselves the hero and the warrior and not always the conquered and the dejected.

Fabre and O'Meally represent such micro-histories as "an event or figure, a book or an era, a place or an idea; it can be simple and ambiguous, natural and artificial" (295). More importantly, such sites have "material, symbolic, and functional" characteristics that Nora feels must coexist in order for these *lieux de memoire* to exist at all. The barbershop, with its physical contents, symbolic aesthetics, and the functions of its services, meets the criteria. By virtue of its history and relative exclusivity, the Black barbershop fosters a "will to remember" the ancestors that Morrison discusses in "Rootedness." Nora points out that if this trait is missing, the distinction between spaces as *lieux de memoire* and as *lieux d' historie* (295) is often lost.

Therefore, the fictional world of the Black barbershop - always presented as a male space different from and at odds with the world outside the door - functions as a cross-generational space.[1] Each layer is individually and collectively encased within a culturally symbiotic relationship. The assemblage of young and old in the barbershop makes it the perfect site of memory in the African American male folk network and also shows the transference of cool pose as a technique for survival. This is a community that offers limited spaces where the young and old can commingle freely. By examining the literature that uses the Black barbershop as a culturally viable space, this study seeks an unrestricted look at the unique elements of its function as a site of memory that critiques history.

Although scholars have studied similar literary spaces – porches, houses, churches -- and Harris and Thornton have written exclusively, if only briefly, about the African American barbershop -- as yet, no one has offered an in-depth study of the literary significance of the barbershop in African American writing across multiple texts and through a range of genres. Consequently, there is no single comprehensive lens through which to position a look into the Black barbershop. Therefore, a major function of this project will be to bridge these gaps in coverage into a comprehensive whole. Nevertheless, studies of related spaces can, however, help establish critical frameworks for this project. Among these are Marilyn Chandler's *Dwelling in the Text: Houses in American Fiction* (1991), Trudier Harris' *The Power of the Porch: The Storyteller's Craft in Zora Neale Hurston, Gloria Naylor, and Randall Kenan* (1996), and Jocelyn

[1] Among texts that reveal the Black barbershop as a cross generational space are William Demby's *Beetle Creek*, Langston Hughes *Not Without Laughter*, and Albert Murray's *Train Whistle Guitar.*

Hazelwood Donlan's *Swinging in Place: Porch Life in Southern Culture (2001).*[2] Like these spaces and their particular audiences, the Black barbershop reflects the importance of space in the folk culture of African American males. That is, Black men find a personal and communal refuge from the prejudices and frustrations of the work spaces and the general social spaces outside the barbershop. What's more, these spaces more often than not allow for the formation of a perforamative posture that allows for individual and collective survival. Additionally, the barbershop is also different from a church or dance hall, sites of what cultural critic Albert Murray refers to in *Stomping the Blues* (1976) as the "Saturday night social and the Sunday morning service," because it generally does not discriminate on who can and can not come in and feel comfortable at any given moment like other spaces.

One measure of the Black barbershop's significance gets presented in the way the space functions in relationship to a postmodern identity in the twentieth century for Black men in America. In an ever-changing society where the individual's identity is increasingly fragmented, Black men continue to suffer overwhelmingly from a socially constructed, monolithic identity. Particularly because there is no *monolithic Black man*, a study of African American literature's treatment of barbershop culture provides a wider representation of Black men than can be accomplished in many social spaces. This view of the barbershop as a site of memory allows one to further problematize what Edward Soja in *Thirdsapce* (1996) views as "an overdeveloped historical contextualization of social life and social theory that actively submerges and peripheralizes the geographical

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[2] The bulk of studies on the barbershop are in the field of Sociology. Melissa Harris-Lacewell's *Barbershops, Bibles, and BET: Everyday Talk and the Development of Black Political Thought.* Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 2004 provides one example.

or spatial imagination" (117). In other words, by examining the evolution of Black men in literature one notices the refutation of a critical silence that is transcended through memory in the barbershop. This perceived critical silence stems from texts that often marginalize Black males and their stereotyped inability to engage one another in meaningful conversation. However, this does not attempt to suggest that the African American barbershop is in any way monolithic, nor does it presume that all conversations inside are worthwhile. To the contrary, it is precisely the heterogeneous nature of the boys and men that frequent these spaces that makes them so vital and diverse in their individual communities. The result is a compilation of texts that cover a wide swath of Black masculine identity and historical development. In the end, because these texts range over a significant time period they afford one the opportunity to chart changes.

According to Nora, spaces such as African American barbershops are indeed "mixed, hybrid, mutant, bound intimately with life and death, with time and eternity; enveloped in a mobius strip of the collective and the individual, the sacred and the profane, the immutable and the mobile," these sites "exist because of their capacity for metamorphosis, an endless recycling of their meaning and an unpredictable proliferation of their ramifications" (295-296). The Black barbershop over an historical continuum can and does indeed allow for a better understanding of the moments that shape the lives of the men inside.

In terms of the historicity of the space, *Washington Post* writer Stephen Hunter characterizes the barbershop as a quintessential "third space" that is the antithesis of work or home. Hunter says that the barbershop is simply a space "where you go to … be" (C 1). Examining Hunter's assessment of the barbershop as a "thirdspace" allows one to see

that the barbershop is not merely a place to flee for the black male. In this “conditioning” that Ellison highlights, the barbershop symbolizes a space in which one becomes strengthened for the world(s) outside the shop. In the lives of the men who often exist or stand in fear of being voided, a space to “be” presents the ultimate platform from which to make a declaration that “I am” in a definitive and declarative way.

Capturing the literary essence of the African American barbershop as a site of memory for black men to “be,” poet Kevin Young’s “Eddie Priest’s Barbershop & Notary: Closed on Mondays” (1991), examines the Black barbershop that “is music is men / off early from work is waiting / for the chance at the chair / while the eagle claws holes / in your pockets / keeping time by the turning of rusty fans / steel flowers with cold breezes” (790). This vision of the Black barbershop has existed virtually unchanged in the memories and realities of African American men for generations. It is this image that writers have long depicted as the location in which a community of men seeks to carve out and claim a space of their own, free from the restrictions of the outside world. This is a very important moment in understanding the dynamics of how the barbershop functions. While it “is” the music and it “is” the men, the barbershop is also more than an idealized space that can completely shut out the world around it. As Young carefully crafts the understanding, even though they are “off early from work” the “eagle” i.e. social and economic reality still “claws” at them in a world often filled with “steel flowers.” What one realizes then is that the Black barbershop functions as a site mediating between two thought systems. On the one hand, the Euro-American model emphasizes, according to George W. Roberts in “Brother to Brother: African American Modes of Relating Among Men” (1994) “competition, individualism, and domination,”

and on the other hand, as he points out, the Afrocentric paradigm is one that "stresses the importance of group and community needs over individual aspirations, cooperation over competitive relationships, as well as interconnectedness among people" (384). Young closes his poem saying that the shop "is the final / spin of the chair a reflection of / a reflection that sting of wintergreen / tonic on the neck of a sleeping snow haired man / when you realize it is / your *turn* [emphasis mine] you are next" (790).

These closing lines project the feeling of hope in an upcoming "turn" within the shadows of the Black male experience in America that Ellison also writes about. This "turn" is not about going first or really going at all. It is simply about being part of something collective and worth sharing. This "turn" that Young writes of is that identifiable moment of synergy within the African worldview that an outsider may not be able to appreciate. The barbershop, beyond its readily apparent tangible functions, offers black men a turn at something so special that it becomes inexpressible in the voice and must be known through the experience. The chairs and the space itself may seem to serve as a locale for a haircut and maybe a shave and nothing more, something you would find in any barbershop. But the true essence of the Black barbershop experience resides in that almost spiritual moment when one is welcomed to his place on the closest thing to a throne many will ever know; it is a chance to rest in the spirit of his ancestors. To those even remotely involved within the African American barbershop community, more specifically those who *are* the community, the shop serves as an intravenous connection to *life*. For those lucky enough to know the "turn" that Young highlights, it is the chance to sit on that "throne" and be counted. It represents a time to be listened to and talked to, to hear men tell it like it is in a place very different from home, church, or work. It is the

turn to be acknowledged as an equal by others using, and judged by, the same criteria to define their own identity. In many ways, sitting in that chair offers the only opportunity for an ostensibly "invisible man," acutely aware that he is a "native son," to be all that he is or can be in America. Young's closing stanza drives directly to the core of a project on the barbershop in African American literature and culture - the issue of the Black male's navigation of the racial terrain in America and the cultural spaces of his own that shape this identity and help him to survive until that next "turn" comes again.

While dialogue on the thoughts of black masculinity and manhood in America ends up in a conversation about the status of the "endangered species," the "thug appeal," and the outright "killa" on the streets of America, few outsiders actually understand the conversation or care to listen to what black males have to say for themselves.

Furthermore, many are often unable to look past the cool poses that serve as survival tools. Undoubtedly, without the multiple variations of the pose, Black men would not have survived. But it is also critically important to engage the totality of cool pose and the consequences of these poses too. Behind the grinding realities and the silent, often impenetrable eyes of the black male gaze, there is and always has been an attempt by Black men and the authors who recreate their worlds to speak inwardly to one another and outwardly to those who know how to listen. While the church may represent the refuge of the black body in search of salvation and the porch the buffer between home and community and the Saturday night jook joint a temporary respite from the "blue devils of melancholy" (Murray, *Stomping*), the black Barbershop is its own "thing," too, and the various "services" it provides, the rich discourse that it shelters, and the

illuminating stories it has inspired challenge the denial of its existence and the singular importance it serves in the lives of Black men.

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Chapter One

The Fresh Cut: The Rise of the Barbershop in African American Literature

"That's nothing, sir – I can shave just as well.
My hand shakes because I did not have much sleep last night.
But I was thinking just now," he added with a laugh,
"how easy it would be for me to cut your throat."
"An Adventure in a Barber's Shop," *FreeDemocrat*, (1852)

The finest barber shop in town
Was one that caught the transient swells;
The men who came, the men who went,
The men who rang the hotel bells
Charles Henry Shoeman, "He Came Again," (1899)

Published in 1899 as part of the collection entitled *A Dream and Other Poems*, Charles Henry Shoeman's "He Came Again" gives one of the earliest representations of the African American barbershop post emancipation. The poem's narrator reveals the story of an unnamed barber described only as "one big man" working in "the finest barber shop in town." The poem develops in a very humorous exchange between the unnamed barber and his customer. The barber says to the customer in the beginning, "Who cut dat har?" as a way to entice the business. Having been taken by the suggestion that his hair was "cut bad" by a prior barber, the customer allows the barber to cut his hair. All the while the barber engages him in comedic conversation:

'Ef I'd done cut yo' har like dat,

Ah couldn't hold dis job, ah say;

De man who done dat job, ma man,

Should chop de wood from day toe day.'

As the poem progresses, the barber himself is left being laughed at by the reader and perhaps the others who may have overheard the exchange in the shop. The customer allows the barber to cut his hair and returns three days later only to discover that the barber who had told him "'de next time just come 'roun' toe me" does not remember him and therefore tries to secure his business the same way as before:

> 'Ef ah cut har like dat, ma frien',
> I could not hole dis job, ah say;
> De man dat hacks up har like dat
> Had oughter nebber git his pay. (21)

Surprised and willing to counter the barber's claim, the man responds 'Now here, my friend, you cut my hair yourself last week" (21). Shoeman's text reveals that even in their earliest representations, African American authors were aware of the comedic potential in examining the space and the interactions of the men inside.

An earlier literary treatment of the Black barbershop, written on a more sobering note, reveals a more serious examination of the Black barbershop in inter – and intra - racial politics during the same period. Written by an unknown author in 1852, "An Adventure in a Barber's Shop" looks candidly into a fictional barbershop in antebellum Mobile, Alabama. The narrator, a white sailor on shore leave, enters the shop and engages the services of a young mulatto barber. While the initial conversation seems a harmful banter between the two men, there seems a bit of tension in the air. Because the young barber's eyes "burned like coals of fire" as he stropped his razor, the White man comments that "I did not remove my gaze for a single instant while the razor was passing over my neck and throat" (147). The barber does seem to have everything going for him

in his current situation. As a lease-slave, he is able to make “thirty bits a day” in his profession. Although he makes enough money that in time would allow him to purchase his freedom, he comments earlier that “as for that, I care but little. I have all the liberty I want, and enjoy myself as I go along.” This antebellum story provides some very useful information. First of all, at the rate which he is charging customers, the barber could easily and realistically have been in reach of purchasing his freedom. Yet, there seems to be some level of contentment in his situation. But as the story reveals, freedom is a precious link to one’s sanity and, for this barber, his break from sanity is a razor thin line. Though there is not much to the story in length, the scarcity of words speaks volumes. For example, in the middle of shaving his customer, the barbers says, “barbers handle a deadly weapon sir,” as if to comment on the reality of these situations. For those whites dependent on the system of oppression to maintain their sense of position, there seems to be no thought that at any random moment these men, the barbers, could slit their throats. Though he shrugs off the barber’s comments, the gentleman does sense the threat. Once he is out of the chair, the man witnesses the fate of the next customer to enter and take a seat:

> I went to the glass, which did not reflect the chair, to arrange my collar. Certainly I had not stood before it a single moment, when I heard something like a suppressed shriek, a gurgling, a horrible sound that made my blood run cold, I turned – there sat the unfortunate gentleman, covered with blood, his throat cut from ear to ear, and the barber a raving manic, dashing his razor with tremendous violence in the mangled neck.

This story exemplifies an obvious break from the expected norm of how readers have been led to engage the Black barbershop. While the narratives throughout the twentieth century mainly present very docile-natured barbers who remain in control of their actions, this one reveals the raw violence that was potentially just under the surface when one loses control of his faculties. The fact that this is one of the earliest documented fictionalized accounts from within a Black barbershop raises some key concerns. Although Douglas Bristol's "From Outposts to Enclaves: A Social History of Black Barbershops, 1750 – 1915" (2002) may have accurately characterized the barbershop as an outpost for Black men, the reality is that it was also a very volatile battleground of cross racial politics. Yet even as the violence in this account seems uncharacteristic when looked at through an individual story, others in the same period also examine the intersections of politics and potential violence in the Black barbershops around the turn of the century.

Robinson Asbury's Equal Rights Barbershop in Paul Laurence Dunbar's "The Scapegoat" (1904) and Tom Taylor's Wyandot Hotel Barbershop in Charles Chesnutt's "The Doll" (1912) are also important artifacts that engage the conversations concerning the transformation of the Black barbershop. Dunbar and Chesnutt's stories, moreover, serve as witnesses to the post-Reconstruction realities of Black men in America inside the barbershop. Both the fictional Tom Taylor and Robinson Asbury are men "committed by circumstance to a career of personal service" (Chesnutt 248). This career of service is fundamental to Douglas Bristol's study on the history of Black barbering. The barbershop in both these stories provides an engaging look at the significance of the space for the formation of black masculine identity through cultural memory. Both of these stories, at

their individual core, represent the central aspects of the platforms of Black political thought at the time and how, through fiction, authors engage key issues concerning the development of a sense of community.

Born after Emancipation, Paul Laurence Dunbar, like Dubois, did not know the horrors of enslavement intimately. Nevertheless, although he did not experience the "peculiar institution" himself, Dunbar was aware of the legacy it left. Most remembered for his dialect poetry, Dunbar, two years before his untimely death in 1906, published *The Heart of Happy Hollow*, which contains the short story "The Scapegoat." While this may be one of Dunbar's lesser works, "The Scapegoat" begins my look into the role that the barbershop has played in the building of African American male identity through cultural memory.

The first of sixteen stories in *The Heart of Happy* Hollow, "The Scapegoat" depicts Mr. Robinson Asbury's rise and fall and eventual second rise to power in the fictional town of Cadgers. Unlike the usual personas of Dunbar's poetry, Robinson Asbury does not come across as the uneducated, dialect-speaking folk character of the day. Instead, Dunbar positions Asbury as an articulate realization of the theories of W.E.B. DuBois' talented tenth. He has gone from a lowly menial job at a barbershop to owning one of his own, The Equal Rights Barber-Shop, which stands as the jewel of the Black community, and into the world of politics. The story begins with the narrator commenting on the situation of the day, noting that, as a result of the "circumstances" in which they find themselves, the Negroes of Cadgers have been "encouraged" to exist "thronged like ants" in the narrow confines of the Black districts (3-4). Dunbar's depiction of the barbershop at the turn of the century represents the infancy of the Black

barbershop's transition to a position as a sacred space in the Negro quarter. The shop served as "a sort of club, and, on Saturday nights especially, was the gathering-place of the men," who may have come for the "illustrated and race journals" kept in the shop (4). There is also evidence within the story that the barbershop, especially, is a space where "those who cared neither to talk nor listen to someone else" have a place to go.

Asbury uses the barbershop to serve as a community liaison between the Black and White worlds. Once the city's political "party managers" realize that they have a need for his position and influence in the community they use him:

> They gave him money, and they gave him power and patronage. He took it all silently and he carried out his bargain faithfully. His hands and his lips alike closed tightly when there was anything within them. It was not long before he found himself the big Negro of the district and, of necessity, of the town. (5)

Noting that Asbury has higher aspirations and knows that the key to his future rests in gaining a foothold in the political machine of America through the ballot, Dunbar's story taps into the ideology of the then recently published *Souls of Black Folks* (1903). Positioned in terms of Duboisian ideology, Asbury, as a model of the talented tenth, begins "wooing the coquettish Dame Law," knowing that any significant presence for himself would have to be made within the existing system. He therefore decides that his place would be within the system of laws that he will endeavor to change. Despite warnings to the contrary on the part of Judge Davis (a liberal, white official), and a friend, Asbury continues to pursue political power. In fact, following the Judge's warnings, Asbury "smiled an inscrutable smile. Then he whispered something into the

judge's ear that made the old man wrinkle from his neck up with appreciative smiles" (6-7). One can only guess at the comments made by Asbury. However, his words lead the judge to respond, "you ought to be white that's all. When we find a black man like you we send him to State's prison. If you were white, you'd go to the Senate" (7). What we see here is a relic of the trickster figure of the antebellum period. Although the representation of the trickster was shifting away from the animal tales of the prior century, Asbury shows as much guile and wit as Brer Rabbit could have and, as a result "he was admitted to the bar soon after, whether by merit or by connivance is not to be told" (7). Thus, we see how Dunbar and other authors took the lead in exposing the evolution of trickster identities within the community and how the Black barbershop became the new briar patch in the literary tradition.

Nevertheless, even as he seeks to reassure the Black community that he will not desert them, proclaiming, "I will live among them and I will die among them," Asbury faces his harshest detractors from other Black leaders. These are men who carefully guard and script Black middleclass ideology; these are the men who the self-appointed elite class. Once he has proven that he will not abandon the community, Asbury finds that as a "barber-lawyer," the masses love him; "they held a mass meeting and endorsed him. They made resolutions that extolled him, and the Negro band came around and serenaded him, playing various things in varied time" (8). When he was merely a successful barber, the Black leadership tolerated Asbury. Once he won a political office, however, they became intent on bringing him to ruin:

> They devised a plot that was deep and embraced the formation of an opposing faction made up of the best Negroes of the town. It would have

> looked too much like what it was for the gentlemen to show themselves in the matter, and so they took into their confidence Mr. Isaac Morton, the principal of the colored school, and it was under his ostensible leadership that the new faction finally came into being. (10)

Such a reaction serves notice of the immense play for power that the Black barber faced at this point in history. Bristol clearly reveals in his text that as far as the rise of the Black middle class goes, barbers, historically, were better off financially than most other African Americans due to the lucrative nature of their trade. As a result, these men were often the brokers of power in the community. What Asbury understands early in the story and is able to articulate is that, despite the rally against him by the "best people" of Cadgers, "it's good to be one of the best people, but your vote only counts one just the same" (Dunbar 11). This indicates a level of political awareness that seemed to reflect the historical position of African American barbers discussed in Bristol's text as individuals who understood more about people and politics that they often let on. As a metaphor, the barbershop truly is that window into understanding the rise of a Black body politic. It further is an appropriate lens through which to chart the growth of a Black middle class ideology. As the story continues, Asbury is ultimately tried and convicted of trumped up charges. Upon his release and return to the community, he humbly returns to his barbershop. Unbeknownst to those who felt they had destroyed him, Asbury humbly worked the shop and waits for the opportunity to return to power. In the year that follows his release from jail, Asbury quietly pieces together a political campaign of epic proportions that left no doubt that he still fully knew how to manipulate the political machine in the town of Cadgers. When it comes time for the elections, "it began to rain

Negro voters, and as one man they voted against their former candidates," the men who had turned on the barber. "Their organization was perfect" (30-31). As one of the earliest depictions of a barber's power and reputation in the community, this story sets the stage for more examples of this type of development.

Picking up the torch set by Dunbar, Charles Chesnutt also uses the barbershop to chart the growth of a Black middle class ideology. Tom Taylor's shop in Chesnutt's "The Doll" (1912) stood as the benchmark depiction for decades. In this short story the reader again witnesses a turn of the century scene in a northern city. The Colonel, a Southern Dixiecrat, and Judge Beeman, a liberal northerner, have come together to discuss the Republican Party's platform and the Negro question. The Colonel feels that Blacks are not "worthy of equality" because, if they were, "they would have never endured slavery" (248). He feels that they have "no proper self-respect; they will neither resent an insult, nor defend a right, nor avenge a wrong" (248), which reflects the Southerner's code of honor. In order to prove his theory of Black inferiority, the Colonel invites the Judge into Tom Taylor's barbershop, which is located in the Wyandot hotel. Taylor's shop offers an excellent depiction of the barbershop as a site for remembrance of the turn of the century realities for Black men. The story the Colonel shares in the shop is that, during his youth in the South, he "killed a nigger to teach him his place." The Colonel's intention is to prove that a Black man will not respond to such an obvious insult. Overhearing the details of the Colonel's story to the Judge, Taylor realizes that "he had heard the same story, with some details ignored or forgotten by the colonel" (249). Taylor concludes that it was his own father that the Colonel had killed and finds himself in a position to avenge his father's death.

This is the scene that frames the idealization of Black barbers for decades to come. Realizing this, “the barber heard every beat of his own pulse, and the colonel, in serene unconsciousness, was nearer to death than he had ever been.” Taylor continues to shave the colonel, fighting off the urge for revenge. He knows that the colonel’s identity had been shaped in a time and place where “life was lightly valued, where hot words were often followed by rash deeds, and murder was tolerated as a means of private vengeance” (250). However, Taylor recognizes that to kill at this moment will satisfy nothing. Chesnutt, writing this story for W.E.B. DuBois’s revolutionary *Crisis Magazine*, recognizes the complex situation of his protagonist and allows him to take the high road. Taylor knows that his role as a barber is to work for his people. From within the “whirlwind emotions” and his “homicidal impulse,” Taylor rationalizes that “should he slay this man beneath his hand, this beautiful shop would be lost to his people” and, more importantly than that, he knows that “a center of industry, a medium of friendly contact with white men, would be lost to his people” (251). This is a very critical moment. In his position as barber, Taylor knows he is a mediator between the races and he has been able to do “many a good turn” for others in the community (251). The memory of his father’s brutal murder by the Colonel leaves Taylor transfixed. And now, “under his keen razor,” is the man who killed his father, “the enemy, too, of his race, sworn to degrade them, to teach them, if need be, with the torch and with the gun, that their place was at the white man’s feet, his heel upon their neck” (250), yet it is also memory that stays his hand. Taylor knows that if he allows himself to be consumed by anger and kills the Colonel, the shop will be taken over by whites and all the good he has accomplished will be undone. In fact, this story reveals how history rarely afforded a man like Atlanta’s Alonzo

Herndon the opportunity to speak out in the hearing range of the white community without fear of reprisal. In looking at how the fictional Taylor sees himself, one glimpses how a man like Herndon too may have felt about his own shop and his position in the community. As he looks around, Taylor notes the significance of his shop:

> It was a handsome shop, and had been to the barber a matter of more than merely personal pride. Prominent among a struggling people, as yet scarcely beyond the threshold of citizenship, he had long been looked upon, and had become accustomed to regard himself, as a representative man, by whose failure or success his race would be tested. (251)

These moments within the African American literary tradition deserve attention because they attest to the fact that history alone cannot convey the complex memory of the people who lived the moment.

According to Herndon's biographer, Carole Merritt, Herndon was born into enslavement in 1858 in Walton County, Georgia and following Emancipation took advantage of "a trade traditionally reserved for blacks in the South who could make good money in service to whites, particularly in cutting white men's hair." Merritt goes on to state that "Herndon found in barbering a small window of opportunity, a narrow path to wealth and prestige" (4-5). Merritt also notes that barbering, in this context, "created a distinctive relationship between two separate and unequal orders of gentlemen. The barber was the confidant of men who had knowledge of the inner workings of business, law, and society" (Merritt 44).

> But could the Black barber become the spokesperson for the race? Perhaps only *to* the race. His position allows him to learn the ways to navigate and advocate on

behalf of his community much in the way that Dunbar portrays through the fictional Robinson Asbury. According to Bristol, men like this still had unusual opportunities:

> Projecting an image as harmless, respectable black men, they countered the growing racism of antebellum [as well as post Reconstruction] America; moreover, they acquired the credentials necessary for entering the growing market for luxurious services. White men, raised to fear being corrupted by luxury could indulge themselves at black-owned barbershops, knowing that the presence of degraded black men inoculated them against the enervating effect of decadence. Capitalizing on the desire of the white middle class for distinction, black barbers invented the first-class barbershop, which pampered customers in opulent surroundings. (Bristol 11)

In their studies Ayanna Byrd and Lori Tharps, like Bristol, point out that even during the antebellum era, barbering for white clientele proved profitable for many free blacks (73). But what history cannot tell, according to Byrd and Tharps, is that within the complexity of racial and economic constraints prior to the shops becoming racially homogeneous, "sadly, these same barbers were unable to or unwilling to cater to members of their own race for fear of their white client's defection" (74). Yet, it is very important to note that these men were never fully apart from the community (Nunley 94). Evidence in both the fiction and the facts shows that these barbers did not abandon the Black community. In fact, because of the contact with their White clients, these men seemed more apt to act on behalf of other African Americans when necessary and possible. This heightens one's

understanding of the African American barber as a keen observer of his surroundings. Although men like Herndon and the fictional Taylor were fulfilling a service role, they were deeply involved in politics. In fact, Alonzo Herndon traveled in the inner circles of the Black elite, which included men like Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. DuBois. Herndon was actually in attendance, along with DuBois, at the initial meeting of the Niagara Movement, the organization that would ultimately evolve into the National Association of the Advancement of Colored People (N.A.A.C.P) (Merritt 74).

Inside the barbershop, Tom Taylor finds escape from the violent past of the South. Yet that violent past follows him north, bringing with it that crossroads moment when he must decide his own fate as well as that of the community. It was this moment that he had longed for:

> In his dreams he had killed this man a hundred times, in a dozen ways. Once, when a young man, he had gone to meet him, with the definite purpose of taking his life, but chance had kept them apart. He had imagined situations where they might come face to face; he would see the white man struggling in the water; he would have only to stretch forth his hand to save him; but he would tell him of his hatred and let him drown. He would see him in a burning house, from which he might rescue him; and he would call him murderer and let him burn! He would see him in the dock for murder of a white man, and only his testimony could save him, and he would let him suffer the fate that he doubly deserved! He saw a vision of his father's form, only an hour before thrilling with hope and energy, now stiff and cold in death; while under his keen razor lay the

> neck of his enemy. One stroke of the keen blade, a deflection of half an inch in its course, and a murder would be avenged, an enemy destroyed! (Chesnutt 250)

Undoubtedly, history could not convey this moment with as much passion as the dramatic literary setting chosen by Chesnutt, but that the author chooses the Black barber shop is significant. Placing moments like this in the context of memory in the Black barbershop allows Chesnutt to transcend the anger and rage of one man. It allows him to tap into the untold stories of those men who have been silenced by history, to step aside from the formal restraints of history and allow collective memory to rise out from the shadows and reveal a life otherwise unrecorded. What happens here is that authors like Dunbar and Chesnutt become what Leonard Barrett, in *Soul-Force: African Heritage in Afro-American Religion* (1974), characterizes as a "living witness" (17), though they work in the realm of the imagination. What the Colonel looks upon as African American docility and cowardice is in reality more than a survival tactic; it is revolutionary restraint as a means to navigate the communal reality and advance the cause of the race. Power relations in place historically in America were played out even in the barbershop. This particular case presents a business sensibility as a means of resistance to outright oppression that Taylor puts into play. Taylor at this point represents the materialization of a DuBoisian sense of double consciousness. For both Dunbar and Chesnutt it was important that their characters understand the "color line" that Dubois felt would define the twentieth century.

In terms of Bristol's account of the antebellum period of Black barbering, Tom Taylor, a generation later, existed within many of the same parameters of racial

interaction. However emasculating one may interpret such situations for these Black men, there was critical agency in place. These narratives emphatically position the Black barbershop as a significant place and the barber as the "seventh son" forced to see himself "through the revelation of the other world" (Dubois 8). But Dubois points out a clearly stated summary of the situation:

> The history of the American Negro is the history of this strife – this longing to attain self-conscious manhood, to merge his double self into a better and truer self. (19)

For Asbury Robinson and Tom Taylor there could be no retreat. Bristol notes the true nature of that apparent retreat:

> Black barbers could derive satisfaction from understanding white men better than their customers could ever understand black men. Their role-playing attuned them to white feelings of inadequacy and made them aware that they performed an important psychological function for white men. By debasing themselves, however repugnant it may have been, black barbers empowered themselves in ways largely imperceptible to white men. (102)

Survival in situations of this nature allowed men like Taylor to "establish black outposts in the almost entirely white commercial public sphere" (102). Thus, these "outposts" were sites where Washingtonian diligence and Duboisian decadence could merge and allow to emerge the power and resiliency of Black men at the dawn of the twentieth century.

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Chapter Two

Keeping the Length: Heroic Folk and the Barbershop

Say now hey now Mister Luzana Cholly.
Mister Luzana Cholly one time.
(Watch out because here come old Luzana goddamn
Cholly one more goddamn time and one goddamn time
more and don't give a goddamn who the hell knows it.)
Mister Luzana Cholly all night long.
Yeah me, ain't no body else but.
The one and only Mister Luzana Cholly from Bogaluzana bolly.
Albert Murray's *Train Whistle Guitar* (1974)

Proving his masculinity is a daily chore for the black male.
It can never be taken for granted.
Richard Majors and Janet Mancini Billson *Cool Pose* (1992)

This chapter on the barbershop in African American literature begins clearly aware that a hero and heroism are in no way universal characterizations among and between ideological groupings. As a safe space in communities of African American males, the barbershop itself has served as a cultural platform from which the men and boys inside, over generations, have launched a multitude of their heroes. Using John W. Roberts' introduction in *From Trickster to Badman: The Black Folk Hero in Slavery and Freedom* (1989), the hero, as examined in this chapter, is that character or character type who allows the men and boys of the Black barbershop to create and celebrate themselves through a projection of awareness, esteem, and agency back upon themselves and their situation (1) through others.

Specifically, one character type of the African American literary tradition stands out when dealing with heroes in the Black barbershop. The bluesman as the "bad nigger" figure represents one model of how men in the barbershop cope with their various

situations. Because these situations can and do change over time, the nature of who gets positioned as a folk hero in African American literature and what actions constitute the heroic may seem questionable from moment to moment. Stemming from their experiences in America, as seen in literary treatments, the African American males in the barbershops who create and perpetuate their own heroes out of an African American blues tradition face scrutiny because their heroes tend to challenge an "American" heroic identity that depends on their heroes being the bad guys. Nevertheless, because their heroes serve to "cover cracks" in the larger cultural identity of America that does not address Black men as heroes, the heroes of these men, specifically as witnessed in the barbershop, serve as a projection of the identity the men want as if it were an actuality in their lives (Roberts 2). In fact, the barbershop represents that tangible link Roberts argues is missing "where heroic creation has the greatest interface with culture." In addition, by looking to the barbershop also as a mediating structure within the blues aesthetic, one comprehends a sense of the seldom-discussed creation of the African American folk hero as a symbol of "black cultural identity" created in the very space itself (2). Likewise, the non-tangible rituals and symbols of the space define the cultural space for Black men and also guide their actions in the world in which they create *themselves* as participants in heroic identity instead of having consciously to endure the role of the anti-hero or, at best, the sidekick. Through reading this space in the tradition of the blues, one is able to understand why the badman figure as hero is central in barbershop literature. Roberts argues that "actions" committed by these characters are those that a group "perceives as the most advantageous behaviors for dealing with an obstacle or situation that threatens the values that guide action within a specific temporal or social, political, and economic

context" (5). Therefore, because of these "interfaces" described by Roberts, the heroes created by the men in the barbershop through their literary portrayals warrant further study.

Addressing the creation of folk heroes at the intersection of the blues and barbershop culture, authors Toni Morrison and Albert Murray address the search for folk heroes in the twentieth century, noting the inescapability of the badman as a figure who grew more violent with each generation in the literature of the vernacular culture. The use of the barbershop by these authors as a gender-specific community center of sorts provides a clearly identifiable space from which to study major trends in African American literature's development of the twentieth century folk hero[3]. Both Toni Morrison and Albert Murray utilize this space within a blues tradition to study the men inside and what they represent to the larger African American community. These men, the badman heroes generated in the barbershop, represent the type of outlaw hero discussed by Eric Hobsbawm in *Bandits* (2000), men who are classified by their social banditry, a term that alludes to their willingness to defy the law and ultimately reach a point where they are "considered by their people as heroes, as champions, avengers, fighters for justice, perhaps even leaders of liberation" (20). More specifically, according to Jerry Bryant (1997) in his chapter "Toni Morrison: Ulysses, Badmen, and Archetypes – Abandoning Violence," these men "can be a source of nourishment and liberation for the African American community, leading the more timid into new modes of consciousness, toward otherwise inconceivable choices and identities" (180).

[3] Because this space is male oriented and male dominated, the heroes themselves are male. However, this does not preclude that there are no female heroes in the blues tradition.

Yet prior to the evolution of what would become the badman figure in African American literature and music there were others. During the antebellum period of African American literature, the trickster figure as hero served the socio-psychological needs of African Americans under the system of enslavement. These figures are amply represented in the tradition of the Brer Rabbit tales and the John stories. However, following Emancipation and the period of Reconstruction, the representations of the folk hero evolved to reflect the new experiences and expectations of the people who now had spaces that were their own. The connivance and circumvention strategies of the animal trickster during enslavement, though vital in their historical form, needed to evolve at the dawn of the twentieth century because the means of racial interaction had changed. This period saw a shift in the requirements for folk heroes who now needed to address the coming tide of integration, assimilation, and modernization of America. African American authors found themselves in need of heroes that could deal with the ramifications of a new system of codes and mores underpinned by Jim Crow segregation in a society transforming into, and a result of, modernity, mechanization, and mobility. These new folk heroes who received the torch from Brer Rabbit eventually evolved into a blues characterizations as badmen figures rebelling against authority. While the means for presentation of these heroes initially grew out of folktales and ballads, they evolved into the novel of violence in the African American literary tradition. Much like the music that played as backdrop to their character's lives, this new novel of violence within the folklore tradition represents change:

> [It] did not develop within a tradition of folk heroic creation in which retaliatory actions against the established power structure required

> expressive justification. It had its cultural and expressive roots in the folk heroic tradition that enslaved Africans transformed from their African cultural heritage. Furthermore, the folk heroic traditions of enslaved Africans developed in an atmosphere where destructive material and physical conditions were ubiquitous; persecution was the norm of existence and behaviors against it were accepted as essential to the well being and survival of black people (182-183).

While there have always been examples of individual and collective resistance within the African American community, these may not always have been looked at in relationship to the ordinary men, their connections to barbershops, and how the blues aesthetic influenced them as modes within a cool pose structure. Examining seeds of the blues as resistance in relationship to the role of the barber and barbershop in African American literature allows one to interrogate the role of this space in the perpetuation of folk heroes within the community.

Who Gets Cut?: Framing the Hero Inside the Barbershop

Albert Murray and Toni Morrison both locate the barbershop as a site of resistance and development of the blues folk hero in the twentieth century by locating the barber as hero and the shop as a site of memory for this blues folk hero. *Train Whistle Guitar* (1974) and *Song of Solomon* (1977) thereby allow these authors to capitalize on the barbershop's role in the development of folk hero identity within the blues aesthetic. These novels represent an excellent focal point to examine the evolution of Black male identity and the factors used in determining heroes who can adequately meet the needs of a folk community willing to engage violence with violence.

Jerry Bryant points out in *Victims and Heroes* (1997) that if Morrison's *Song of Solomon* is indeed the 'epilogue' for the next generation of African American novels of violence, what she brings to the debate over the most appropriate ways to address Black identity in the face of violence in the African American community is very eye opening. This occurs because of the symbolic significance of what the barbershop represents in the African American folk community. That symbolism is deeply engrained in the need to personify resistance in a way that allows it to be named. In Morrison's case it is the men of the Seven Days. Having characters that are men, yet bigger in life than the average man, is hope. They are the ones that can strike back and people can all celebrate their actions. In Murray's novel, blues man Luzana Cholly shares this role. The significance of these novels allows one to witness the responses of the African American men in the barbershop to levels of white violence so pernicious that it leads them to respond in kind with violence as well. Utilizing the craft of storytelling to address the world where, according to one of Morrison's barbers, Railroad Tommy, "ain't no law for no colored man except the one sends him to the chair," Morrison and Murray challenge readers to engage in the conversation of how and why heroes are made and celebrated in the Black barbershop and why they are more often than not violent within their own community (*Song* 82).

Morrison and Murray present to readers in *Song of Solomon* and *Train Whistle Guitar* epic quests integral to their individual story's central narrative. Both novels look at the lives of boys and men and the places that shape their identity into manhood. This quest in *Song of Solomon is* that of Milkman Dead and his best friend Guitar Bains. The quest in Murray's novel is that of Scooter and his best friend Little Buddy Marshall, who

are imitating Luzana Cholly, a train-hopping blues man. Even as individual texts, Morrison's *Song of Solomon* and Murray's *Train Whistle Guitar* share much more than the obvious plots that deal with the individual and community's search for identity. Both novels position the barbershop as a distinct lens from which to view the African American folk hero of the twentieth century within a reading of the blues tradition. Additionally, requiring readers to engage with the blues folk culture of African Americans as they quest for a hero type in the twentieth century allows Morrison and Murray both to argue that the idealistic notions of the badman hero in place during the Civil Rights / Black Power movement's nationalistic agenda of the 1960s and 70s showed signs of shifting towards a more aggressively violent type of folk hero that ultimately perverts the communal relationship within the barbershop and the community as well. Nevertheless, even as they use these characters to challenge, they also reinforce a heroic identity.

In Albert Murray's *Train Whistle Guitar,* itinerant blues man Luzana Cholly represents a quintessential folk hero of Papa Willie Gumbo McWorthy's barbershop and the community of Gasoline Point, Alabama. Because of his wanton disregard for a more sedentary way of life, Cholly's propensity for hopping trains represents a freedom that the other men in the barbershop and Gasoline Point do not share. Murray takes this character, the average man (Charley / Cholly), and elevates his desire to travel the open road as an act of resistance to the society outside the barbershop. Murray opens his theoretical book *The Hero and the Blues* (1973) clearly examining the "storybook images of authors as a means in which to examine the 'everyday life' of individuals and groups. These same authors, these "storytellers," are also in many ways able to construct identity

because of the role of each as one who "defines the conflict, identifies the hero, and decides the outcome" (11). In other words, Murray argues that the individual author of fiction is not merely a witness to the lives and stories he or she seeks to retell; instead the author is an active participant in the story who may indeed seek to assist in the ultimate outcome or at least understanding of the situation and the ways and means in which the blues hero is born.

Murray's use of Luzana Cholly as an African American folk hero within the oral tradition locates the barbershop hero functioning as part of a blues aesthetic that produces heroic and at the same time likable badmen figures. In this case, Luzana Cholly shares a tradition with badmen like Stackolee (who were bad enough to go into hell and take on the devil himself) and can also endear himself to the community. The way Cholly gets described throughout the novel helps one understand why men like Cholly are celebrated for their bravado. These are the men who would in the blues tradition go into hell and say "devil, devil, put your fork up on the shelf / Cause I'm gonna run this devilish place myself" (Gates et al. 50). Cholly, as a blues man, is held in such high esteem that the men in the barbershop and those in the community of Gasoline Point believe, or at least celebrate the possibility, that he really could, in the spirit of the blues man persona, see through "muddy waters." Cholly is talked about initially in *Train Whistle Guitar* more as a spirit than a man. For Scooter, memories of his hero go as far back as the "wee winking blinking and nod web of bedtime story time." These childhood memories captures the spirit of Scooter's hero, complete with his memories of Cholly's "tailor-made black broad cloth box back plus peg top hickory-striped pants," a "silk candy-striped or silk pongee shirt," a "diamond stickpin," and his ever present scent of "barbershop talcum

and crisp new folding money" (7). His music alone would have made him a hero. But Cholly also won respect because his swagger came complete with a "blue steel .32-20 on a .44 frame" (7). By making use of the barbershop as a site in which to (re)evaluate the twentieth century African American folk hero, Murray utilizes the role of storyteller in the African American literary tradition as well as a blues aesthetic to reconstruct the next generation of the African American folk hero in Cholly.

The Barbershop's role in African American literature rises in value when one asks how it really affects the works in which it appears. Murray writes in *The Hero and the Blues* that men like Luzana Cholly reflect the needs and social realities of the writers or storytellers who created them and that these "made-believe examples of literature" are one way to understand the lives of the people who create them (9). It is important to study a man like Luzana Cholly as literary folk hero within a blues tradition in the barbershop because he allows one to get a sense of the identity that the men in Papa Willie's barbershop seek for themselves as African Americans. One of the main reasons Cholly, as a blues hero, works is because the blues were never *just* about sadness; they were about survival. They were about men putting together a mask through which they could see the world and themselves and not give up hope. The enduring image of the folk hero in Papa Willie Gumbo McWorthy's barbershop counters the mechanizations of the larger society that denies the men of Gasoline Point full absorption into the myths of contemporary mainstream heroes. Not only that, Cholly is important because he addresses the inability of mainstream heroes and those of African American protest literature in meeting the needs of African Americans. These needs and how they impact the novel is fully integrated in the blues as African American experience.

Bigger Needed a Haircut: Protesting the Protest Novel

Specifically, Murray sets out in *Train Whistle Guitar* to counter the burden of social pathology in works like Richard Wright's *Native Son.* Following his critique of the heroes of protest literature, specifically Bigger Thomas, Murray writes that these types of heroes seem to manifest only the "godliness of the dragon" and are allowed by the systems of dragons to "blow off hot air until their sense of frustration is relieved enough or they become bored enough with themselves to settle back down into the routine" (*Hero* 45-46). Whereas Richard Wright's Bigger Thomas may have internalized his pain and anger to the point that it leads to his eventual implosion, Luzana Cholly as blues hero transcends the paralysis of fear that grips Bigger, which causes him to react and kill Mary Dalton. The distinction in the types represented here is that Bigger's act of killing Mary Dalton is an involuntary action whereas Cholly is conscious of his actions and his sense of agency. In fact, to clarify Murray's point about Bigger Thomas, Bigger does not reach a point of critical consciousness until *after* he has violated the written and unwritten laws of society. For Murray, the sociology of the novel is what hinders the text itself. It is a level of critical consciousness for Bigger:

> He accepted the moral guilt and responsibility for that murder because it had made him feel free for the first time in his life; having felt in his heart some obscure need to be at home with people and having demanded ransom money to enable him to do it—having done all this and failed, he chose not to struggle any more. With a supreme act of will springing from the essence of his being, he turned away from his life and the long train of disastrous consequences that had flowed from it and looked wistfully upon

> the dark face of ancient waters upon which some spirit had breathed and created him, the man with a man's obscure need and urge; feeling that he wanted to sink back into those waters and rest eternally. (Wright 316)

Bigger will "sink back" because he has no sense of the folk community like Cholly. Even as he wanders through spaces in the novel, Bigger never really exists *inside* of anything or anywhere. He is completely isolated. For example, in all of the public spaces one reads him, Bigger Thomas is never emotionally connected in any other way except through fear and anger. On the other hand, Cholly's persona, his very walk, screams attention to his refusal not to be seen as a man other men could look up to.

The outlaw hero of African American blues culture serves to give the marginalized individual staring at a world of prosperity and simultaneous oppression hope, because he too is an outlaw figure. Without such heroes, life seems mostly a chore for the ordinary men who come to the barbershop. While this hope may at times be expressed both vicariously as well as materially, Murray writes "it is hardly wise to proceed as if any nation or community will never need any more citizen dragon fighters who are battle-seasoned in hand-to-hand combat," which means that as long as there is injustice in the world heroes will be needed (*Hero* 48). As long as there are situations that could create a Bigger Thomas in the shadows of life in America, antithetical folk heroes like Cholly will appear in barbershops as "a normative cultural activity linked to culture building in America" (Roberts 4). The normative in this sense is the response that results in abnormal treatment. Thereby the blues will continue to have a place in that culture. Cholly, guided by a blues aesthetic, survives as he wanders through spaces (both urban and rural) in the novel because he has the barbershop and the blues; Bigger dies because

he has nothing tangibly connecting him to a Black masculine community. Murray's position in *The Hero and the Blues* is that his character Luzana Cholly functions essentially as an epic hero in *Train Whistle Guitar* because he represents the kind of hero that is culturally viable and addresses the specific needs of the men in the small-town barbershop owned by Papa Willie Gumbo McWorthy. Murray, as a critic, writes that the work of the author or the storyteller is to connect the reader to what the story is about (*Hero* 22). These tales – whether narrated by the novelist or told by a character are "artifact" and, simultaneously, "performance" that depends on an audience. The relationship for the reader is "essentially the same as that of entering the theatre" (22) or the jook joint. *Train Whistle Guitar* is about African American community and how critical mediating spaces such as the barbershop serve as engines of the culture and the community's identity. Because its function heavily depends on ritualized participation, the barbershop serves as stage and prop in the "theatrical fabrication" of the "performer who exists not only to provide entertainment and amusement, but who may also provide specific instruction and general education" to the members of the community (Murray *Hero* 22-23) even among the most isolated. This relationship between the barbershop and the blues works so well because both spaces function through audience / customer participation. Yet because the "heroes" of the barbershop are often the outlaw type, Murray points out that these men do not assume the role of hero "by simply keeping their police records clean and their grade point average high enough to qualify them for status jobs and good addresses inside the castle walls" (Murray *Hero* 39). Men like Cholly become heroes because they are not good, but at the same time they are not evil. They are products of their interactions with the oppressive society around them who refuse to be

crushed by that society's oppression. According to Roberts, they are the quintessential blues men:

> [They]have traveled as champions of African Americans who have been forced to negotiate the American landscape by being quick of wit and adept at detecting sleight-of-hand. To those who have traditionally looked to black folk heroes for models of behavior, the terms trickster and badman are not value judgments but rather descriptions of folk heroes whose characteristic behaviors have historically and traditionally served as models of and for behavior among people of African descent in America. (221)

After all, these "champions," according to Murray, are metaphorical swords which in order to become the best weapon, must be beaten and shaped by the harshness of the fires and the hammer crashing down upon the metal time and time again (*Hero* 38). The Black men who become the blues heroes of the barbershop, like the sword, must absorb and become shaped by the pounding and twisting, heating and cooling of life's fires. Essentially the barbershop serves as that part of the process that allows the men to prepare for the next barrage of punishment they face daily in the world:

> The writer who deals with the experience of oppression in terms of the dynamics of antagonistic cooperation works in a context which includes the whole range of human motivation and possibility. Not only does such a writer regard anti-black racism, for instance, as an American-born dragon which should be destroyed, but he also regards it as something which, no matter how devastatingly sinister, can and will be destroyed

> because its very existence generates both the necessity and the possibility of heroic deliverance. (Murray, *Hero* 49)

While they may never totally destroy the metaphorical dragons, these heroes of the African American blues tradition need the barbershop to keep them in the fight.

Murray's young protagonists Scooter and Little Buddy in *Train Whistle Guitar* want to see themselves as men like Luzana Cholly because to aspire to that in itself represents a challenge to the figurative "dragons" that exists all around them. Murray writes that "as every school boy should remember easily enough, to aspire to heroism is to wish for the adventures of Ulysses, the obstacles of Hercules, the encounters of Sir Lancelot – and so on, to the predicament of Hamlet or the poverty and isolation of Stephen Dedalus" (Murray *Hero* 50). When viewed in terms of the historical moment within this novel, Luzana Cholly manifests the will to overcome, survive, and fight back in ways the other men of Gasoline Point cannot. For Scooter and Little Buddy, Cholly's adventures on the open rails are Herculean and have all the magic and fantasy of a Greek epic, albeit with an Alabama twist. As an epic hero, Cholly provides those nameless, faceless men in Papa Willie's Barbershop the opportunity to say into the face of oppression that one among them can beat the system of white authority if only momentarily but in a way that allows them all to vicariously savor a victory. Cholly's dragon is the fire-breathing, anti-black world outside the barbershop. And for the young and old alike, the barbershop is like a magic storybook to be read, but the stories shared and dreamed about within the barbershop in Murray's novel are not tales of the high seas where the hero slays a Cyclops or spends years on a quest. Rather, these are tales that fall within the community's own knowledge and hopes involving life on the rails and the

city-life far beyond Gasoline Point. Interestingly enough, what Cholly represents with his "sporty-blue limp-walk" is a challenge to the world on one hand and a badge of honor for Scooter and Little Buddy Marshall on the other. Cholly's walk itself tells a story to the men of Gasoline Point and Papa Willie's Barbershop. This walk of his "told the whole world that you were ready for something because at worst you had only been ever so slightly sprained and bruised by all the terrible situations you had been through" (15). Based in cultural realism, Cholly not only breaks the monotony but also assuages the uncertainty of life as an African American male and reinforces the notion that a posture of cool is always needed to survive life on the margins.

Like the American hero of Khalil Elayan's *America's Hell and the Hero's Quest for Identity* (2003), Cholly, as blues hero in the African American literary tradition, uses the barbershop to seek an alternate identity;

> [It is an] environment conducive to his serenity and from which he can live as naturally as possible, free from the constraints of betrayal, treachery, limitation, and one-dimensionality. His energies desire *use*, potential evolved into *kinetic*. In the environments that hinder the use of this energy, the hero finds a wasteland, for it is from the infinite horizons that the energy comes, stored in the infinity of the universe. The energy surrounds life completely, but the wrong forces and environment sap its essence, leaving the hero no other choice but to find a new environment potentially conductive to his development. (8)

Therefore, according to Elayan's characterization of the American (i.e. white) hero, Cholly, as an African American hero also "seeks isolation from an environment that

appears to sever the ties he has with his *authentic* environment" (Elayan 7). He steps out from the world of the barbershop into the "wasteland" of America defying anything and anyone that challenges his belief that he too shares entitlement to those freedoms America promises. The enshrinement of someone like Cholly in the heroic lore of the barbershop provides transcendence of the group's inability to make a stand against oppression as individuals. Men like Cholly, by acting counter to the role prescribed to them by society, offer those at home in the barbershop tangible proof that the things they dream of can in some ways come true. If only by living vicariously through their collective heroes these men see possibilities within their own lives. When Cholly hops that train, he carries all the hopes and dreams of the men who can't go themselves yet still aspire for the "Philamaork-skyline-blue mist" of wherever their dream may take them "beyond blue steel railroad bridges" of Alabama (15). In other words, Cholly harnesses the energy of the Black barbershop, committing to action the desires of the men inside.

Additionally, Lawrence Levine points out in *Black Culture and Consciousness* (1977) that the heroes of African American culture evolved much as African Americans evolved in America. What began as heroes of animal tales during the Colonial and Antebellum periods by the twentieth century had transformed into men like Luzana Cholly who openly challenged the hegemony of white authority and oppression. As the culture changed so did the willingness of these men to fight back openly against white oppression. The shift that began in the early 1900s reached a plateau of sorts with Luzana Cholly. Cholly, as blues man personified, became part of that "pantheon of heroes" Levin discusses who reflect "the greater diversity and heterogeneity that were the fruits of freedom, mobility, and urbanization" (440). By giving faces to and humanizing these

figures in a way that underscores the hero as bad-man figure but is also more complex than just presenting an angry black man, Murray recognizes that the creation of a folk hero like Luzana Cholly happens at those moments in time when the people see the need for "culture-building" as an attempt to "protect the identity and values of the group in the face of a threat to them" (Roberts 5). Among those Cholly would share fame and heroic status with would be men like John Henry, Shine, Stackolee, and Railroad Bill. For Murray, examining Cholly as a folk hero embraces the cultural moment when the blues took center stage. That moment in his novel gets wrapped up with the Great Migration and the shift in Black culture from its rural agrarian identity to the exploration of urban life.

Along with Murray's *Train Whistle* Guitar, Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon* positions the Black barbershop as the metaphorical crossroads in the identity of African American men seeking to see themselves as heroes. While Murray's text seems to look at the early period of the Great Migration of the 1920s and 30s, Morrison's text clearly examines the aftermath in the 1960s and 70s. The barbershop in both novels is neither the white world of laws and restrictions nor is it the world of home, work, or the church. It is a third world of sorts, an in-between space. Put more succinctly, the barbershop is a space for what cultural critic Homi Bhabha calls the "unhomed" (9) in his text *The Location of Culture* (1994). The hero in the barbershop stands as that signifier for African American men of their individual and collective attempt to *presence* themselves as an act of cultural engagement. As a border space for Black male identity, there is within the space "the overlap and displacement of domains of difference – that the intersubjective and collective experiences of *nationess*, community interest, or cultural value are negotiated"

(Bhabha 9). Within this "intererstital intimacy" Murray's blues guitar playing traveler, Cholly, comes across as an exploration of what drives the men in the barbershop to become heroic out of and as part of the dynamics of the space. The conventions of the great American Dream, according to Elayan, result in a stifling of the individual man to the degree that life becomes hell:

> Hell is a place where the individual can no longer live without criticism because he does not fit in. He must conform to accepted social behaviors in order to live a life free from insult or marginality. If he does not, and decides to remain an individual, then he becomes an outsider. And every time he ventures into the heart of America, he must put up with the hell America has become. (2)

The negotiation of this hell by African American folk heroes represents the point that Murray takes to task. Murray stresses the value of community before and beyond all else. For the men in the fictional representations of African American barbershops, this system of disappointment and oppression has become numbing. Cholly escapes the numbing "hell" of Gasoline Point by taking to the rails and the life of a transient. His method of coping within the cool pose paradigm is to resist though action. Inaction, a failure to be mobile, would negate who he is as a man. Likewise, because of his mobility, Cholly must always be prepared for violent situations to erupt when riding the rails. Whereas the men in the shop may have wanted to do the same, it is only Scooter and Little Buddy, two little boys, who actually emulate their hero by hopping the freight train out of Gasoline Point. But as boys, their ambition is not so much about leaving; it is the coming back that they relish, returning to the barbershop as heroes. Once they are on the train, Little Buddy

says, “Goddamit, when I come back here to this here little old granny-dodging burg, boy I’m going to be a goddamn man and a goddamn half” (20). Cholly’s impact as a blues figure on these boys is central to Murray’s novel. To them he represents those far off exotic places that *their* heroes are known to travel: Chicago, Detroit, St. Louis, Kansas City, and Los Angeles. Yet, in that moment of doubt at the implications of leaving home to emulate his hero, Scooter has thoughts of the barbershop. He realizes that he had not truly thought through his decision to leave Gasoline Point;

> How it was actually going to be then. Because what I had been thinking about before was how I wanted it to be. I didn’t say anything else because I was thinking about myself then. And my stomach began to feel weak and I tried to think about something else. But I couldn’t. Because what I suddenly remembered as soon as I closed my eyes that time was the barbershop and them talking about baseball and boxing and women and politics with the newspapers rattling and old King Oliver’s band playing ‘Sugarfoot Stomp’ on the Victrola in Papa Gumbo’s cookshop next door, and I said I want to and I don’t want to but I got to, then I won’t have to anymore either and if I do I will be ready. (21-22)

The boys accept that their adventures call them forth towards their destiny, so they go through with the plan to hop the train and leave Gasoline Point. Like the great epic heroes used to inspire this novel, in the end Scooter too is unable to escape his destiny. Once on the train, Scooter has no more control over his destiny than classical heroes like Ulysses or Beowulf have in theirs. In reality, as the train moves farther away from Gasoline Point and Papa Willie Gumbo McWorthy’s barbershop, Scooter begins to understand:

> You were just there in the hereness and nowness of that time then, and I don't think you ever really remember very much about being in situations like that except the way you felt, and all I can remember now about that part is the nothingness of doing nothing, and the feeling not of going but being taken, as of being borne away on a bare barge or even on the bare back of a story beast. (25)

This "story beast" links the classic tales of the epic heroes with Luzana Cholly and through him to the epic heroes of the African American blues vernacular. These heroes are not your run of the mill "detective study hero." Fantastic as their stories are, they mandate "environmental change through revolution" and counter the numbing affects of limited lives (Murray *Hero* 16). These epic heroes "never acknowledge the fundamental condition of human life as being a ceaseless struggle for form against chaos" but seem to feel that all can be right one day (Murray 16). Even as these heroes may truly be "cripples among cripples," they are heroic because their very existence is an indictment of the system that created them (Murray *Hero* 16-17). Moreover, Scooter reveals that he is not yet ready to fully assume the lifestyle of his hero. At this point, the barbershop has not given him all he needs in the way of nourishment to cope with the world. He has also not lived long enough to intimately know and articulate the blues.

Cholly as blues hero of the barbershop works because he achieves a "successful personal integration as a human being while engaged in action to promote the general welfare" of the community (Murray *Hero* 18-19). The barbershop serves as a theatre where the interconnectedness of Cholly as performer and his audience is nothing more than a fundamental relationship between "instructor and student" (Murray 23), and both

barbers and patrons may have their hour on the stage. The men in the shop, the stories of the men on the walls, and the tales of even itinerant or legendary men like Cholly represent a means to teach an alternative sense of identity that specifically counters that socially constructed identity of African American men outside the barbershop, stereotypes that characterize them as weak, inept, or altogether invisible[4]. Like one reading a book about his hero, the child or man in the barbershop listening to these fantastic stories is " deeply engaged in the educative process as if he were an apprentice in a workshop" (Murray *Hero* 23). *Train Whistle Guitar* shows that the men in the barbershop welcome the boys to listen and absorb all they can because in this process of absorption is the creation of a significant self-identity. Because he has been part of those spaces of the folk community such as the barbershop, Scooter can, with confidence, say his name is "Jack the Bear" and "Jack the Rabbit" and his home is in the "also and also of the briar patch" (Murray *Train* 4). This lesson cannot be told using the abstracted adventures of the storybook heroes that Scooter and Little Buddy were exposed to at school. Instead, like the blues, they can only be spoken in relationship to the experience of the culture. Boys, as well as men, need a hero that looked like them and shared the same history as them. And when the hero of their tales looks like them, they too can aspire for that "sporty trochaic walk" that defines badmen thus entangling them all in the history and memory of the metaphorical briar patch of African American identity.

The figure of the hero in any culture is like the protagonist in a Greek drama, and Cholly as the hero of the African American barbershop recognizes that he can either subdue or be annihilated by the oppression around him (Murray Hero 30). Cholly chooses

[4] As a matter of fact, the Black male in American culture has always been hyper-visible and portrayed as hyper-masculine in order to justify the laws and abuses that have been put in place to control his movement and meaning in society.

to temporarily subdue it. But he also is not completely self-absorbed in his own life; this hero shares a sense of the greater good of the community.

Consequently, when he discovers that the boys have jumped the train with him, Cholly chastises them to the point that Scooter wishes he "could have melted leaving only a greasy spot" (27). What follows for Scooter and Little Buddy leads them to understand what a "barbershop uncle" is and how he is integral to their well-being. He represents that type of man in the barbershop who looked out for the children, that type of man that made parents comfortable enough to leave a child alone in the shop without fear or worry. This is the sense of community that drives Papa Willie's Barbershop. Once he gets the boys back to Gasoline Point, with all the symbolism of a heroic speech, Cholly says to Scooter and Little Buddy to "make Old Luze proud of you. Make Old Luze glad to take his hat off to you some of these days" (30). Without a doubt, it is in that moment that Cholly *acts* most like a hero. As a heroic figure, he understands how important it is to live his life free as a blues man, yet he knows it's important that his freedom of spirit not have adverse results for the next generation in the community. And because he seems to be looking out for the greater good of the community, Cholly asserts a sense of patriarchal authority that seems to say, "do as I say, not as I do," which does not go unheeded.

When Scooter's odyssey picks up again in the second novel of Murray's trilogy, *The Spyglass Tree* (1991), he does pay homage to his boyhood hero, Luzana Cholly. When Cholly in *Train Whistle Guitar* brings the boys back to Gasoline Point "as if by the nape of the neck" like a protective parent, he takes them "as if specifically to the door of Miss Lexine Metcalf's classroom" (Murray *Spyglass* 5). Miss Metcalf, the school teacher

who picks up the instructions of Scooter in his life's lessons initiated in the barbershop, says to him "you will go where you will go and you will see what you will see, so you must learn what you must learn because who, if not you, will do what you must do, my splendid young man" (21). This establishes the point that the barbershop is only a *part* of the larger society. The subsequent knowledge gets transferred out of a blues aesthetic as it reaches beyond any single episode in the text. In fact, these lessons carry over into both subsequent novels in Murray's trilogy.

To an outsider, the African American barbershop may seem to be a bitter or even hostile environment for a child, but underneath the rough exterior of the frankness and the signifying there is a core of goodwill and bonding that Murray articulates in the novel. More importantly, the barbershop is part of the community. In a sense, the whole point of Cholly as a barbershop hero in the tradition of the blues expresses the connectivity of African American life. He functions as hero because he reinforces the idea that despite individual needs and desires, the community's well being is always addressed first. He also represents that even with the harshness of Black life there remains a sense of vitality and goodwill that lives strongly in the spirit of these men. Though he is a wandering man, Cholly is as much a part of the community as any man. He understands that his role in the society is special and that not every man can pull up and hit the rails as he does. His way of life makes notice of the paradoxical responses to the harsh reality of Black life in America. Murray posits that the life of the African American folk hero is "not unlike ancient tragedy, it would have the people for whom it is composed and performed confront, acknowledge, and proceed in spite of, and even in terms of, the ugliness and meanness inherent in the human condition. It is thus a device

for making the best of a bad situation" (Murray *Hero* 36). Therefore, Cholly as a hero challenges readers to understand that the hero of the African American barbershop blues tradition is a hero precisely because of his knack for adaptation. More specifically, men like Cholly become heroes because they embody the spirit of the blues, which in Murray's words allows the hero the affirmation of "his personal equilibrium" in a life that is anything but balanced and is more often than not "a low-down dirty shame" for black men (37).

Train Whistle Guitar engages the blues as that element of African American experience that can sometimes only be expressed in those moments of "the also and also" in the novel. These are moments where words themselves lose all meaning and the emotional connection is the only language understood, much as a deep moan in a blues man's repertoire communicates beyond words. Surprisingly enough to some, Cholly as a blues man reaches out beyond the barbershop to become a welcome agent in the community in an almost unspeakable balance. While some of the preachers and Sunday school teachers taught against the blues (97), Cholly could inspire some in the church to say "there come old box-picking Luzana Cholly playing the fool out of that old thing like nobody else in the world," and they love him and are so fascinated by him that there is "never a word about him being on his way either to or from a skin game, or to a jook house" (98). Therefore, if Scooter and Little Buddy had accompanied Luzana Cholly on the train out of Gasoline Point the dynamics of his life and his role as hero would be altered along with the health of the community. He is a hero because he does make the best of a bad situation yet he cannot be burdened by fear of the consequences either, and yet they love him as they preach against him and against the way of life he represents.

Cholly is more than a man; he must be understood as a connection to and an *embodiment* of the blues:

> Heroism, which like the sword is nothing if not steadfast, is measured in terms of stress and strain it can endure and the magnitude and complexity of the obstacles it overcomes. Thus difficulties and vicissitudes, which beset the potential hero on all sides, not only threaten his existence and jeopardize his prospects; they also, by bringing out the best in him, serve his purpose. They make it possible for him to make something of himself. (Murray, *Hero* 36)

Within this tradition, Cholly knows that his journey will be a solo one. To outsiders he is a badman figure, but he is both respected and feared because, like the traditional badman, Cholly is bad enough to kill a man and then pay for his funeral (13), and because of this the people of Gasoline Point love their hero in their own way. Because they can see through the exterior façade of his cool pose posturing, they say he is "crazy" much in the same way they call him a "fool," which allows them to see and respect Cholly's magical swagger:

> I decided that what they were talking about was something like poetic madness, and that was their way of saying that he was forever doing something unheard of if not downright outrageous, doing the hell out of it, and not only getting away with whatever it was, but also making you like it to boot. You could tell that was the way they felt by the way they almost always shook their heads laughing even as they said it, and sometimes even before they said it: Old crazy Luzana Cholly can sure play the fool

> out of that guitar. Old crazy Luzana Cholly is a guitar playing fool and a card playing fool and a pistol packing fool and a freight train snagging fool, and don't care who knows it. (13-14)

During an interview with Tom Piazza published in *Conversations with Albert Murray* (1997), Murray summarizes why Cholly works so well as a folk hero. He works so well as hero because the "more 'don't car-ified' you are, the more effectively you dispel the blues" (114). Cholly, by living that life of nonchalance, extends his reach beyond the barbershop. What happens is that whereas the other men may come *into* the shop to boast and brag, they ultimately leave that persona inside the shop. On the other hand, Cholly *leaves* the barbershop with his identity intact and doesn't care what the world outside the shop thinks of him.

The stories of someone like Luzana Cholly in the barbershop are cathartic for the community in the barbershop. Because his image is intact upon exiting the barbershop, it's important to the outside community as well. This ultimately produces what Murray terms a "durable synthesis" that is the result of the hero's ability to survive the struggle despite having to move beyond his fallen brethren, those who were eliminated along the way (*Hero* 40). The result is that because he can survive, the community too survives. Again, this sense of communal solidarity intermingled within this "durable synthesis" means that Cholly does not completely remove himself from the community; he needs them as much as they need him. Both Cholly and the men in the barbershop understand that his status in the community comes because his identity is "borne on the shoulders of worshipful admirers." In order to maintain his status as folk hero he must look and act as if he were "capable of the miraculous feats of championship which he has in fact already

accomplished" (Murray *Hero* 59), and they must continue to expect him to be able to do these feats.

A hero like Cholly, for the men inside Papa Willie's Barbershop, represents a *symbol* of black manhood. Without these kinds of heroes in the barbershop, the dynamics of life as an African American male may become too intense. Therefore, the barbershop increasingly comes to represent a stronghold for black men and their heroes, "for not only must there always be someone qualified to command the official anti-dragon operations, but there also must be adequate forces in being and in reserve to be mobilized and deployed" (Murray, *Hero* 48). Yet by the end of the novel, Cholly, as the model hero for Scooter, begins his graceful fadeaway. Having absorbed all the knowledge he could from the barbershop and the other places, Scooter himself begins to evolve as the hero because he has positioned himself to be able to leave the barbershop and Gasoline Point in a way Cholly never could. Scooter's eventual departure from Gasoline Point in the subsequent novels of the trilogy, *The Spyglass Tree,* and *Seven League Boots*, in no way diminishes Cholly's role as hero. In fact, it is the lessons Scooter learns from Cholly that allow him to embrace the knowledge offered to him by the teacher, Miss Metcalf. These lessons are what ultimately make it possible for him to leave Gasoline Point for good and serve as witness to the power of a blues hero.

Living Just Enough for the City: New Haircuts, New Barbers

By contrast, Tommy's Barbershop in Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon* offers the men a completely different sense of themselves and their mission as Black men within

the blues tradition. Not since Wright's Bigger Thomas has a badman character reached into the horrors of Black male identity in America and revealed the consequences of America's oppression on Black men as Morrison does with the men of the Seven Days. Whereas Bigger's act of defiance is more of an unintended accident, barbers Rail Road Tommy and Hospital Tommy are deliberate and methodical in their expressive actions. They have a clear sense of conviction built out of the conversations they have had in the barbershop. From the safety of the barbershop they launch a plan that they feel is on behalf of their community. They use the barbershop as a foundation that allows them to be quite different and still useful as heroic figures in ways that Wright could have never imagined for Bigger Thomas and Murray's Luzana Cholly could not go alone. What seems to be missing from Bigger's life in many ways is that he has no space that allows him to bond with others. Wright's deft portrayal of Bigger is strengthened by the fact that he is such an isolated figure. One reading *Native Son* may see Bigger and pity him, despite Wright's intentions. Yet one could also read Wright's novel and be completely repulsed by the idea that a man could be a part of American society and not be a part of the culture to the extent that he could react in the ways Bigger does. Yet, when one takes the same historical circumstances and applies them to Morrison's novel, the one glaring difference is that these men have a sense of themselves *within* a community[5] yet these men are also isolated. While Bigger finds no solace in his home, the pool hall, the

[5] I use *Native Son* here precisely because of its impact on African American literature. Bigger Thomas represents what Kenneth Kinnamon terms an "Authentic American Bogeyman." However, because he is such an isolated figure, Bigger does not engage the community the way Morrison's and Murray's characters do. Following *Native Son*, yet prior to the publication of *Train Whistle Guitar* and *Song of Solomon*, Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* captured the sense and depth of community inherent in the Black barbershop.

Dalton's place, or Ernie's Chicken Shack, the men of Danville, Ohio (*Song of Solomon*) and Gasoline Point, Alabama (*Train Whistle Guitar*) have the barbershop.

As the twentieth century advances into the pivotal Civil Rights / Black Power era or the 1960s and 70s, the literature about the hero of the barbershop changes drastically. Hoyt Fuller's "Towards a Black Aesthetic" examines the revolution in the literary establishment towards understanding and naming a Black aesthetic that looks at the work of African American writers as they engage the changing representations of Black identity. Fuller points out that this journey for Black writers and their texts cannot go through the "literary mainstream" (3). During the pivotal 1970's the literature of African Americans that dealt with heroes and the community's search for a new identity had to contend with the mainstream naysayers who felt that the characters were too violent, "as if violence is a new invention out of the ghetto"(3). Toni Morrison looks at the barber *himself* as a violent folk hero, thus using the barbershop as a means to discuss Black identity politics and the formulation of the heroes that would become leaders and icons of the movement. Throughout the Black experience, the barber often appears in African American literature as a man of the community, one who always looks out for the good of the group. With this historical perspective in mind, Morrison takes a different approach in *Song of Solomon* in terms of how that role may have become warped as the larger community searched for a new identity, a new sense of its heroes.

Noting a change in African American culture itself, *Song of Solomon* examines this change through the barbershop. The barbers, Rail Road Tommy and Hospital Tommy, appear in the novel when Guitar and Milkman skip school and attempt to buy beer at Feather's pool hall. Once they are scolded and run out of the pool hall, not

because they are too young but because Milkman is the son of Macon Dead, the boys take to the streets. Although the two barbers, Rail Road Tommy and Hospital Tommy, are introduced with an almost angelic aura as they stand in the doorway with their "white smocks" (58), Morrison strips the barbers of everything but the most basic aspects of their identity. In a novel *about* identity, Morrison characterizes these men by what she does not tell. The reader is left to define them according to what is given about them in relationship to their chosen profession and how they are seen in society. The initial encounters with the barbers seem to support the stereotype of a watcher / recorder within the community. As they are introduced in the novel, one of the barbers leans on the doorframe of the barbershop while the other sits relaxed looking out the window at the world (58). Having skipped school that day, the young Milkman and Guitar, who are seated on a bench outside the barbershop, face the inquiry of the barbers. Hospital Tommy says, "Have the halls of academe crumbled, Guitar?" (58). As the conversation continues, Morrison wastes no time distinguishing these barbers from men like Tom Taylor[6] in Charles Chesnutt's "The Doll" -- who represented the African American barber persona for generations. She also makes it clear that this shop is very much unlike that of Papa Willie's shop in Murray's novels. Breaking from the tradition of the mild-mannered soft-spoken barber of prior generations, Morrison's barber Railroad Tommy vents his frustrations in the barbershop. When the young Guitar tries to explain his anger for not being allowed to buy a beer, Rail Road Tommy explodes, revealing his frustrations as a Black man over his lifetime:

> You ever have five thousand dollars of cold cash money in your pocket and walk into a bank and tell the bank man you want such and such a

[6] Chesnutt's story "The Doll" was first published *in Crisis Magazine* in 1912

> house on such and such a street and he sell it to you right then? Well, you won't ever have it. And you not going to have a governor's mansion, or eight thousand acres of timber to sell. Nope. Never. (61)

When Guitar pleads his case again, Railroad Tommy's response is a terse quip on the reality of black life, "yeah, welcome aboard" (61). The scene indicates a change in the bond patrons once had with such barbers, who were more optimistically passive.

In *Song of Solomon,* barbers Railroad Tommy and Hospital Tommy are used to dramatize the African American quest for a hero that meets the needs of that segment of the community grown impatient with the passive forms of resistance like that of the non-violent movement led by Martin Luther King, Jr. The portrayal of these barbers points out the consequences of relying on hero types that do not remain grounded in a truly communal identity like that exhibited by Luzana Cholly. The by-product of a social construct, the aggression of these Black males may seem unfounded or at worse something to be exploited for gain. The text counters this idea by looking at the causes and situations that would lead men to react the way the Seven Days do in the novel. As a revision of the barber figure in African American literature that incorporates an acceptable tolerance of violence, this conceptualization of the Seven Days effectively results in a text that accomplishes what Richard Wright may not have with *Native Son*[7]. Whereas Bigger's killing of Mary comes as a consequence of overarching fear, the violence committed by Morrison's characters is more ruthless because it is premeditated and more surprising because it comes out of the barbershop.

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[7] As he states in "How Bigger Was Born," Wright created Bigger Thomas with the intent to produce a character representative of the African American experience so real that there would be "no consolation of tears" (513).

Looking at the premeditated response from the men of the Seven Days provides a glimpse into the internalization of this aggression within the social spaces of the barbershop. This aggression gets channeled into a type of energy that propels the novel of violence in the African American literary tradition to a new level. Framing an understanding of the Seven Days as heroes through the lens of Elayan's "America's Hell and the Hero's Quest for Identity" makes it clear:

> The hero ultimately achieves a sense of agony in his trials and his reward is the energy that propels him to the next adventure. In this sense, then, the hero must incessantly experience hell on earth with only the hope of serenity. Perhaps he can be happy only in an existential resistance, a resistance to all that fails to be authentic and all that fails to uphold truth. The hero's desired reward is to live a relatively tranquil life, impossible when considering his extraordinary talents, which yearn for conflict and action. Conflict again comes to the forefront of the hero's existence, for it is an addiction, part of the incessant duel of selves. The hero desires answers to his dilemma, the conflict of identity, but if indeed he resolves the conflict there would be nothing left to fight for, no base from which conflict can inspire the hero to great action. (18-19)

As a result, one sees the psychological turmoil in being a part of an organization compromised of average men trying to *protect* African Americans. Along with the two barbers, the group is made up of average men like Insurance Agent Robert Smith. These men are an exercise in contradiction. Their rationalization is based on the idea of keeping a balance on the violence:

> But when a Negro child, Negro woman, or Negro man is killed by whites and nothing is done about it by *their* law and *their* courts, this society selects a similar victim at random, and they execute him or her in a similar manner if they can. If the Negro was hanged, they hang; if a Negro was burnt, they burn; raped and murdered, they rape and murder. If they can. If they can't do it precisely in the same manner, they do it any way they can, but they do it. They call themselves the Seven Days. (154-55)

Lawrence Levine in *Black Culture and Black Consciousness* (1977) writes that heroes like these "symbolized the strength, dignity, and courage many Negroes were able to manifest in spite of their confined situation." But he also cautions "they too are circumscribed by the limits of reality. The sweet taste of vengeance was usually their greatest victory, and they often paid for that with their lives" (Levine 400). As much as some in the community may want violence to be a means of redress, *Song of* Solomon argues that it cannot work, at least not as mere revenge. Consequently, the men of the Seven Days, like matches in a box, must consume themselves at the same time they serve their purpose.

Roger Abrahams in "The Changing Concept of the Negro Hero" (1962) looks at the function of narrative lore in the African American community's treatment and embrace of its folk heroes. Abrahams writes that for the folk community, their narrative lore, because it is grounded in interactions that position the individual as both "performer" and "audience," allows these tales to serve as a means of "anxiety release by the externalization of some of their otherwise unutterable or unexpressed significant thoughts and actions" (119). For an individual in a folk community, particularly in a

barbershop setting, actively making use of stories and legends featuring violent folk heroes that individual seeks the means to express concerns and issues within the relative safety of the narrative form instead of acting out his own violence. Abrahams goes on to point out that the narrative form is a way for the group to "give sanction to the values of the community" and teach at the same moment that one learns. The novel, rather than look at how the community functions through vicariously living through its heroes, examines the sociopathic liabilities of Rail Road Tommy and Hospital Tommy, thereby positing the notion that men like this cannot mature into full-fledged heroes for the African American community even if they potentially represent anchors of the community. The men of the Seven Days ultimately fail as heroes because even in their abstract form they are irreversibly dangerous to the community. In reality, these men can't rationalize their existence as a group outside the barbershop to anyone but themselves. Even as Guitar tries to explain what the Seven Days is all about, he cuts to the core of the community's unwillingness to support or admire this manifestation of violent men. While they were never the initiators of violence against whites, the fact that "they are indifferent as rain" when it comes time to kill is hard to accept (155).

In the end, however, through the eyes of the community, they become just like the people they hate – cold-blooded killers. Inside Tommy's barbershop, the men of *Song of Solomon* as the men of the community work through their response to the violence of the outside world. Morrison dramatizes that retaliatory violence is not as practical as its proponents believe it to be. The men of the Seven Days are used to interrogate the development of the African American folk hero who seeks a return to the community's sense of wholeness. Morrison, through these men, examines the motivation of men like

Railroad and Hospital Tommy to uncover the logic of their pernicious violence, which comes as a result of the racialized trauma of their experiences in America. According to J. Brooks Bouson's *Quiet as it's Kept: Shame, Trauma, and Race in the Novels of Toni Morrison* (2000), these men serve as witnesses to "the haunting and driven quality of traumatic and humiliated memory as she depicts the 'rememories' – that is, spontaneous recurrences of the past – that plague [Morrison's] characters"(3). One of the most horrific scenes in the novel takes readers inside the hearts and minds of these men as they try to process for themselves the full meaning of the death of Emmett Till. Through locating this historical moment within the memory of the novel, Morrison provides a visceral look at the larger meaning for the men that day in Tommy's Barbershop as they reflect on their own lives and the horrors they face as Black men. As they trade their "tales of atrocities" it becomes a "litany of personal humiliation, outrage, and anger" that, when they used humor as a salve, became stories of the "speed with which they had run, the pose they had assumed, the ruse they had invented to escape or decrease some threat to their manliness, their humanness" (82). Their life experiences place them into a situation in which they feel they must act as an expression of a restricted sense of manhood fostered by a society built upon the ideals of equality and self-agency yet that imposes upon the Black man an ideology that he is somehow not a part of this system and therefore somehow not a man.

Consequently, readers witness an examination of what happens to these men when cool pose no longer works for them as a coping strategy. These men, inside the world of the barbershop, refuse this position and *within* a system of violence react and respond to claim some sense of agency. *Song of Solomon* challenges readers to judge

these men in a way that almost makes it difficult to do so. Jerry Bryant in *Victims and Heroes: Racial Violence in the African American Novel* (1997) argues this issue:

> What had been a preoccupation in most African American novels of racial violence with the violent hero as a public figure living a life of socio-political protest, Morrison turned into an exploration of the African American male and the brotherhood that helps him to form his identity. (292)

The barbers and the other men of the Seven Days represent a frustrated response to the challenge to black masculinity. When nothing else appears to work, the Seven Days rationalize that they kill only because they feel "there are no innocent white people, because every one of them is a potential nigger-killer, if not an actual one" (155). The result is that *Song of Solomon* forces the community to see the value of working together to maintain a sense of balance in its desire for resistance and the establishment of a sense of manhood formed not out of a pure hatred for whites but a love of self. Guitar says to Milkman that his whole "life is love" (160), which is in the end the same thing that Murray asks of his readers in *Train Whistle Guitar* through Scooter's relationship with Cholly. But these men are not glorified in the killing they do. Hospital Tommy actually cautions that the reality of killing someone is not like the movies; on the contrary, he says, "killing anybody is hard" (100-101). Later in another conversation with Milkman, Guitar tries again to clarify this point on behalf of the barbers and the other members of the group.

> If there was anything like or near justice or courts when a cracker kills a Negro, there wouldn't have to be no Seven Days. But there ain't; so we

> are. And we do it without money, without support, without costumes, without newspapers, without senators, without lobbyists, and without illusions! (160)

While Guitar pleads his case for understanding, he is clear there are no "illusions" in what they do. Not even the connection that Milkman makes to Malcolm X inspires Guitar to take on some sense of prideful delight in the killings by the Seven Days. The façade of cool pose itself does not allow this type of rationalization.

Levine points out that these fictional characters "were not merely mechanisms of escape or fantasies that brought relief from a difficult world. They were also mirrors of reality. They paralleled and reflected the changing situation of Negro Americans in the century after emancipation" (439-440). Though the novel does not seem to object to violence as a tactic, it cautions that the level of violence and the pathological nature of the violence used by the men like barbers Railroad and Hospital Tommy serve only to destroy the very community they support in the barbershop. Morrison weaves barbers into this group to allow the novel to juxtapose elements of the community that are inherent in maintaining solidarity and a positive identity against elements that are destructive.

Interestingly, *Song of Solomon* opens with Robert Smith, the insurance agent for North Carolina Mutual Life Insurance, killing himself. This is very ironic because, along with the barbers, the men of the Seven Days are there to provide and protect the *mutual life* of the community. Instead, what one witnesses is the destruction of the community. In this vein, Guitar again tries to clarify why these men should be seen as heroes. When Milkman says that the idea of such an organized killing machine is senseless, the reply he

gets from Guitar reflects on how the men assume the community they represent feels. His words cut to the heart of the type of conversations taking place at the time:

> Every time somebody does a thing like that to one of us, they say the people who did it were crazy or ignorant. That's like saying they were drunk. Or constipated. Why isn't cutting a man's eyes out, cutting his nuts off, the kind of thing you never get too drunk or ignorant to do? Too crazy to do? Too constipated to do? And more to the point, how come Negroes, the craziest, most ignorant people in America, don't get that crazy and that ignorant? (155-56)

What began to take shape at the end of the twentieth century with men like the Seven Days as heroic models is essentially the same thing that happened with the transition from trickster to badman. There became a sense of the need to present a direct challenge to the unchecked oppression committed against African Americans. According to Roberts, transitioning between paradigms of the folk hero, African Americans had to be careful not to support "behaviors that potentially threatened both their communal values and the well-being of its members" (199).

As part of the ideological structuring of the literary treatment of the Black power movement and how it examines the role of the barber / barbershop, the men of the Seven Days apparently considered themselves defending the race. Understandably, if these men share a tradition of resistance with men like Frederick Douglass, Nat Turner, and Gabriel Prosser, it was only a matter of time before the "prophecy" of the violent hero discussed by Eldridge Cleaver in 1968 would be fulfilled. Cleaver writes in *Eldridge Cleaver: Post-Prison Writings and Speeches* that the type of radicalism inherent in the movement led by

men like Malcolm X was an indicator that the "coming of the gun to the black liberation struggle" had changed everything (38). To get a feel for the type of rhetoric that perhaps spawned Morrison's development of the Seven Days, Malcolm X's 1964 speech before the opening rally of the Organization of Afro-American Unity (OAAU) offers some insight into the thinking of men like Railroad and Hospital Tommy:

> Everything in the universe does something when you start playing with his life, except the American Negro. He lays down and says, 'Beat me, daddy.' 'A man with a rifle or a club can only be stopped by a person who defends himself with a rifle or a club.' That is equality. (Howard-Pitney 98)

These men see it as their cultural duty and natural right to balance the violence in the society. Many in the Black Power movement agreed with this type of position.

Among those who commented on this willingness to use violence is William Van DeBurg, who notes in *New Day in Babylon: The Black Power Movement and American Culture, 1965-1975* (1992) that one of the major assumptions that held prominence in the mainstream perception of the movement at the time is that it was essentially a "directionless expression of rage." He also says that the perception would be that because of the high level of volatility in the movement there would be no lasting impact (15). In fact he points out that even though the fight was a valiant one, by 1975 many participants in the movement had been "silenced" by incarceration, death, or drugs. Van DeBurg also notes that during some of the most violent days of the movement, many studies showed that the larger community of African Americans was not in support of the more radical elements of the Black Power movement (17). Instead, there was more support for the

cultural aspects of the movement like the styles of dress, foods, etc., along with the non-violent teachings of Martin Luther King, Jr. What this indicates, as Morrison depicts it, is that while many could *understand* the wrath of men like the Seven Days, they would not have condoned such force, because to accept such a platform would not have been wise for the community as a whole. There were other ways of resistance just as viable that did not welcome destruction to all for the relief of the few.

While the protagonist Milkman Dead tries to evade his obligations to the community, the men of Seven Days seek to fulfill theirs. But because they function as a contradiction to everything they stand for, they fail to achieve anything. The contradiction is that as barbers they are historically representative of the bonds of brotherhood and the welfare of the community. Thus it becomes problematic that these men can no longer resist the temptations of violence. Even more problematic is the fact that if one explicates the names of the barbers in the Seven Days there is further evidence of Morrison's didactic construction of this situation. Her construction of community-sanctioned violence critiques the development of the ideas of irrational thought processes prevalent at the time that did not or could not maintain a long-term vision. Morrison, in an interview with Thomas LeClair, says she writes "village literature" so that her "work bears witness and suggests who the outlaws were, who survived under what circumstances and why," as a means to allow her work to connect to "those things in the past that are useful and those things that are not" as a source of "nourishment" for the greater community (LeClair 370-371).

In her interview with Thomas LeClair, Morrison also appears to address concerns about her use of folklore and myth in her writing. As part of her response, Morrison

acknowledges that for her, folklore and myth allow her to have "uncomplex stories with complex people," and because of this she as a writer is allowed to take on dragons that surround her village. She goes on to say "you don't ever kill it, but you have to choose a job worth the doing" (372). While Morrison does not concern herself with people liking her work or her characters, who are extremely violent, she sees herself as a storyteller telling stories about her village and in this village one gets to see people who have always been "backdrops, stage props" and anything but the "main characters in their own lives" (373) who reach out and demand to be heard.

Later in that same interview, Morrison acknowledges the importance of names in her work. The care she takes in naming the characters grows out of what she says is the "psychological scar" of being black in America and given a name not indicative of one's African heritage. Yet because of what she classifies as an African American sense of "cultural orphanage," the names her characters go by, not their government names, are what connect them to the village (LeClaire 375). These names bear witness to the history of the village. Rail Road Tommy, however, is a clear representation of the Great Migration and how the barbershop may have been a way station for Black men in the new spaces of the cities where they found themselves.

The folktales and myths that *Song of Solomon* and *Train Whistle Guitar* present ultimately challenge readers to examine these stories as initiations and a search for identity. *Train Whistle Guitar* opens with a clear invocation of the African American folk tradition in which Murray, like Ralph Ellison, capitalizes on the folktales of Jack the Rabbit, Jack the Bear, and the mythical briar patch as Scooter begins his search. The

barbershop becomes the metaphorical briar patch of the novel. It serves as protection to Scooter, who seeks to understand and emulate the folk hero of Gasoline Point.

While Scooter and Cholly represent that first generation of African Americans after Emancipation who saw the possibility of the American Dream, following the 1920s, Milkman and the men of the Seven Days, at the opposite end of the century during the 1960s and 70s, are witness to that dream deferred. Men like Cholly were needed as folk heroes in Black barbershops because of the way they defied the system by representing that sense of freedom and adventure promised by America at the beginning of the twentieth century. As a blues man, Cholly sees it as his duty to take that chance and chase his dream of being a free *American* but still intertwined in the very fabric of what it meant to be a Black man in America. On the other hand, the men of the Seven Days represent the release of pent up anger as the century unfolded.

Both *Song of Solomon* and *Train Whistle Guitar* use one of the most sacred spaces in the inner life of Black men to portray the need to have folk heroes, and the model changes even in small backwater communities. They look within the space of the African American barbershop for the kind of heroes that have indeed come to dominate African American folk culture of the twentieth century. These fictional representations suggest that the legendary badman can become either a positive or a negative model for the Black community. With its presiding elder, the barber, as folk hero who shapes his client's heads in more ways than one, the barbershop is the ideal setting to explore the image of the hero who succeeds in or challenges the oppressive society outside the black community:

> As a result of their portrayal of the black badman as a source of unrelieved violence in the black community, folklorists have repeatedly suggested that the black conception of the badman as hero derives from the fear such figures generate among African Americans. Therefore, the folklore of black badmen offers African Americans merely an expressive outlet for their feelings of hostility and violence and not a model of emulative behaviour adaptable to real-life situations" (Roberts 177).

Taking this statement to task reveals that in many cases, the badman is not so much feared as he is respected. His entire identity is his threat potential towards not the community but those individuals who systematically challenge his articulation of himself. As one looks at the actions of men like Cholly, he essentially responds to challenges and yet still has enough respect for the community to understand that children are watching him. The men of the Seven Days, though misunderstood in their use of violence, do see themselves acting for the well-being of the community. Ultimately, these men are heroes in a community torn by its desire to define itself as resistant to the social and political exclusion practiced by whites but also resistant to self-destructive violence in the face of white violence. That their creators, Albert Murray and Toni Morrison, place them in the black barbershop is metaphorically an interpretatively an act of great significance, perhaps suggesting that we keep the length instead of a close cut.

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Chapter Three

Holla Back! Signifyin' and Lyin': Hush Harbor Rhetoric and the African American Barbershop

Each Week, he steps up to the chair,
the closest semblance of a throne
he'll ever know, and lays in
for the cut, the counselling of
older dudes, cappin' players, men-of-words,
Greek chorus to the comic-tragic fanfare
of approaching manhood.
Sharan Strange, "Barbershop Ritual" (1994)

Vorris L. Nunley in "From the Harbor to Da Academic Hood: Hush Harbors and an African American Rhetorical Tradition" (2004) offers critical insight into alternative discourse practices used within the safe spaces of African American identity. As a group functioning within and because of a marginalized identity on the fringes of an American identity, African American males within the barbershop culture indeed find ways to speak a counter discourse against a hegemonic superstructure that attempts to demand their silence. To outsiders, this counter discourse often comes across as unintelligible slang buttressed by loud talking and curses. However, Winston Napier, in his introduction to *African American Literary Theory* (2000) writes that what he terms as resistant signification has long been a part the culture:

> It has traditionally been a defensive maneuver in the formation and survival of African American culture. Such oppositional semantics represents arguably the first line of available systematic counteraction by Africans in the Americas and involves a traditional self-conscious play with language, a ready reception of signifying free play as a survivalistic tool of life. In the proto-deconstructive spirit of a trickster, African

> American slaves, for example, constantly had to deform signature, sign, and context in order to undermine and survive in a world where, leaving them at the mercy of tyrannical whimsy, laws negated the racial equality of being Black. (7)

Napier's statement underscores the importance of examining a culture built on language and one's ability to fit into or become excluded from the mainstream based on the acquisition and use of that language. Black men in the barbershop utilize the discourse modes of the Black vernacular community within a hush harbor rhetorical tradition in order to preserve themselves and their community. In a sense, the use of hush harbor rhetoric allows the men agency and the ability to reverse the trend of *othering* onto the world outside the shop. Making use of the hush harbor's significance, African American authors position language within the Black barbershop as a constructive tool from which Black men build a defense from the outside world. They make the barbershop a safe space by inviting the audience to witness in the ritual of community. Those who can't "hear" the conversations taking place are purposely left out of the conversation.

Looking inside the African American barbershop as hush harbor not only provides a means to witness and quite possibly *participate* in the African American male discourse practice, it also allows one to gain a sense of appreciation for the multiple layers in the complexity of this discourse. Furthermore, it allows for an examination of how this discourse gets encased in cool pose posturing. Indeed, one must first know *how* to listen to barbershop exchanges to understand the rules of engagement. Clearly, there is a performance taking place in these exchanges that has a level of fluidity to it that often seeks no distinction between performer and audience. Fundamentally, because the

barbershop serves as what Erving Goffman in *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959) terms a "front," understanding its role as a hush harbor allows entry into a discourse terrain that many may never have been privileged to experience.

Although there seem to be pathological trends arguing that the Black male in America is a voiceless pawn in the greater culture of American identity politics, his voice has not been totally silenced. Clearly, free speech and the African American male have not always existed in harmony. As the poster child of a marginalized identity in America, the Black male has fought and continues to have to fight for his voice in this culture. One of the major ways he carries on this fight is through intra-community signification processes. The literary portrayals of the African American barbershop as a vernacular site of memory show that this space possesses vital significance because these fictional portraits reflect a reality hidden to almost everyone but those men for whom the barbershop is a site of empowerment for Black masculinity and the Black male voice. For generations, the barbershop has been a haven for countless Black men to chew the fat, tell lies, and bond over the stories of their individual and collective lives without fear of judgment or reprisal. In other words, the African American barbershop evolved from a place to have a shave and a haircut into the place to learn the rules of engagement in navigating life as a Black male in America. More importantly, it became a space to learn the dynamic intricacies of *talking* as a Black man in America and both speaking one's mind and celebrating a unique voice. Although the barbershop itself looks like a conventional public space in the general sense, the dialogue inside is often very counter-public in the way that men are less inhibited to say what can't be said when they are at work, or at home or in the church. The unwritten barbershop code is that in certain

situations what is said in the barbershop should remain in the barbershop.[8] In *Not Without Laughter* (1969), Langston Hughes describes the barbershop as a place where a boy can go to learn and hear "man-talk" (186) within a representative space that takes in an entire vernacular community that bears out the full and complete thoughts and concerns of those within its walls who understand the need for the coded discourse. In this coming of age tale of young Sandy Williams, the barbershop functions prominently in the boy's development. When given the opportunity to work in Pete Scott's barbershop, Sandy is often teased because of his sandy colored hair. Although at first he is troubled by the jokes about his hair, Sandy soon realizes "that so-called jokes are often not really jokes at all, but rather unpleasant realities that hurt unless you can think of something equally funny and unpleasant to say in return" (187). Seen through the eyes of a child, this tradition of toasting tells much more about the value of this tradition. In a world where they too are victimized verbally, the "men who patronized Pete Scott's barbershop seldom grew angry at the hard pleasantries that passed for humor, and they could play the dozens for hours without anger" (187). The value in this tradition is immeasurable.

Ironically, the name given to this phenomenon is "hush harbor" – a term recently rearticulated by Vorris Nunley. Examining hush harbors within the African American community, linguists and authors help understand the viability of hush harbor rhetoric within the spontaneity of the African American barbershop. Jack Daniel and Geneva Smitherman, in "How I Got Over: Communication Dynamics in the Black Community"

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[8] This is a recurrent theme both in fiction and film presentations dealing with the barbershop. Two of the best examples are Albert Murray's *Train Whistle Guitar* in which Scooter is told by Davenport Davis, "Boy, you heard all that? Well if you cunning enough to get away with that [eavesdropping on a conversation] I reckon, goddammit, you also clever enough to know you supposed to keep it to yourself" (112). The other example is from the 2004 season of the "Bernie Mack Show" in which Jordan gets his first haircut and repeats to Wanda things he overheard in the shop.

(1976), explore the vernacular language of African Americans and its linkages to a traditional African worldview and how this impacts hush harbor rhetoric. Daniel and Smitherman explore the use of characteristically African modes of discourse as they are interwoven within African American communications systems. They establish a link between the African cultural legacies and continuities of Black speech as the wedding of various language developments that resulted from the experiences of enslavement. It is well documented that African American discourse spaces, such as the barbershop, grew directly out of the interactions and restrictions of African Americans brought on by their experiences in America which in many cases necessitated the use of hush harbors to speak. Nunley argues for a deeper understanding of these spaces:

> Hush harbor rhetoric is composed of the rhetorics and the commonplaces emerging from those rhetorics, articulating distinctive social epistemologies and subjectivities of African Americans and directed toward predominantly Black audiences in formal and informal Black publics or African American-centered cultural geographies. (224)

Daniel and Smitherman's work helps lay the groundwork that allows one to assert that the distinct space of the African American barbershop plays a key role in the development of Black vernacular language as a site of memory by allowing the conversations inside to serve as acts of resistance. In other words, sites that Vorris Nunley mentions have to be spaces that are to some degree fluid. The spaces themselves have to serve multiple roles so that when resistance is necessary from *within*, there can also be the perception that something else is going on in plain sight. In essence, the barbershop as hush harbor has grown out of the same need in terms of social value the

African American church with its coded discourse. Smitherman's *Talkin and Testifying* (1977), looks at African Americans use of Signifying, Call and Response, and Narrative Sequencing[9] as key features of the speech dynamics of the broader African American community. As a site of memory, the barbershop utilizes these discourse modes in often misunderstood "man-talk" to perform acts of resistance. By examining these vernacular strategies as they appear in Charlie L. Russell's play *Five on the Black Hand Side* (1969), Lonne Elder III's play, *Ceremonies in Dark Old Men* (1965), and James Alan McPherson's short story "The Faithful" (1979) this chapter studies how African American authors reconstruct the complexity of hush harbor rhetoric used in the Black barbershop and its function in the African American male's expression of an unconfined identity.

James Alan McPherson's "The Faithful" makes use of hush harbor rhetorics within the barbershop to examine internal challenges to the impending social changes facing the African American community at the height of the Civil Rights movement during the 1960s and 70s. The protagonist and owner of the barbershop, barber / preacher John Butler, refuses to accept the community's shift away from folk traditions that tended to reinforce community over individuality. Caught in the political surge surrounding interest in the Afro hairstyle, Butler sees that his clientele slowly dwindles as a result of his refusal to cut an Afro or deal with "the process." This one issue has come to be a major symbol representing the larger trends in African American culture surrounding the Black Power Movement. While this may seem like an innocent enough topic for discussion, the issue becomes a platform from which to witness the internal discussions

[9] Smitherman in *Talkin and Testifyin* actually lists Tonal Semantics as a fourth discourse mode. However, that fourth mode is outside the scope of my focus for the purposes of this research.

within the Black community at the time. This story opens with Butler "looking out his shop window on a slow Monday morning. Impeccable, as usual, in his starched white jacket, … a living advertisement for his profession" (76). Nunley's definition of the hush harbors as spaces that allow conversations beyond the hearing of whites takes on critical importance here. The underlying argument is that "'dey some things they [whites] ain't tuh know. Dey's some strings on our harp fuh us to play on an sing all tuh ourselves'" (qtd in Nunley 221).

With respect to McPherson's story, this need for privacy explains Butler's stance against the shift towards full integration and the consequent assimilation of African Americans into mainstream society. The barbershop becomes his battleground and hush harbor though which to engage debate. It is through his engagement within the barbershop that he affects his commentary. However, Butler's relationships both inside and outside the barbershop suffer because of his stance. Those outside the murky windows of the shop, no longer able to stand up to his accusatory stares, now avoid eye contact with him (76). Although Butler is an "impeccable" sign of his profession, the narrative makes clear that the window through which he sees the community is "blurred" by time. Nevertheless, Butler tries to make use of the hush harbor to speak his discontent as the cultural gatekeeper of the community. Specifically and strategically, Butler integrates hush harbor rhetoric through the tradition of Call and Response to propel his conversation. Even as everyone involved "shares a sense of embarrassment" in the fracturing of community solidarity, "in his mind he forgives the workers; but the shiftless, the workless, the timeless strollers up and down the avenue he does not spare" (76). When Mickey, the young boy who frequently plays hooky at the barber shop,

attempts to circumvent the latest of Butler's proselytizations against the shift from folk tradition represented by the more acceptable haircuts, Butler retorts, "maybe you better go on to school" (77). As the mouthpiece, Butler does not speak directly to those in the shop; instead, he chooses to deliver his message by indirection, which Henry Louis Gates (1987) points out as a trait utilized in the African American vernacular community. Tactically, instead of stating the obvious, Butler's comments leave it to the men in the barber shop to interpret his understanding of what's happening to him, his business, and the community at large. By indirectly verbalizing commentary on Mickey's truancy from school, Butler simply provides enough of the thought of the boy’s wrongdoing to silence him; Mickey obviously gets the message as he "slinks back to the chair and sits" (77). Butler, in this sense, does not have to speak in terms of a specific set of words. It is by the characteristics of indirection of speech embedded within the cultural framework of call and response that the message achieves its point. Butler’s rhetorical framing of his statement (the call) leaves the others unable to offer a viable response. Therefore, the speech act lends more power to the message in the word play than had Butler directly stated his concerns. Thus, drawing on the community’s rhetorical strategy, Butler takes the message to a higher level of functionality by forcing the men to first understand the coded message and then, once they understand it, acknowledge the bond that has been formed and likewise broken that he seeks to emphasize. By default, hush harbor rhetoric used in the African American barbershop affords a certain level of intimacy between the men inside the space. This level of intimacy often gets separated out in other more public spaces. Functioning as a hush harbor, the African American barbershop both links and signals the break in the community represented by the men in the barbershop during the

Civil Rights era. As African Americans debated among themselves their personal identity, spaces such as the barbershop became the battlefields for integration / assimilation politics.

Metaphorically wrapped in the symbolism of a hairstyle, the assimilation / integration debate erupted in the Black barbershop. The shift in young people no longer requesting the "down-home" haircut known as the *schoolboy* (also known as the Cecil), instead preferring the more radical Afro, leads Butler to argue his position:

> These whites have bullshitted our young men. Our boys didn't stop gettin' haircuts until these white boys started that mess. That's a fact. Wasn't no more than a couple years ago, they'd be lined up against that wall on a Saturday night, laughin' at the white boys. But soon as they see these white kids runnin' round wild, all at once they hair ain't long enough no more. (78)

Butler’s commentary signals what for him may be a loss of "true" Black identity as he perceives that the younger generation of African Americans are losing their sense of identity in mimicking whites. Such statements, of course, were not shared in a way that allowed White outsiders to see discontent within the Black community. Butler stresses that he is "as proud as the next man," but he does not seem to see the need to follow a pattern of resistance set by "white boys" (78). Upon closer examination of Butler’s statement it becomes apparent that he fruitlessly attempts to use hush harbor rhetoric as an attempt to rally the others. Each of his sentences elicits a verbal acknowledgement of support for his comments. Yet even some of his older customers have already gone to more contemporary shops. Those few left in Butler’s shop remain silent. John Gilmore,

one of the customers, even goes so far as to tell his wife that the only reason he continues to patronize Butler is that she still attends his church (79).

Rallying for his position in the barbershop, Butler argues that this move towards embracing the Afro, i.e. Black Power, will ultimately backfire in the form of a disunited, unmemoried community. Spoken in the barbershop, such sentiments are very important because to speak them in public, outside the safety of the barbershop, would have shown a level of disconnect not meant for whites to know. In fact, one of the major premises of Nunley's argument for spaces like the barbershop as hush harbors allows for the double speak of Black vernacular in those places where African Americans could go when they "didn't want de white folks tuh hear 'bout nothing lak that" (qtd in Nunley 221). Trying again during one of his routine Sunday sermons, Butler again attempts to engage the debate that started in the barbershop. :

> I have been thinkin' about the rift there is these days between father and son; thinkin' about the breach there is between son and son and daughter and daughter. I'm thinkin' this mornin' about old bloody Cain and his guiltless brother; . . . And hungry Esau, just a-droolin' at the mouth, sellin' his birthright for a mess of pottage. (80)

As both barber and preacher, Butler shares his position concerning the idea that not everything to be gained in the forthcoming Civil Rights movement would be the best thing for the community. Thus by aligning both the barbershop and the church as hush harbors, Butler cuts an unmistakable path to the totality of assimilation's consequences within the possible future of African American identity. Through the use of biblical metaphor, Butler questions the motives of Black leadership. Whether intentional or not,

these changes signal a major problem for Butler in his view of community solidarity. Even more fascinating is how James Alan McPherson as author appears to be responding to the call sent out by James Weldon Johnson's *Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man* (1936) a generation earlier. By placing this conversation in the barbershop, McPherson critiques the warning that Johnson's unnamed protagonist foreshadows in 1936 about what may materialize as the African American community shifts towards full assimilation at the risk of getting a "mess of pottage" in the trade for a "birthright" that comes along with being an African American (Johnson 511). As a result, Butler's sermon represents a full circle examination of an identity debate within the larger community. This strategically positions "The faithful" in what Gates describes as a "speakerly text"[10] in dialogue with earlier texts using hush harbor rhetorical strategy in the African American literary canon. Butler's sermon and McPherson's authorial intent calls for a private dialogue with Johnson's unnamed protagonist's message at the end of the novel. As Butler's sermon progresses, the usually anticipated and highly animated shouts of "Amen," characteristic of the Call and Response aspect of Black folk speech in the church, are replaced by weaker, less supportive responses. In a show of defiance, the community *chooses* not to capitulate to his call for solidarity with the folk memory. Not responding to his words, or lowering their tone, they speak more volume than if they had shouted their disunity at the top of their lungs. Challenging Butler at this point leaves no doubt about the statement being made at that moment. This show of no confidence, this breakdown of the traditional Call and Response as hush harbor speech mechanism boldly asserts itself in the barbershop the following Monday. Two very important elements

[10] For a complete discussion of how Gates theorizes that African American authors signify on other texts see his chapter, "The Trope of the Talking Book" in *The Signifying Monkey*. New York: Oxford UP, 1988. (127-169).

about hush harbor rhetoric are revealed at this moment. The first is that these discussions are space transferable so long as the spaces themselves are within the network of hush harbors inside the African American community and the participants all agree on the transfer. Second, because these are dangerous spaces nonetheless, it is important that there be a certain level of fluidity between them in the event that one becomes compromised. For example, Ray, one of the other barbers, suggests that they should begin to do "processes" -- hair-straightening-- stating that, “nobody can say *now* that's imitating the white man." He even offers evidence that "guys on the block" (the cool cats) sport the look (81). Here, the reader gets a sense of another of the hush harbors, the street corner,[11] and how it too gets intertwined with the barbershop. Butler only visualizes the winos and hustlers who sport the "process" only as agents of destruction in the community. He says "it's devils work." Exploring the barbershop’s use of hush harbor rhetoric reveals that discussions that drive to the core of Black identity often play out in the protection of the space. The vilification of the hush harbor rhetoric becomes crucial when the argument between Ray and Butler explodes. Ray shouts, "Goddamn! Everybody done switched over but us." He even goes so far as to indicate that “even the barber schools don't teach them old down-home cuts no more" (84). But where there should have been an “amen” to Ray’s point, there is only silence in the shop. This argument and those countless ones before it create a barren space in the shop that does not warrant discussion in the larger community where “white folk” can hear it.

Daniel and Smitherman point out traits within the Black system of communication that seek to “synthesize ’speakers’ and ’listeners’ in a unified

[11] Elliot Liebow’s *Tally’s Corner* (1967) provides an engaging examination of the street corner and its role in the development of black masculinity among the working / lower class.

movement.” The notion of unity inside the hush harbor produces, as a requirement, “active participation of all individuals” (33). As a result, the relationship under this situation is one in which everyone in the barbershop serves as both performer and audience, creating a vital level of inseparability during communication. When there is no one to offer a response to his call from within the hush harbor, Butler feels violated in his role as preacher and as owner of the barbershop and seeks to regain his voice or withdraw from the space.

Following another failed Sunday sermon characterized by the collapse of call and response, Butler finds himself in the position of the rejected voice of the community. Broken but not beaten, he toys with the idea of accepting the Afro (86). He asks, "'Mickey, what does it [the Afro] do for these kids?" Now in the position to *speak* for the community with "the fire of deeply held knowledge," Mickey responds, "what *don't* it do for you?'" (86-87). Houston Baker, in “Spike Lee and the Commerce of Culture” (1991), offers a discussion of the Afro in this context, stating that the "process" was thought to offer the possibility to "circulate profitably in easy-listening, slick, mulatto economies of the urban ghetto" (242). Which means that from inside the Black barbershop the Afro came to communicate one’s politics. For Butler, the process signals a shift away from the community’s sense of home. This reveals a very great divide within the larger African American community. For many, any divide in the Black community is an issue that should not be shared with outsiders and therefore needs a hush harbor for discussion. The warnings of change continue to bombard the barbershop as the community fights back from within. However, the voice from the barbershop continues to issue its warnings. Understanding the inevitability of his shop’s closing, Butler suggests off-handedly to

John Gilmore, during an argument, a return to the South. He quips "Maybe *all* of us ought to go back" (88). Again there is no response.

For his part, Butler feels a sense of concern about fighting for the younger generation of the community, represented by Mickey. He rationalizes that as the mouthpiece for the community, both in his role as preacher and his profession as barber, he represents a mechanism for the protection of this generation. This is a message that reinforces the call sent out during his sermon on Cain and Abel from earlier in McPherson's story. Indeed, Butler does consider himself his Brother's Keeper. This leads him to feel that if he were to abandon his fight against the shift towards integration and assimilation he would essentially be leaving Mickey to fend for himself. Rather than admit defeat when the community silences him, Butler sets into motion the last act that he can articulate with his weakened voice. When it is clear that the tradition of the hush harbor fails to achieve his objectives, Butler exercises the only voice he has left in a conversation, one to which the reader is not privileged, to protect the next generation. He opts to take the private and make it public by calling the truant officer to pick up Mickey. His intent is to use his voice to protect the boy from falling prey to the temptation of the world outside the tradition of the barbershop. In his ultimate defeat, Butler violates the hush harbor by calling in the white truant officer. Nunley notes that one of the keys to understanding hush harbor rhetoric is that often the discourse used within these sites is not what would be used in public forums. He argues that these hush harbors are "temporary homes of emancipatory politics suffused with particular forms of agency and identity." He also notes that they are "spatialities where Black folks go to affirm, negotiate, and reproduce culture, epistemology, and resistance and to find sacred and

secular grace" (229), a place where the conversations needed to happen out of the public eye.

Having violated the sanctuary of the hush harbor, Butler attempts another call and response situation. Although a response comes, it is not the response Butler seeks. The sermon starts, "we are a stiff-necked people," his voice unusually steady, the music gone. "Our heads turn thisaway and thataway, but only in one direction at a time." He pauses. "We'll be judged for it" (93). From the congregation comes the explosive response 'Who go'n judge us?' 'Who's to say what's to be judged and what ain't ?' 'Who's left to say for certain he knows the rules or can show us where they written down' (92)? Not only has Butler lost respect as the local preacher, he has lost his respect as a barber because he violated the hush harbor by allowing whites to know of the discontent. Ordinarily, no one would dare to question the preacher in the pulpit as Marie does in this scene: likewise, no one would openly question a barber on how he cuts hair as Mr. Gilmore does. These challenges come back to Butler as he sent them out, and we realize that his position of authority has been lost.

A different use of the barbershop as hush harbor occurs in Lonne Elder III's *Ceremonies in Dark Old Men,* (1965) where Elder reveals how the African American barbershop functions in the lives of the Parker family to open up the hush harbor in a constructive manner to the outside world. When Mr. Parker begins to actually open up to his son Bobby in discussing the boy's unwillingness to "break his back for the man," it becomes central to the play that Mr. Parker empathize with his son's position. This scene represents a transitional moment for the relationship between the two men that in the course of their individual lives can only take place in the barbershop. The barbershop

affords an opportunity for the elder Parker to tell his son of a way of life that by virtue of his birth in the North he had not been exposed to. That Mr. Parker reveals the story of this part of his life while sitting in the barber's chair is crucially important. Outside the barbershop they are denied this level of intimacy and, in fact, even denied the expression of Mr. Parker's story. Because they are in the hush harbor, Mr. Parker can open up with his son and share his experiences on a Georgia chain gang. These are stories which none of his children had known before. Here in the hush harbor, Parker shares that experience:

> I Busted some rocks John Wayne couldn't've busted! I was a rock-busting fool! (*Rises and demonstrates how he swung the hammer*.) I would do it like this! I would hit the rock, and the hammer would bounce – bounce so hard it would take my hand up in the air with it – but I'd grab it with my left hand and bring it down like this: Hunh! (122)

The stage directions at this point indicate that Mr. Parker should be fully engaged in his role as storyteller as he allows his mind to travel back to the memory of this time in his life. He indeed becomes so engulfed in the retelling of this episode that he almost makes it seem as if it were something to celebrate. However, the celebration deals more with his ability to tell the episode as a story of survival. Moments in the narration appear so "good" to him that he seems to enjoy recalling his hard life. He's says, "Hunh! Yeah! Hunh I'd say, Ooooooooooweeeee! I'm wide open now! Yeah, baby, I say, Hunh! Sooner or later that rock would crack!" (122). Though the memory of this incident seems almost comedic, Mr. Parker comes full circle in sharing this historical moment in his life and also captures the horror and its impact on the moment at hand, which is the uncertainty of the barbershop's future as well as that of his family. Most significant is the

elder Parker's statement that he broke open rocks that even the iconic John Wayne could not. Parker uses this to demonstrate that even as he was being demoralized by the chain gang system, there were ways he could hold on to his masculinity. To understand these statements, one must see them as fragile moments in which Parker tries to connect with his son as a man. He wants to tell him of his life's realities while at the same time holding on to some sense that he has not been beaten by these realities. These are thoughts, feelings, and memories that cannot be shared outside of the barbershop, because father and son are so heavily invested in their hyper-masculine personas that even in a moment of tenderness, in mid-sentence Parker goes from a tone of light-hearted fun to one that is more serious. He warns his son:

> them crackers is mean. Don't let nobody tell you about no Communists, Chinese, or anything: there ain't nothing on this earth meaner and dirtier than an American-born cracker! We used to sleep in them long squad tents on the ground, and we was all hooked up to this one big long chain: the guards had orders to shoot at random in the dark if ever one of them chains would rattle. You couldn't even turn over in your sleep! (122-123)

Even as he tells the story, Mr. Parker's awareness of his role within the hush harbor as the storyteller is apparent. He becomes so empowered, however, that he declares he will share his experience as a Black man on the Georgia chain gang by having his daughter type the story on the typewriter (124). While there does not appear to be an immediate response to the idea of having Adele type this and other stories, Elder does address the issue.

Though only Mr. Parker and Bobby are in the shop at the time, the story speaks to the possible experiences of the men who would be there later and possibly could not articulate such a story themselves because they cannot break through the façade of cool pose to speak. By having Adele type the story on the typewriter, Parker offers a narrative that testifies to the spirit of the individual and the community to survive in the face of trying times. Recounted in the context of the barbershop filled with patrons, this moment may have been lost in the plethora of conversations going on at the time, and we are made to realize that in the hustle and bustle of the barbershop sometimes the things unheard may be the defining moment in the narrative of one man's life. This moment clarifies for the younger Parker what life would be like for him if he were to give up the shop and go out to get a job -- submission to the system of oppression itself. This is a story that for Parker *has* to be told in the barbershop because he has already been worn down by the world outside the shop. Inside the shop, his memory of that history and the way he tells it has meaning. It has a purpose. In the end, this story and the way he tells it acknowledge his identity as a man and affirm that he has truly lived. Parker uses this story as a verbal declaration of his life for all to know. Though the energy of his *telling* the story may diminish in the written form when Adele types it, that moment of recounting it he shares with his son in the shop will bond them together forever, because he took his son into his confidence inside the hush harbor. Parker seems to realize that once written, the memory will be the only thing left of him; therefore, what he achieves from within the hush harbor is to talk himself into existence. As illumination of Pierre Nora's point in distinguishing between history and memory, Mr. Parker takes command of a story that in other hands would fail to recognize men like him and makes it

triumphant for him and his son. As Harlem was once the symbolic center of black life, it seems fitting that Elder would select it as the setting for his play. However, the Harlem during this period is reeling from a time when all that seemed to have been gained by Blacks during the renaissance and post World War periods seems about to vanish. The idea of Parker's oldest son Theo wanting Bobby to steal a typewriter that will allow Parker to write his stories reveals the need or desire to record the oral tradition of the hush harbor. Sadly though, Theo ultimately gets read as an example of what is lost in the movement. The fact that his motivation for everything is fast cash reveals the constant need to protect the hush harbors.

When one thinks of the African American barbershop and the language within, it's usually loud raucous laughter and trash talking that comes to mind. In *The Signifying* Monkey (1988), Henry Louis Gates explains:

> When a Black person speaks of Signifyin(g), he or she means a 'style focused message … styling, which is *foregrounded* by the devices of making a point by indirection and wit.' What is foregrounded, of course, is the signifier itself, as we have seen in the rhyme scheme of the Monkey tales. Signifyin(g), in other words, turns on the sheer play of the signifier. It does not refer primarily to the signified; rather, it refers to the style of language, to that which transforms ordinary discourse into literature. (Gates 78)

Gates cites Claudia Mitchell-Kernan's clarification of the distinction between Standard English signification and that of African American Vernacular English (AAVE) in denoting meaning. This distinction is crucial in developing an understanding of the

linguistic environment of African American barbershops. Mitchell-Kernan writes that "the Black concept of *signifying* incorporates essentially a folk notion that dictionary entries for words are not always sufficient for interpreting meanings or messages, or that meaning goes beyond such interpretations" (qtd in Gates 82).

One of the more readily accessible means to explain signifying in the barbershop is in the many Toasts recited by the men in Charlie Russell's play, *Five on the Black Hand Side*. In his explication of these speech modes, Gates offers clarity:

> In opposition to the apparent transparency of speech, this poetry calls attention to itself as an extended linguistic sign, one composed of various forms of the signifiers peculiar to the Black vernacular. Meaning, in these poems, is not proffered; it is deferred, and is deferred because the relationship between intent and meaning, between the speech act and its comprehension, is skewed by the figures of rhetoric or signification of which these poems consist. This set of skewed relationships creates a measure of undecidability within the discourse, such that it must be interpreted or decoded by careful attention to its play of differences. Never can this interpretation be definitive, given the ambiguity at work in its rhetorical structures. The speech of the Monkey exists as a sequence of signifiers, effecting meanings through their differential relation and calling attention to itself by rhyming, repetition, and several of the rhetorical figures used in larger cultural language games. Signifyin(g) epitomizes all of the rhetorical play in the Black vernacular. Its self-consciously open

> rhetorical status, then, functions as a kind of writing, wherein rhetoric is the writing of speech, of oral discourse. (Gates 53)

This statement goes to the core of one of the most recognizable and probably the most stereotyped aspects of hush harbor rhetoric in the African American barbershop -- the Toast. As part of the development of an historic African American male identity, the toast has particular merit for the individual male as rhetorical device. Although the Toast grew out of the trickster tales, it is an evolution that contrasts with them in several ways as rhetorical strategy. Among the ways the Toasts are distinguished are the overt uses of profanity, allusions to sexual prowess, and, according to Smitherman (2000), "the hero is fearless, defiant, openly rebellious, and full of braggadocio" (*Talkin* 157).

When the Toast shows up in Mr. Brook's barbershop in *Five on the Blackhand Side,* it happens at a moment in the play when the character named Fun Loving appears. Upon his entry into the barbershop, Fun Loving, the local ladies man, immediately begins to position the conversation as coded communication. As the elder barber, and Mr. Brook's right hand man, Sweetmeat initiates the hush harbor call to him with "Hey, here's my man" (37). It is not enough for Sweetmeat to refer to Fun Loving as his "man," however; he immediately stresses that he is his "main man." In turn, Fun Loving accepts the accolade and returns the gesture back to Sweetmeat in a show of mutual admiration. As the full exchange plays itself out between the two men we witness a toast performance that takes place for the benefit of the men in the shop and thereby registers this as a community conversation.

This exchange shows how hush harbor rhetoric offers participants the feeling of importance, a modicum of respect or deference when none may be offered or warranted

in an outside situation. One should note that the pretended posturing is acknowledged by all involved. Nevertheless, the performance of respect is welcome. The initial conversation between Fun loving and Sweetmeat reaches its climax when Fun Loving analyzes the harshness of street life. Ever the conscious egoist, Fun Loving has no apparent worries, though the streets are "mean." The response from him is "I wouldn't give a cripple crab a crutch if I owned a lumber yard" (37). Sweetmeat's response shows his own brand of verbal dexterity and also how the Toast works. In order for it to work, there has to be an instigation point, the challenge issued by the first person, in this case Fun Loving, to another to match wits. Outside the barbershop they may have found themselves completely powerless and voiceless. Inside the barbershop they give power to themselves. Sweetmeat takes up the challenge, responding through rhetorical strategy with a rhyme:

> "Deep in the heart of the kingdom sticks, the animals had a poolroom but the baboon was slick. 'Til up jumped the monkey from Cocoa-nut Grove. He said let me get me some of this money before this joint close. The baboon said: Man, you want to shoot some pool? The monkey said, I can't shoot no pool, but if you'll pull up a stump to fit your rump, I'll play you some coon-can[12] 'til your rear end jumps."

Although the initial conversation is between Fun Loving and Sweetmeat, because it takes place inside the hush harbor anyone inside at the time may feel privileged to participate. Thus Slim counters Sweetmeat's invitation and signifies on him with, "I don't have time right now, but I don't see why you want to play me, Sweetmeat. You know what happened the last time we played. The score was three to three. You lost three and I

[12] Coon-can is a card game very similar to rummy.

won three" (37). Though it seems empty of any real meaning, this exchange is loaded with significance. First of all, the men's apparent need to build up one another is very important within the barbershop. The exchange shows the men in the hush harbor empowering one another through rhetorical signifying. This mechanism of empowerment begins in the most simple of ways – the initial greeting. Sweetmeat's "What's happening, Fun Loving?" is met with "What you want to happen, baby?" which allows each man to offer to the other the idea that he is in control of his life instead of the perpetual feeling of being acted upon by society. It is a system of self-reflective agency-sharing.

Later in the same day, the men present a slight variation to the hush harbor rhetoric inside the barbershop. As in the earlier scene, Sweetmeat opens this dialogue. This time he addresses his comments to Rolls Royce, the local numbers runner.

> SWEETMEAT. Hey, Here comes Rolls Royce. How are you doing, Rolls Royce?
>
> ROLLS ROYCE. As the rooster crowed, those who stood before the bar shouted: Open the door! You know what a little time we have to stay. And once departed, we return no more. What number are you investing in today, Mr. John Henry Brooks?
>
> MR. BROOKS. 333.
>
> ROLLS ROYCE. Thank you, sir. Waste not your time in vain pursuit of this and that endeavor. Groove wit the Grape! For 'tis better to be happy with the fruitful grape than sadden after none or bitter fruit. Mr. Sweetmeat.

SWEETMEAT. 505. And give me a three-way combination on that, please, sir.

ROLLS ROYCE. Bless you, sirs. (*Addresses* SLIM, *who does not play the numbers*.) Ah, make the most of the time that you have. Before you, too, into dust descend. Dust to dust and under dust to lie. Without songs. Without singers. Without wine. Without end! Yes, when I was young I did eagerly visit philosophers and saints. And I heard great arguments about this and that. But every time I came out of the same door that I went in. (*Proceeds to* FUN LOVING.) And if the wine you drink, if the lips you press, end just the way they started, ‘tis a small matter. Then think. You are today what you were yesterday. Tomorrow you shall not be less. Yes, Fun Loving?

FUN LOVING. 456. And an extra five dollars on the four to lead.

ROLLS ROYCE. (*Takes a wine bottle from his hip pocket.*) We are no other than a moving row of magic shadow shapes that come and go around and around a sun-shaped lantern held in the night by the master of show. (*He emerges from the closet, walking fast. He points a finger at each person he passes.*) Fun Loving, 456, with an extra five dollars on the four to lead, right?

FUN LOVING. Right!

ROLLS ROYCE. (*Stops in front of* SLIM.) My man! Come fill the cup, and in the fire of spring your winter garment of repentance fling. The bird of time has but a little while to flutter, and the bird is on his flight.

As hush harbor rhetoric goes, this is a manipulation of language into a coded discourse that on the one hand pulls the speakers closer. It allows a level of intimacy not fully shared outside the space of the harbor. On the other hand, this rhetorical zone prevents outsiders entry into the conversation. In this particular case, Rolls Royce chooses to modify and rearticulate very significant passages of the "Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam" in order to address the fleeting nature of life.[13] Yet these words also speak to the larger issues faced by men outside the barbershop as well. This presents a powerful interplay of hush harbor relativity. If, as a Black man, in this space, he is able to articulate the reality that one is born only to die, the power of this realization is indeed to live that life which one has to the fullest. The men come into the shop with troubles of the world upon their shoulders, and Rolls Royce offers them hope through the numbers, but through the power of his words he provides a knowledge that no matter how one lives, the end result will be the same, and therefore it is the *moment* that matters, which in itself is an act of resistance.

As he moves to leave the barbershop, Rolls Royce closes with, "And lately, by the open door came shining through the dusk an angel shape bearing a huge vessel on her shoulder. And she offered me a taste from it. And it was the Grape!" (41). Thus Rolls Royce signifies on the world outside the shop. This is part of the vital essence of the African American barbershop; it allows each man the opportunity to speak freely inside and to look outside and comment on the world. For many, the world outside the shop does not offer such an opportunity. Therefore, the barbershop as hush harbor provides a

[13] I am referencing Edward Fitzgerald's translation of the *Rubaiyat* as published in *Literature in Translation. Revised Edition.* Stith Thompson and John Gassner. Eds. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1964.

locus of verbal authority where the men initiate a process of dismantling the discourse that defines and restricts them in their everyday lives outside.

Like the poems that Gates mentions in *The Signifying Monkey*, the rhythm of these exchanges is "crucial to the desired effect, an effect in part reinforced by their quasi-musical nature of delivery" (Gates 54). This statement reveals the importance Fun Loving's final scene in *Five on the Black Hand Side*. Not only does he use the Toast as rhetorical strategy to offer advice, he simultaneously provides entertainment by requiring the active participation of the men in the barbershop:.

> In my alley if you're hip to yourself that makes you hip to everybody else. I don't mean to be dipping into your business. Now I've been checking out you dudes talking about women, I'm going to let you peep a little of my game. All you need to get a woman is a strong rap. Hey! What'd I say? Every woman in the streets wants a piece of me. You dig it. They call me sweet Peter Jeter, the womb beater, the baby maker, and the cradle shaker. The deer slayer, the buck binder and woman finder. I'm known from the gold coast to the rocky shores of Maine. Dig? Fun Loving is my name, and love is my game. I'm the bed tucker, the cock plucker, the motherfucker. The milk shaker, the record breaker, the population maker. The gun slinger, the baby bringer, the hum dinger, the pussy ringer, the man with the terrible middle finger. I'm Fun Loving the hard hitter, the bull-shitter, the poly-nuci gitter, the beast from the east. The judge, the sludge, the wimmen's pet, the men's fret, the faggot's pin-up boy. Fun Loving the dicker, the ass kicker, the cherry picker, the city slicker, the tiddy liker. I

> ain't giving up nothing but bubble gum and hard times. And I'm fresh out of bubble gum. I'm the man who walked the water and tied a whale's tail in a knot. I taught the fish how to swim, crossed the burning sand, and shook the devil's hand. I rode around the world on a snail, carrying a sack that said airmail. I walked forty-nine miles of barbed wire and used a cobra for a necktie. I took a hammer and a nail and built the world. Yes! I'm hemp the demp, the woman's pimp. I'm a bad dude. Women fight for my delights. Johnny Rip-Saw, the devil's son-in-law. I gave a highway patrolman a speeding ticket, and sold a blind man a flashlight. Oh yes! I roam the world, God knows I wander. Smoking stuff is where I get my thunder. I'm the only man in the world who knows why white milk makes yellow butter…. I even know where the lights go when you cut the switch off. Now I might not be the baddest man in the whole world, but I'm in the top two. And my father is getting old. (47-48)

The power of men like Rolls Royce and Fun Loving and their verbal dexterity have deep communal significance in the barbershop. Inherent in this communicative strategy is power or the perception of power. Though rehearsed within the hush harbor, it can and will spill over into the larger society. Men like Rolls Royce and Fun Loving earn status in the African American male community by their ability to signify, and the site where they can do it most expressively is the barbershop, because there they find their best and most uninhabited and receptive audience. In a juke joint, such expression might lead to a fight; in a church it couldn't happen. According to African American cultural icon and social critic H. Rap Brown, implicit in this lesson in verbal dynamics is the understanding of the

highly complicated vernacular terrain that African American males traverse. Learning, in this case, is well beyond the type that would have been offered in any formal school environment. For the men and boys within the community of the barbershop, the streets provide little to no sanctuary for those learned only in "reading about Dick and Jane going to the zoo and all that simple shit" (qtd in Gates 72), which itself calls into question the ability of spaces outside the hush harbor to adequately prepare the next generation for life in their own discourse communities.

Reading these renditions of toasts in Russell's play, much is lost in taking the oral to the written form. While the reader may get a sense of the exchange taking place, if that same reader has never heard such an exchange in a Black barbershop or wherever else it is likely to appear, the full appreciation of someone like Rolls Royce or Fun Loving will not occur. To fully understand these men and their use of the hush harbor rhetoric is to witness the performance. In his essay "The Game," Clyde Taylor writes that for Black men life is a game in which the rules constantly change and are almost never in their favor. He argues:

> Black men are densely mythogenic, the object of layered fictions produced by others. Like other mythogenic people – Gypsies, Jews – the legend of the Black man outruns and awaits him through the course of his journey. And like other mythogenic people, Black men are, as if in self-defense, prolific generators of self-descriptive legends. But with the uneven odds of the game, the world more quickly fastens on Huck's Jim, Uncle Tom, Friday, Little Black Sambo, or Uncle Remus – the Disneyish gallery of

> Black malehood – than on home-grown figures like High John de Conquer, Brer Rabbit, John Henry, Shine, or Stakolee. (Golden 169)

Men like Rolls Royce understand this game and use the game itself as a means of establishing masculine identity not only for themselves but for those with whom they banter. But their stage is not the street corner, the porch, the pulpit, the pool hall, the jook joint, the bedroom, or the blues den. The only stage on which this heroic expression can play, where the audience will play back and remember, and where both the performers and the audience take not only pleasure but pride and the enlargement of being, is the Black barbershop.

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Chapter Four

Line it up: Trauma and the Traumatized in the African American Barbershop

> I am an invisible man. No, I am not a spook like those who haunted Edgar Allan Poe; nor am I one of your Hollywood-movie ectoplasms. I am a man of substance, of flesh and bone, fiber and liquids – and I might even be said to possess a mind. I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me.
>
> Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (1953)

> The barbershop is the most influential place that reveals the essence of Black male bonding. Historically, Black men have been taught not to show signs of weakness, or a need for help, physically or emotionally. For some Black men, the barber shop allows them to have privacy with each other. It permits them to talk about problems and express concern about current events. For the most part, it allows Black men to ask for help. In doing so, this opens the flood gates for more information that can lead to solving particular dilemmas.
>
> Melvin Murphy, *Barbershop Talk: The Other Side of Black Men* (1998)

Cathy Caruth argues in *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* that the idea of trauma should be characterized by its implications on the mind of an individual or group. She posits that trauma is not only a mental phenomena but physical as well; it is "an event that is experienced too soon, too unexpectedly, to be fully known and it is therefore not available to consciousness until it imposes itself again, repeatedly, in the nightmares and repetitive actions of the survivor" (4). According to Caruth, trauma, as we see it manifested in the actions of individuals, should be seen as an attempt "to tell us of a reality" that may be beyond our knowledge of that individuals' life (4). African American barbershop fiction written during or addressing the 1980s and 1990s is filled with explications of this "reality" that Black men faced and how this all plays out in the barbershop. Utilizing Caruth's lens allows exploration of the fictional portrayal of African American men during the 1980s and 90s, providing a paradigm through which one may examine Black male survival in America as well as the subsequent

consequences of that survival within the context of the Black barbershop as a mediating structure.

Addressing the issues surrounding how these men face the traumas of their lives and the ways that protective spaces such as the barbershop help this process reveals a unique tension in the relationship between Black men, trauma, and space. Ernest Hill (1998), Nichelle Tramble (2001, 2004), and Gloria Naylor (1998) mark a critical point of engagement in developing ways to understand the effects of Black male trauma and why the barbershop represents a mediating space in literature. They utilize the Black male's very existence in the historiography of American literature as the manifest essence of trauma and traumatic awakenings. Historically forced to seek refuge from these trauma in the quasi-private space of places like the barbershop, Black males could lean on one another for support. However, as Caruth points out, trauma is the reliving of the experiences over and over. For as much as trauma and the reliving of that trauma is often a day to day occurrence for some, it's important to witness this revelation of that trauma in the one space that for many is just as constant in their lives. In other words, it's not enough simply to locate the men inside the shops; it's also important to consider how the shop is inside the men. One important thing the barbershop does for these characters is to offer them witnesses to their lives in a space that has become the imprint of Black men. The reality about the barbershop in the community is that they are everywhere. However, part of the concern is that because they are so saturated in the community, it's almost as if they are invisible spaces for outsiders. Many ignore the potential in the space because they are such common spaces. They are open every day of the week and men go there

often with more frequency and regularity than they go many other places. In some ways the barbershop's invisibility is the result of its high visibility.

Public consciousness directed towards an awareness of problems facing African American males during the late 1980s and early 1990s characterizes them as an "endangered species" in America. This characterization of Black male visibility as being somehow "endangered" points to the "unknown" that Caruth speaks of in her treatment of trauma and represents a further use of a discourse that is ultimately dehumanizing. Labeling of Black males as *endangered* only emphasizes their being seen as a separate "species" from human. Such attempts at identification show that, even as one may seek to address the issue of Black men in America, there continues to be this need to view them as an *other* within the larger American society. By entering into the barbershops through literature, one can hear first hand the tales of lives lost and dreams deferred.

Nevertheless, while the notion of an "endangered species" may come across as dated political jargon, the reality in countless literary depictions of African American communities was, and in many ways continues to be, a generation filled with shell-shocked African American men and boys due to the violence and self-destructive pathology in what some may perceive as their day-to-day existence. These individual novels bore witness to the seemingly unending bloodbath of the 1980s and 90s in America triggered in part by growing unemployment, a lack of education, and the cataclysmic infusion of drugs into communities throughout the country. According to Caruth, it is important to know when dealing with victims of trauma that it is "not only the reality of the violent event but also the reality of the way that its violence has not yet been fully known" (5) that must be considered when dealing with a specific population.

Having grown up in the throes of continuous and often violent conflict, countless Black men suffer from the effects of trauma without having the proper space for release. This, in turn, leads to situations that increase the rates of Black on Black crime, drug use, and other internalizations of traumatic life experiences.

Ernest Hill's *A Life for A Life* captures this experience. Set in Brownsville, Louisiana, in 1987, the novel opens with a reference to a mysterious "he" as if this as yet unknown person could be anybody. Established immediately is the fact that this person is "guilty" of a crime and therefore it is understandable that his hands are tied behind his back. As Hill's novel unfolds, the reader is made aware that the mysterious "he" is actually a ten year old boy named Little Man. Along with his friends Beggar Man, Crust, and Pepper, Little Man, trying to escape the summer heat of the Louisiana sun, ventures into the area of the city known as Death Row. Once inside Death Row, the boys go to Kojak's Place, the local bar, to take advantage of the air conditioning. While inside, Little Man falls into conversation with a prostitute who invites him to do drugs with her in a private back room. Later, when confronted by Kojak for the payment of the drugs he had just been invited to smoke, Little Man is unsurreptitiously ushered into manhood as it is lived in Death Row:

> He had anticipated hearing the gunshot. He had anticipated feeling the excruciating pain of a bullet boring through his skull. He had heard the deafening wail of his broken hearted mother, the angry moan of his dejected brother, the pitying words of his friends, and that question that white folks always ask, 'why do these people do this to each other?'" (15)

Although the novel opens with this terrific scene, this story is actually about another boy, D'Ray, Little Man's older brother, who comes to rescue him from Kojak. As "two different versions of the same thing," D'Ray as a fifteen year old and Kojak a man double his age, both respect the street wisdom of knowing that life in a drug culture meant nothing. The only thing that D'Ray has on his side when pleading for his brother's life is the fact that Kojak knew and respected his incarcerated father, Papa World. Nevertheless, they both knew "ain't no kids in the projects," and as such Kojak tells D'Ray if "you ain't back with my money in a hour, you can tell your mama she got one less mouth to feed" (17). Now that he has been thrust into a situation that held his younger brother's life in the balance, D'Ray plans a bold daylight robbery to get money for the one hundred dollars worth of drugs that Little Man and the prostitute had smoked. D'Ray's plan was to steal a car and drive over to the next town and rob a store. However, once inside the store, D'Ray's plan crumbles. The cashier, Stanley Earl, is shot and killed by D'Ray. When D'Ray returns with the one hundred dollars to pay the ransom, the reality of their lives in Death Row prevents them, even at that moment, from gestures of love and compassion. Even as children, their existence in already framed by trauma:

> D'Ray had a strong desire to throw his arms around him, hold him tight, and tell him that it was OK to be scared. But he knew better. If Little Man was to survive the cruel world into which he had been born, he not only had to come to terms with the fear that he was feeling; he also had to learn to use that fear to terrorize others as he had been terrorized. (26)

Following a very restless night, with the thought of the murder he had committed on his conscience, D'Ray goes to the barbershop the next morning. Within the trauma of his life

at that moment, D'Ray fled his mother's home to the "sanctuary" of the barbershop. Once inside he is able to quickly relax and let the scene of light-hearted barbershop talk soothe his frazzled nerves. What he realizes in listening to the men there is that "Life was a game" and to him this game was played with rules where the winners live another day and the losers were used and abused because of their weaknesses. Through the scene's development, D'Ray assesses the crowded room filled with men. He observes them and their conversations on race and society. He finds amusement in them. To him, "people like these were insignificant players who made interesting conversation, but in the overall scheme of things their words and ideas were meaningless to people like him, who lived in places like Death Row" (47-48). The narrator here, through D'Ray, indicts the men generally, for doing what men do in the shops – they talk. D'Ray, on the other hand, when faced with the situation of his brother's death responds with action. Later, when Gus, the Courthouse custodian, comes into the shop with an update on the police investigation of the murder, D'Ray decides to leave immediately. Once outside the barbershop, he gets "that same feeling you got when you played hide-and-go-seek. You had the perfect hiding place, yet you knew they were coming" (62). This sense of paranoia outside the safe space drives him to flee.

Kirby Farrell's *Post-Traumatic Culture: Injury and Interpretation in the Nineties* (1998) indicates that, quite often, specific traumas present instantaneous effects that can be overcome by some. However, "cumulative stresses," such as has been the historical reality of countless African American males, may lead to what some may characterize as "psychosomatic responses" (3). Unfortunately, these historical traumas create very real consequences in the lives of African American males that are readily apparent in Post

Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) symptoms. One can only imagine the type symptoms that real environments like the fictional Death Row leave on their inhabitants. Additionally, Judith Herman argues that "traumatic events generally involve threats to life or bodily integrity, or a close personal encounter with violence and death. They confront human beings with the extremities of helplessness and terror, and evoke the responses of catastrophe" (qtd in Farrell 5) as would be the case in many inner city battlefields. By virtue of the historic violence in the streets in Urban America, many see these places as war zones. Quite often these theatres of war come complete with notions of an *us* versus some sense of a *them*. These "me against the world" rationalizations are all too real and in many cases produce violence and pathology that often gets turned against those who look most like the perpetrator himself. But these battles are made more traumatic in that there often appears to be no beginning and no end to the sense of hyperawareness that is found in a combat environment. In fact, as noted in D'Ray's rescue of his little brother, these environments teach early the fact that "there is a fine line between living and dying" (26). In turn, the African American boys and men who survive in these environments often exhibit very real symptoms of PTSD in keeping with Karyn Ball's examination of war veterans in "Introduction: Trauma and Its Institutional Destinies" (2000). Therefore, one must critically examine the lives of African American men within a reality entangled in webs of violence so pernicious that there can develop, over time, an acute numbness to life. In fact, these constant scenes of violence resulting from warfare can, in some cases, "permanently scar the psyches of surviving soldiers who continue to suffer from the long-term effects of killing and watching others being killed" (4). Consequently, in this comparison, these Black males have lives clearly

symptomatic of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) because the conditions they find themselves in mirror open warfare and its resulting trauma. Farrell's assessment of these symptoms is important here:

> The variety of post-traumatic suffering makes clear how capacious a concept trauma can be. Symptoms may range from paralysis to frantic, disorganized action. They may be intrusive, as when flashbacks, nightmares, or troubling thoughts haunt the victim. Life may feel meaningless and futile, and the victim may become alienated from others. Numbness or depression may constrict feeling, or hyper-alertness may produce impulses to aggression, startle responses, panic reactions, and a feeling of losing control. The victim may suffer mental confusion or have trouble with concentration or memory. Dissociative and personality disorders may be attributed to the catastrophic event, as neurotic conditions, atypical psychoses, and many impulse-control and substance-abuse disorders. (6)

Farrell goes on to highlight three modes of coping with PTSD that an individual may use. They are (1) "social adaptation and relearning" in which the individual is functional in society, (2) "depressive withdrawal or numbing," and (3) impulsive force (berserking)" (7).

Author Nichelle Trambell, depicting the often violent world of the late eighties and early nineties of Oakland, California, through her protagonist, Maceo Redfield, takes readers into a world very much like that of Hill's Death Row community that many know only through the nightly news and forces the act of witnessing. At the center of her novel

The Dying Ground, stands Cutty's barbershop. With the city of Oakland as violent backdrop, Maceo describes the significance of Cutty's shop as a safe space within the turmoil of Oakland's streets. For him, Cutty's "was one place in Oakland that provided shelter if needed and contributed order to an often chaotic life. More simply, it was home" (*Dying* 5-6).

The novel opens with Tramble's use of the ghost motif as frame much like Ernest Hill does with the story of Stanley Earl in *A Life for a Life* and Gloria Naylor does with the resurrected Ben in *The Men of Brewster Place*. In her prologue to the novel, Tramble uses nightmares to inform Maceo's life. Yet when he wakes from these nightmares he is quieted by the warnings of his grandmother to "wait till morning" (3). These nightmares shape his life; they frame his chase for manhood. Maceo is guided by two extremes. One is the violent storm of his birth and the other is the relative calm of the barbershop. To really know Maceo, one has to know how these two extremes work in his life. Maceo utilizes a stunning play on words to unravel his birth. He states, "I was born in death when my father decided to celebrate my arrival with a lethal drug treat for my mother. A suicidal combination of cocaine and heroin" (3). It is through this exterior frame that Maceo moves about his life. But, while Maceo reveals that Cutty's barbershop, Crowning Glory, is a shelter in his life, it is not exempt from Oakland's violent reality. But it is also the first and only time in Tramble's novel one witnesses Maceo's complete naming. The opening declaration of "well, if it ain't little bitty Maceo Albert Bouchaund Redfield! That name so tall the boy got to walk up under it and say excuse me everyday of his natural born life" (5).

Although the insults about his height were initiated by Cutty, it is Cutty himself that brings it to a close with, 'shit, Maceo ain't seen hide nor hair of five feet.' He raised his natural comb to his mouth to think for a moment. "No, I take that back. Maceo was about seven feet tall when he was winning all those championships.' And just like that the jokes about my height switched to praise for my baseball career" (6). Inside the world of Cutty's barbershop, "everything and everybody, no matter how sacred, was fair game. Entering Cutty's meant donning a thick skin and readying a sharp tongue of your own" (10). This is only a reflection of the life these men live on the streets. These insults do scar Maceo:

> Laughter reminded me that people often see my height as a flaw. It has been a source of ridicule since I was a young boy, but to me my size is a day-to-day reminder – a reminder to keep life compact and close to the vest. The few times I've reached for the height of others I've been knocked back into place. So I've learned to live as a little man with a big name. And I've learned to smile at the jokes. (6)

Nevertheless, even as Cutty's barbershop in many ways appears similar to the shops seen in prior texts, it paints a particularly troubling look into the world of Black masculinity. As the increase of crack cocaine and the violence that accompanies it take hold of the community, the barbershop too falls victim. Cutty had moved the location of the barbershop five times because of violent events. Each move is punctuated by more violence than the last. Even as the violence intensified and the youth are guided by iconic and ideological movies such as *The Godfather* and *Scarface,* Cutty held on in the barbershop. In fact, at his final location Cutty "had the property baptized by a local

preacher, he installed church pews instead of seats …, and there hadn't been a murder since" (8). What this reveals is that while the interior of the barbershop may be the site where men come to relax, the space itself is never immune to the consequences and ramifications of violence in the community at large.

Because there are some who may perceive the conceptualization of PTSD and the lives of Black males within their individual communities as a stretch, African American authors' systematic use of fictional narratives as social tools provide a glimpse into studying the link between trauma and the lives of African American men. In other words, through employing fiction to address issues in the Black community that may not be addressed in larger social conversations about Black men, trauma, and space, this chapter views the barbershop and its relationship to Black men's use of cool pose in light of trauma studies to addresses the larger implications of the barbershop in the lives of these men and how cool pose itself becomes disabling and leaves the barbershop unable to protect them from themselves. When placed against the resulting numbness brought on in the lives of Black men following generations of trauma in the U.S., one witnesses a desperate attempt at survival in the badlands of America where sometimes even the barbershop is not a safe space for those Black men seeking community and freedom of expression. Using representative fiction to address this issue of cool pose and trauma in the lives of Black men, one sees that some writer's present this space as one that individuals frequent in hope of coping with their lives. But Gloria Naylor's The *Men of Brewster Place,* Ernest Hill's *A Life for A Life,* and Nichelle Tramble's *The Dying Ground* and *The Last King* provide dramatizations that underscore how the hush pose itself can express the traumatic and the barbershop can be no refuge.

Naomi Rand, in her introduction to *Silko, Morrison, and Roth: Studies in Survival* (1999), argues that individual narrators often make use of the dead as a means of processing the experience of trauma. Each of the three novelists mentioned above utilizes the ghost / spirit of the dead to frame movement throughout their respective novels. While both Hill and Tramble make use of traditional ghosts, Gloria Naylor takes authorial license to resurrect her character Ben, who originally dies in *The Women of Brewster Place*. Hill's novel is framed by the death of Stanley Earl, the young man D'Ray kills in the robbery of the store, allowing the memory of Stanley's life to propel his father's actions and D'Ray's rebirth. And finally, Tramble uses the ghost of Maceo's father to frame his understanding of how he was born. The individual treatment of these ghosts allows them to function as detached observers who either are witness to or catalyst of the trauma in the lives of the other characters in the respective novels. Perhaps because they are dead, these ghosts are freer with their feelings. Because their own personal traumas are never fleshed out, these ghosts are used in the novels to provide a better understanding of the living.

Rand discusses how victims of mass trauma function through an emotional state scarred by memory:

> Survivors can no longer believe in or depend on the social order that we, in our naiveté, take for granted. And why should they? Their experience has tainted everything. Even if they readjust to the world and lead seemingly normal lives, history dogs their memory. They can never fully trust in normality. And guilt is their shadow language. (7)

Explication of Rand's assessment in relationship to Black men specifically forces one to consider the inherent reality of the situation. There is no normative collective experience of Black men in America; there is no before. From first contact there has existed trauma. Therefore, the possibility of there being a moment to "readjust" is impossible. Black men cannot "readjust" to an idealized "normality" when the trauma of their experience in America is that very history. The trauma presented in the novels of Naylor, Tramble, and Hill presents itself as the exportation of manhood based on the indoctrination of the silent stoic male, aloof to or indifferent to emotions of anything other than the extremes of joviality or the irrational extremes of violence and trauma. Framed against this idealized masculinity, these novels present the lives of African American men as a result of the trauma that *is* Black manhood's appropriation of cool pose. To a large extent, Max's barbershop in Naylor's text, Cutty's barbershop in Tramble's novels, and the unnamed barbershop in Hill's novel should function within these communities devastated by social-political trauma as a safe space. However, safety only happens to exist so long as men habitually maintain the façade of cool pose, discuss everything under the sun, but solve no real problems they face.

While Majors and Mancini's *Cool Pose: The Dilemmas of Black Manhood in America* does provide a critical perspective to explore the linkages of trauma within the lives of these men in the barbershop, it also serves as a discussion of what disables them as well. For example, Gloria Naylor's *The Men of Brewster Place*, the follow-up to *The Women of Brewster Place*, provides one of the most poignant explorations of Black male trauma and the use of cool pose as a coping mechanism that is a direct result of PTSD. Yet, it is also important that one acknowledge along with Majors and Mancini-Billson

that cool pose is itself often a debilitating mechanism as well. Majors and Mancini-Billson argue that cool pose represents an articulation of agency in a "ritualized form of masculinity" that seeks to offer Black men a feeling of control in their lives (4) as they seek a sense of self awareness. Naylor opens the door to this sacred space by uncovering the trauma-filled lives of African American men and raises awareness of the sacredness of the barbershop in the Black community. Nevertheless, many scholars look at the Black barbershop as an ideal place exhibiting what Melvin Murphy in "Barbershop Talk: The Other Side of Black Men" refers to as a "social harmony:"

> There is an understanding that each man deserves to be respected and treated with dignity. It is intriguing to observe that there is no need for any pressure, or persuasion to want or to have social harmony when in the barber shop. It is something that happens automatically between Black men. It is harmony and solidarity being established on its own accord. (Murphy 30)

Thus if one were to accept this idealistic vision of the barbershop, a critical disjuncture takes place which continues to jeopardize Black men in one of the few spaces one would expect there would be the greatest sense of protection. Accepting the barbershop as a safe space within the parameters of the African American community necessitates a preliminary discussion about what exactly Black men need to be "safe" from and how this need manifests trauma in their daily lives through an unchecked use of cool pose.

As a consequence of the often traumatic lives of African American men, extreme expressions of incapacitating anxiety reach tangible form in the interactions of Black men among one another. Because it is still mainly a male space, the barbershop is open to this

trauma in more ways than other spaces are likely to be. In an attempt to address such an issue in Black male social interactions, fiction writers have looked within this space because topics such as Black male trauma and its causes are not discussed elsewhere and need to be discussed. If the African American barbershop's function as a hush harbor in the traditional sense is to remain valid, Black men need to establish a critical consciousness with regard to utilizing the potential of this space. Yet, it is *because* the world outside the barbershop comes with the constraints on Black male identity, one would suppose that the thick skin and "cool pose" of Black men would be set aside in the shop. Several authors have, however, challenged this view. While the reality of the American political landscape that decides who can and cannot have voice continues to evolve, these writers ask, does the African American barbershop provide an immediate platform from which men engage the society and one another in a consistently positive and helpful way? What if the construction of the African American barbershop as a "third space" also gets constructed by a deformed masculinity?

The men who live on Brewster Place are as varied as their individual circumstances and stories. They are a sad bunch who find themselves hemmed in by urban blight and decay. Their stories are about individuals who seek that something that will allow then to say "I am a man." Inside Max's Barbershop, in Gloria Naylor's *The Men of Brewster Place,* the men isolate Greasy, the local crack head, by their failure to allow the shop to function as discourse space through which to address issues that may save him from his own demons. These are the same demons that as Black men they all share to a different extent. Rather than embrace Greasy, the men in Max's barbershop punish him because they have looked into themselves and determined that he and he

alone represents the personification of their greatest fear: that despite the promise of middle class status, they too can still fall to the bottom of society. And for that, his audacity to fail, they allow the “winds” to consume him. Seemingly, at this point the barbershop appears to be killing its own wounded, ultimately turning on itself.

Once a successful airline agent complete with family and house, Greasy has slipped into the bottom rung of the barbershop community and society at large. Nevertheless, he still finds enough left of his old self to come into the barbershop for his haircuts. The barbershop community fails to hear Greasy's cries for help. Each day that he comes into the shop, Greasy repeats his mantra, "I'm a man - right Max. I' m a man. I'm trying." However, others refuse to hear his pleas:

> maybe things woulda worked out different if we had realized that was the case with Greasy - he was bleeding inside. But we were so busy being thankful that we weren't him; so busy judging and feeling superior, pitting our halfa minds against his none, that we forgot he was our "brother" and where he goes we go - if we like it or not. (Naylor 163)

Caught in their own fears, the men in the shop choose to let one of their own suffer alone with the “wilds winds” howling inside his empty head (166). Having failed to *listen* to the cries of a brother in need, each man in the shop, following Greasy’s violent suicide, is left to contemplate his own role in the life they let waste away. When the shop opened a week later, Max reveals their response:

> We all remembered what it was like to go home and wash blood from our clothes, our faces and above all, our hands. To have to

> look into our mirrors and lie to ourselves it wasn't our fault. We had not made him the whipping boy for all of our troubles. We had not held that razor to his throat and slashed. If for all the times we had called him brother, if we had really meant it, somehow Greasy should be alive today. But we let him down and let ourselves down as we used him for the garbage can to hold all our fears. (166-67)

Ben's words underscore the devastation of not *hearing* a plea for help within this Black male space. While Naylor's *The Women of Brewster Place* ends with the community of women breaking out from the confines of the spaces that sought to limit them - the kitchenettes, the poverty, and the wall itself - *The Men of Brewster Place* ends with a sense of hopelessness with few if any barriers taken down. The fragmented lives of the men all come together in Max's Barbershop, but they fail to grasp this conceptualization of the barbershop as safe space from which to band together against common trauma. Therefore, the existence of the barbershop as a refuge for Black men comes as a result of their conscious attempts to make it such a space. Consequently, if collectively the men begin killing the already wounded among them, they violate the very sanctity of a space they themselves created. The result of their inability to reach out to one another allows Naylor to engage in a conversation that needs to be had on the state of Black men in America. She brings light to the fact that because of certain notions of African American hyper-masculinity, these men fail to connect with one another in the barbershop like the women do in the pervious novel. Neither of the men chooses to step up on Greasy's behalf when he needs them like Mattie Michael does for the grieving Lucille at the loss of her daughter in the first novel. The women of Brewster Place are characterized as an

"ebony phoenix" that suffer but nonetheless survive (5), the men on the other hand are seen as societal rejects preying off of or perhaps sacrificing those deemed weaker. Case in point, in *The Women of Brewster Place* at the moment when Lucielia Louise Turner (Ceil) needs someone following the accidental electrocution of her infant daughter, Mattie Michael is there for her. For the two women, what follows is a purification rite that the men never find space to offer. Mattie's care and concern for Ceil transcends Brewster Place; it is a cosmic moment:

> Mattie takes her (Ceil) into her childhood and let her see murdered dreams. And she rocked her back, back into the womb, to the nadir of her hurt, and they found it – a slight silver splinter, embedded just below the surface of the skin. And Mattie rocked and pulled -- and the splinter gave way, but its roots were deep, gigantic, ragged, and they tore up flesh with bits of fat and muscle tissue clinging to them. ( )

This beyond time and place bond between the women when juxtaposed with the treatment of Greasy in Naylor's sequel highlights the perception of trauma in the community. The women knew that despite their individual and collective trauma they would be "healed" if they bonded together in words and actions during episodes of trauma, whereas the men become more restrictive with their compassion because of their inability to crack the façade of masculinity that says they must remain silent and continue to suffer in their silence.

Naylor and Toni Morrison in a conversation in 1985 came on the subject of personal identity and the importance of their characters looking within to achieve a sense of personal wholeness. Naylor raises the issue of the larger *human* question that people in

general (men at this point in the conversation) ask: '"who in the hell am I? And what is it that nurtures me, and who is that me?'" Morrison's response exudes a prophetic tone:

> Men can hide easier because they can always be men. They can be abstract, in a crunch, and they seem to know what maleness is. They have a posture for that. They have an idea of how to be male and they talk to each other about the other thing, personal identity. (Montgomery 14)

Morrison argues that it "must be hard for men to confide in one another, not incidents that happen to them, but to confide that other life that's not *male*. "That's hard for them, because they are trained out of it so early in life" (Montgomery 14). Central to this conversation is the understanding that the prevalence of being a "man" is for these Black men, a ghost that haunts them from childhood and the day to day lives of their past. Naylor's characters live in a state of paralysis brought on by systematic attacks from the society that surrounds them. These characters exhibit the results of psychosomatic as well as psycho-cultural trauma. Again, Morrison and Naylor's conversation highlights this dilemma for Black men candidly by stating "It's a terrible burden, because they want to know – when they're little kids, of course, they say, 'who am I?' And then somebody says, 'well, you're a man!' And they try to figure out what that is. That's what they shoot for" (Montgomery 14). The men further traumatize themselves from within this lens because it's an identity they seek throughout their lives. The problem is that the very idea of manhood for them has to be fluid at times and immovable at others. Yet because it is not fixed it is extremely fragile. And this fragility is utterly stressful. The result is that at any moment their notion of manhood can crash and burn, which is what we see with Naylor's ill-fated Greasy.

Her character Ben, also represents this inability to escape the trauma of one's search for a consistency in his masculinity. His story is part of his father's story, and his father's father's story, thus signaling the pervasive level to which trauma is historically part of the lives these men have known. In her writing of *The Women of Brewster Place,* Naylor says that she "bent over backwards not to have a negative message come through about the men" (Montgomery 23). While she did not intend there to be a negative message about Black men, Naylor's readers come away from this novel with views of Black men as weak and completely incompetent and furthermore unlikely to overcome their situation. The same appears true for the subsequent novel highlighting the lives of the men. Naylor may not have intended to disparage the men in either novel. Nevertheless, the result is the same. Telling of the women's survival stories, Naylor in the first novel is left with little choice but to indict the men in their lives. Her indictment cuts so deeply because the truth is that each of the men individually and collectively claws for a masculinity that is inherently flawed.

In *The Men of Brewster Place,* Naylor shows that Greasy is double burdened within this warped sense of manhood precisely because he cannot keep the charade going. His pain is so tangible that he cannot contain it inside, and the coping mechanism of drugs further weakens him. In the very place defined as a positive Black male space, Naylor forces readers to bear witness and share, if only through acknowledgment that Greasy and men like him exist. In her interview with Pearl Cleage, Naylor says of *The Women of Brewster Place,* that she "was trying to celebrate the female spirit and the ability that we have to *transcend* and also give a microcosm of Black women in America – Black women who are faced by a wall of racism and sexism that you have to come up

against" (65). To appreciate *The Men of Brewster Place*, one has to accept Greasy as the voice inside each of the men crying out that they too seek that sense of clarity that can only come with their sense of manhood. By their own acts of omission and failure to reach out to Greasy as he reaches out to them, the men sentence themselves to a slow death. Yet, even if they could somehow know that they had been traumatized they still may be unable to articulate it for themselves. Greasy's death, as horrible as it is, does not warrant being labeled a true suicide. As "blood from the artery in his neck gushed" the men cannot escape their share of the blame because his blood "sprayed all along the mirrors and on every man in the shop" (166). Nevertheless, even after a week of being closed following Greasy's death and despite the memories of having to go to their individual homes to "wash his blood from our clothes, our faces, and above all, our hands," the men never spoke of Greasy that day (166). Out of their own pains and fears, the men neutralize Greasy as a defense from their own personal and collective traumas. This neutralization allows them the pretense that Greasy never existed and therefore they never failed.

Out of his own shame and trauma, brought on by the memories of his past life, Greasy dared to continue seeking that masculine ideal he found in the barbershop. But the negation of his status as a man is practiced as a protective mechanism by the others. Their internalizations of their own psychic traumas limit them from being of much assistance to Greasy as he suffers with his demons. On the one hand, Greasy has been the poster child of middle-class values in the community, with all of the trappings that come with this definition of manhood. He, at some point, had been someone they could look to with pride. When he has lost the elements of what he and the men of Brewster Place see as his

being a successful man, the destruction of his image is complete, leaving him with a life "in which his head was an empty shell" where only "nightmares" were to remain (160-61). These "nightmares" whether or not they stem from his addiction to drugs, are the nightmares of the men of Brewster Place. What remains unanswered is what path led this apparently successful man down the road to destruction and what if anything could have prevented this fall. This could lead one to question, in general, what is the order of priority for Black men when it comes to relationships. Put another way, if Greasy had been able to depend on the support of his family (wife, children, parents) would it have mattered if his barbershop family had forsaken him?

In fact, what one witnesses with Greasy and men like him Eldridge Cleaver characterizes as very problematic:

> It is a type of mental suicide on the installment plan. The component parts of his polarization are constantly gnawing away at his sanity. He has to make myriad rationalizations; but there are times when the mind is unable to come up with the appropriate rationalization; these are the times when the conscious mental aberrations occur, the crushing of the personality under the leaden weight of the inferiority complex, the slow burn of suppressed rage; and these are the times when the Black hand will reach for the bottle of whiskey, narcotics, or what have you, to blot out the insupportable reality which hovers above one in a stultifying cloud of condemnation. (Cleaver 20)

Greasy's fall therefore is much more traumatic for those who may have once held him in such high esteem, because through him they had succeeded. From within their own pain

they can't sympathize with him, so they only berate him with jeers designed to recall and ridicule his past life in an attempt to divert them from their own pains. In one particular attack, someone in the barbershop asks him, "when you gonna put some water on your stinky ass?" (160). Statements like this indicate a complete inability to connect with Greasy's pain. Bringing their own tormented lives to bear upon Greasy removes these men from the protection of hush harbor rhetoric. Like Brewster Place itself, they will crumble bit by bit until there is nothing left. In the end, the true consequence of the trauma in their lives will be that like Greasy there will have been no one there inside the barbershop that could hear their cries for help and offer solace. Rather than reach out from their individual lives, the men retreat within the bravado of Black masculinity, which prevents them from establishing a vital connection, illustrating the dangers of cool pose posturing, even in the hush harbor of the barbershop.

Greasy's personal trauma is further emblematized by the fact that unlike every other character in the novel he never receives a proper name, further signifying his status as a failed man within the hyper-masculine posturing in the barbershop. Not naming Greasy except by his nickname appears tantamount to legitimizing the treatment of the other men towards him. To them he is just *greasy* and they wish to stay clear of his filth (160). Naylor uses this character to show that while the other men act as complete subjects, men like Greasy simply serve as modifiers to the lives and subjectivity of the others who deem themselves successful or rather less of a failure than Greasy. Nevertheless, it is Greasy who leaves the most lasting impression in the novel. His blood stains the hands of all the men in the shop, as well as those reading Naylor's book, thus

acting as the connective from which one can no longer fail to acknowledge the affects of trauma on the Black male in America.

Examining Black male trauma and the lives of those directly affected by it does seem to come with a certain level of frustration. According to Ball, at some point "the public figuration of trauma" within the society itself becomes "a moral missive about suffering that is perpetually returned to its sender" (16). When this type of response arises, the marginalized become increasingly more marginalized in the very success of getting their voices heard and subsequently become silenced by the very voice that gave them an audience initially. Greasy's repetition of "I'm a man" indicts the barbershop as an empty bastion of manhood that he seeks. Naylor, as cultural scribe, uses her text to raise awareness of the devastating trauma in the lives of the men of Brewster Place by forcing a consideration of the real trauma - the fact that men can live and die violently in this safe space and that those who witness it can quickly return to the normalcy of their collective lives, but perhaps shattered within.

The larger cultural, psychic, and political implications of positioning these scenes inside the Black barbershop force readers to bear witness, from within this space, to the levels and prevalence of the historical trauma these men face and their cries for help. Yet even from *within*, and perhaps because of the trauma in their lives, these men continue to seek subjectivity themselves, because they need the same affirmation as Greasy: "I'm a man. Right?"

These lives represent the potential heights of Black masculine achievement. Their individual and collective fall represents the extent Black men become lost in this quest for a small piece of a constrictive masculinity. That these ascents and descents are

witnessed in the barbershop represents a conscious effort on the part of the authors who have chosen this setting to critically interrogate the space and those men themselves. Unlike any texts before them concerning the Black barbershop, *The Men of Brewster Place*, *The Dying Ground*, and *A Life for a Life* portray the scene as a place where Black men have the opportunity to openly weep for one another. They offer catharsis. Yet, because of the choking restrictions on their ability to emote, the men in these barbershops simply return to their lives as if those like Greasy, Maceo, and D'Ray never existed. Though the narrators focus on the surface of trauma, the reader / witness bears the burden too of knowing the individual character's trauma as the unsettling of identity. The fact that this apparent trauma stems not from overt violence or a physical threat but a lack of *man-ness*, implicates everyone who somehow supports a society in which there is such a limited Black masculine ideology. Therefore, whether Black or White, male or female, the reader as witness must also accept some responsibility for Greasy's death, Maceo's violence, and D'Ray's murder of Stanley Earl.

Trauma specialist Dr. Dori Laub in "An Event Without a Witness: Truth, Testimony and Survival"(1992) makes very cogent observations related to survivor stories she recorded. Her characterizations of Holocaust testimonies also allow understanding of the narratives of Black men represented in African American fiction:

> The survivors did not only need to survive so that they could tell their story in order to survive. There is, in each survivor, an imperative need to tell and thus to come to *know* one's story, unimpeded by ghosts from the past against which one has to protect oneself. One has to know one's buried truth in order to be able to live one's life. (Testimony 78)

One of the key assertions of Laub's article is the importance of those who would be witnesses to the testimony of a trauma survivor. Fundamental to her claim is the idea that witnessing is as much personal and private as it is a shared community experience to which the victim seeks definition. According to her work, "this loss of the capacity to be a witness to oneself and thus to witness from the inside is perhaps the true meaning of annihilation, for when one's history is abolished, one's identity ceases to exists as well" (82). In other words, the power of Greasy's proclamation is his attempt to witness himself. But more importantly, as the men there fail to witness for him, he ceases to exist both literally and figuratively. Likewise, each of the three authors dares us not to know our connection as witnesses and each of the authors of the novels just discussed represents a ghost as an interstitial mediating figure between the living and the dead. In *The Men of Brewster Place*, *The Dying Ground*, *The Last King*, and *A Life for A Life*, the authors provide ghosts as memory markers for trauma. These ghosts convey the reality that trauma for these Black men has been generational and always hovers in the shadows like a wraith.

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Chapter Five

Brush of the Collar: What's Next for the Barbershop in African American Literature?

'Who is it that cuts the barber's hair?'
'God. God cuts the barber's hair."
Edgar Nkosi White, "Under the Sun Moon and Stars" (2005)

The terrain through which one navigates the literary representations of the Black barbershop experience in America comes replete with valleys, mountains, gentle rolling hills, jagged crags, massive deserts, sheer cliffs, and dangerous paths. Traversing it is a journey made with the ever-present and still realistic possibility that a physical violation of the Black male body not only can take place but also could be sanctioned by the government itself. An existence characterized by this very real historical legacy has necessitated safe spaces, which become the boundaries and bridges between outer space and inner space, outer chaos and internal peace. The Black barbershop bridges the intersections of a masculine identity that seeks to define itself in a society that has been so historically brutal. It is indeed in many ways a closed, yet public, space inviting to some and closed to others. Nonetheless, as Ralph Ellison points out in *Shadow and* Act (1953), there seems an inherent will to survive in African American culture that necessitates an ongoing evolutionary process in the spaces identified as "black" spaces.

Literature addressing Black masculinity in the African American barbershop ultimately must engage the conversation of Black male subjectivity in this space. But it's also important to see within this conversation that this literature also at times embraces

what Keith Clark in *Black Manhood in James Baldwin, Ernest J. Gaines, and August Wilson* (2002) terms the "dominant patrinarrative of American manhood" (6). Because the conceptualization of Black masculinity tends to function in relationship to its being superimposed into the shadows of White masculinity, or worse as a futile response to constructions of masculinity, my aim was to look inside the space for an explanation of Black masculinity. Specifically, I needed to examine the how and why of the importance of this space in the lives of Black men as it gets represented in literature. Engaging this project began as a personal desire to find out how a space so vital to Black male identity has been dealt with by authors. What I soon discovered was that simply asking the obvious question of "what stories make use of the barbershop?" became an odyssey to find that which was hidden in plain sight. As a mediating space in literature, the barbershop did not immediately jump from the pages. But I knew there were texts out there. There had to be. My initial search readily revealed two articles by Trudier Harris and Hortense Thornton. Their subsequent lists of works cited proved very valuable. However, both essays brief and dealt only with a focused grouping of texts that address the role of the barbershop in African American literature. My goal from that point became searching out additional texts that I suspected to exist that could more fully round out this coverage. Once the titles started coming in and I began reading, it was obvious that this was indeed a special place. As expected, authors have completely framed this space within the dynamic of it being a male space and as such a highly gendered space. The Black barbershop as a gendered space provides critical inquiry into the dynamics of conceptualized masculinity formation as it relates to Black men. The novels, plays, and poems in this study largely investigate how these men seek out their subjectivity within

the fragile space of the barbershop as hush harbor. Yet, within the overtly masculinized space, the role of the protagonist is often lessened one moment and heightened at another to represent the idea that sometimes the shop itself is the main character, as if it too is a living breathing entity. Authors who understand this principle of barbershop culture do not seek to romanticize the space. On the contrary, they use the space in order to fashion a study of a wide swath of Black men that cannot be accomplished in other spaces. In this respect, I have sought neither to romanticize nor vilify the Black barbershop. For as much as I'd like to say that all is well in the Black barbershop, there are issues that need to be dealt with.

Inter-textual framing of conversations addressing Black male space and the positioning of a self is often located within a need to counter dominant discourses of Black masculinity; however, such a frame does tend to further perpetuate a hyper-sexualized, heterosexist agenda. Having made this declaration, one now has to also acknowledge that no one project can attempt to address all areas of concern. Even as one may wish to romanticize this space, there is a reality that there too exist problems. As one might expect, the literary reconfigurations of the barbershop as a Black male space produce compelling and contradictory articulations of Black masculinity. Literary works, after all require drama, irony, conflict, crisis, and resolution, and may range from comedy to pathos to tragedy.

Having come to this project through the circumstance of not being able to get a haircut in Iowa City, Iowa, I began to search out the meaning of a "good cut." My quest for that "good cut" has taken me up and down the east coast from Miami to Newark, through the Midwest from St. Louis to Minneapolis, eventually to Black barbershops in

and around San Diego, California. At some point I realized that this was a search rooted in the experiences of an unfathomable number of Black men who have gone before me in search of that place where they can sit and take a breath from the world outside. While this project is in no way intended to be a sociological study, I too found it necessary, as did Trudier Harris, to verify what I read in fiction as it aligned with the real shops across the country. While I have gotten scores of haircuts along this journey, I must admit that often the conversations and the atmosphere of a given barbershop would allow me to overlook a less than perfect cut. The *good cut* is not so much the end product, the haircut itself, that one seeks; rather it is the experience of the barbershop – waiting your turn, and getting it, climbing into the chair, being a soap-box politician, and ultimately participating in the ritual of *being* a Black man.

While it is not the perfect place, the barbershop is the perfect outlet for the performance of Black masculinity and it is where everyone, when necessary, accepts the necessary fact of the performance. We all understood that at times some of the things we said were lies and half-truths but we needed to be able to talk freely and say what we *would do* knowing that we really may never get the chance elsewhere. We just needed that space to express "what if" safely.

Collectively, we as African American males are seldom afforded space(s) that can be claimed as exclusively our own like the local barbershops in the communities in which we live. We are a group habitually characterized by our negatives: incessant violence, chronic womanizing, and pathological laziness. Even as a child, when I came to understand what the barbershop offered in an openly hostile world, I had no real clue. For Black men, this space is a fort of sorts from which to sustain life's battles with the world

outside. One can come and go as often as he likes to the barbershop. No matter how poor or rich, tall or short, fat or skinny a man is, a good barber can sit him in a chair, engage him in conversation, and make him feel, for a brief moment, equal to any man. In the shop, he can be among those who can best understand what he experiences, what he endures day to day in a world he sometimes himself can not understand. It is at that moment that the barbershop offers order in a chaotic world or a bit of witty or wise cultural chaos in a world that is far too ordered. I would be remiss were I not to revisit Ralph Ellison's comment concerning what Black men think can be discovered in the barbershop. Immediately into my project I came to the realization that barbershops are like small families. Each of these families, while connected to the whole, will also close ranks when one of its own is in need or has stepped outside the prescription of that family. The trend in literature dealing with the barbershop in African American literature, especially in the post 9-11 context, tends to be towards understanding how these little families operate. The leading example of this trend is Edgar Nkosi White's 2005 story "Under the Sun Moon and Stars."

Set in the the ruins of the World Trade Center towers, this narrative charts how a Black barbershop becomes the space for unity in a time of utter chaos and destruction.

> [There were] six together in the tent and had nothing alike except our eyes which were sleepless. There was Abba, Kenya born. Then Juan, who was Chicano, and had Jesus somewhere in his five names. Timothy, who was made point man because he always had a phone in his hand, took a good message and believed. Then Adam and Steve in love with themselves and occasionally each other. (2)

Brought together in an emergency shelter during the chaos of what was 9/11, these men all represent America. More so than any other event in recent memory, the events of 9/11 brought a sense of one America to the forefront. While the story seeks to define this new sense of an American identity, there is a poignant note for the reader, “”It makes a difference how you come to America, whether by boat, plane or birth. Because how you come is how you see it” (6). In this story of destruction, the men and the others at Ground Zero recognize the barbershop as a sanctuary and the barber himself as a symbol of comfort. Through its history in America, the Black barbershop has grown to accommodate the changes in the American landscape, and the post 9/11 world is no different. For these men, White paints a vivid picture:

> Barbershops too are a kind of kitchen. A place to come and be lifted up into warm. Bled of sorrow and placed safe inside lotion and hope. You come and bring your life in and place it in the chair. George, the barber, gives you a collar. Prods you for news. The safe country of the barber shop. George, like the Pullman porters. (13)

This retreat to the idea of barbers being the symbol of Black masculine strength, like the Pullman porters, in such an historical moment is quite special. Reading the Black barbershop, post 9/11, as a safe space not only for Black men but for an entire country, or even more impressively as representative of the country, counters the notion of a disappearance of this space. In fact, White seems to be reinvigorating the idea of the black barbershop and the barber as hero for the larger, not just Black, community:

> While you sit and watch the well windowed world outside. Maybe an arrest. You sit there and read the body language of the undercover police.

> All life passing. For maybe one hour which you wait, you're transported, attended, brushed and forgiven for a new week. Your barber George the priest. Here in Harlem which they'll never bomb. Because you're safe with your barber. He gives you a new mirror and sends you out into the world to become the thing he sees and you'll try to be. (13)

This appears to be a return – back beyond the stories of unrelieved crisis in Naylor, Hill, and Tramble – to the barbershop of old in the hopeful, supportive community like Murray's Gasoline Point, Alabama, though the scene is Harlem and the players very diverse. Perhaps it tells us that in the new millennium, the true strength of the Black barbershop will be its ability to absorb the new, true America.

I also charted the unspoken reality that through all eras of African American literature there is the unspoken reality that a very clear connection with sports and the barbershop thrives. Without exception, any text that offers a description of the interior of the barbershop prominently features a sports figure or a photo of a sports hero on the walls. The barbershop as a canvas functions inherently and conspicuously as a site of memory locating the folk hero of the community particularly in the pictures that are on the walls of a given shop. These photos of prize fighters like Jack Johnson, Muhammad Ali, and George Foreman, and leading figures from many other sports, represent the history of America in the closest thing to a level playing field there has ever been for talented, determined Black men. In essence, the walls of the traditional barbershop are a hall of fame where stories of achievement are added or retold each and every day someone enters the shop. The importance of having pictures of men like Jack Johnson on the walls of the Black barbershop concern not merely the individual man photographed;

these men and their exploits serve as the icons of a people who have overcome. They serve as testimony to the always threatened but indestructible spirit of African American masculinity. Within the realm of national or international sports, the individual hero is so large and beyond trash talk diminution that it's alright for him to be openly embraced and celebrated in the barbershop and elsewhere in the community as well.

One reason the bulk of the pictures on the walls of the Black barbershop represent sports figures, especially boxers, notes Gerald Early, is the important social significance of the Black athlete. Early writes that sports represent "the only extensive field of survey for analyzing Black male ambition in a context where its expression has had an enormous impact on America[n] culture at large" (2). In fact, Early writes, "the prizefighter provides his culture with a heroic stylization in which personal meaning and the symbolic ritual of triumph and defeat can be played out. He is, more so than any other athlete, the hero and devil of absolute anarchy and of absolute absurdity" (386). As many barbershop walls testify, the athlete is the ultimate articulation of Black manhood.

These men are what Levine would classify as "contestant heroes" because they overcame rivals in a way that reinforces the notion that if all things are equal in society, African Americans can win too. He also points out that Jack Johnson, as an example, was more than a fighter; he was a "symbol" (430). Such men are links in the "network" of African American cultural identity that represent an individual victory against a common foe (436). Seeing the prize fighter as folk hero allows one to embrace a culture of violent struggle that is socially acceptable regardless of race or economics. The great boxers are seen not only in the context of their strength and force, but their finesse, their elegance, and even their wit. One might say the same of a very good barber.

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Afterward
Cuttin' a New Look: First Friday Cut

The fight began when a white boy spit in my face and called me a "nigger." Not much in life allows one to forget the sound of snot sucked from deep in the body and then the feeling of it clinging to your face, like a warm blob tangled in your eyelashes. I don't even remember the boy's name or what started the argument that day. But we fought that day on the playground like two unbeatable forces. The other Black kids and I had fought these nameless, faceless white kids like that without fear, without hesitation, forever. As we had fought them in elementary school, it would be the same in middle school. It's not that we just didn't get along. We'd fight, bleed, and then return to our respective sides of the playground and the harmony of our lives together went on. It wasn't that we didn't like each other; it was that were opposing anything that was not us. And so we fought. But that day the trigger word N-I-G-G-E-R was used in the way that only cornbread-fed, tobacco-chewing, Southern white boys can pronounce it, with that extra twang to it that lets you know they mean it in a way that says they hated you or at least their daddies hated our daddies.

Being Black for me represents a statement of birth; being Black and male represents something I had to learn to live. As an ongoing process, my awareness of my Blackness and how it relates to my maleness began that day. I faced my grandfather after being sent home from school in the seventh grade following the fight, and I knew then that it was wrong that I had been sent home, because the White kid started the fight and he got to stay. Somehow I knew that my being sent home had something to do with the fact of my skin color. I also knew that my punishment at home would be slow and

painful. The thought of my grandfather whipping me for this act of “clowning and cutting the fool,” as he liked to call it, was a terror I wanted to run from. As I sat there in my grandmother’s house in the hours before he came home from work, my mind ran free with the details of the punishment to come. I must have been caught up in the anguish of my thoughts when he got home. When I looked up, his shadow filled the door and his body blocked all the light. He said that my grandmother had told him I had been suspended from school and I had been fighting. My grandfather was never much of a talker when it came time to punishment. The fact that there was right and wrong and “you know better” meant that there were never any idle warnings. You did wrong, you got a whipping. Pure and simple. Therefore, I was shocked when my grandfather asked me to tell him what happened.

Thinking it was some sort of trick, I looked at the floor and began to speak. My grandfather told me to look him in the face and talk; I remember that I trembled more that moment that I had in my entire life. His eyes pierced me to my core, not allowing me to look away. The anger on his face was tangible. He clenched his jaws together as if he needed to hold in words. The strength in his arms sent tremors across his taut skin. When he reached for his waist, I knew he was going for his belt and my knees went weak. Instead, he reaches around, pulls out his wallet, looks inside, returns it to his pocket and says “come on.” I walked the distance behind him in fear and awe of his massive back that day. My grandfather, before he retired, worked for the Georgia DOT on a road crew. His days were spent doing “mule work,” as I had often heard him say. The result of this “work” produced on his massive frame muscles that to me seemed to defy the size of his shirts. That day, as I walked behind him, I studied the pattern of dried sweat on his back

like it was a map; but, I couldn't make out a destination. We didn't speak. And when he would turn to see how far I was behind him my eyes fell. The walk through familiar places was short; the distance between us even shorter. I could smell the day's work from his body as he pushed open the door to the barbershop. I didn't dare think to say out loud what I knew he already knew, and that was that I didn't need a haircut.

In barbershop time, my grandfather told the men the situation and they all looked at me as if they were watching the birth of a child they knew would somehow survive but the fact of jeopardy still had to be honored as it came into his world. That Friday came to be the first day in a series of days that I now look back on realizing the power of my grandfather's hand in guiding me into manhood. It would be the place he would take me when I lost my virginity, learned to drive, made the football team, got kicked off the football team, saw death for the first time. But in many ways the events of that first day are difficult to articulate. The force of their existence has shadowed my life and now proves cathartic in retrospect. Before that moment, there was no awareness of time for me. After that night in there, clocks meant one thing to me and barbershop-time another. I would never presume that my childhood barbershop is the representative barbershop for all Black men. But for me it is the lighthouse by which I steady my journey in this life.

I had never been to the barbershop on a Friday night. The pleasure of the men folk was to have the shop all to themselves on a Friday night after work. Children usually had to wait until Saturday morning to get a haircut. Fridays were too special in the barbershop, and having kids around tended to ruin it for the men who came to get their whiskey and begin the weekend ritual of forgetting about yet another work week they had survived. But somehow the special thrill that should have come with the fact that I was

allowed in there was not there for me. I guess I felt some childish disappointment that there were no other kids outside to see me come in and feel left out.

The barbershop on a Friday night was a place I had never imagined as a child. The usually loud talk was even louder that night. Men whom I hardly ever saw around town were there; they were drinking and laughing. The usual crowd of barrel-chested men were there. Mr. Ira, the owner, moved about his shop with a quiet grace that was menacing and at the same time soothing. He never said much that I recall. He always seemed to be listening. He listened as if there was something that would one day be said that he needed to be prepared to hear. But he also listened as if not even he knew what those words would be; so he had to hear them all. Sugar Boy was there spinning myth into truth about the women he chased and caught in his "rattlesnake" days. Though he had been hobbled by a life of back-breaking work and too much "rot-gut likker," Sugar Boy had the amen corner support of all the men when he talked about whom he had chased and how he caught them. Mr. Herbert was there swearing up and down that that day was going to be the day his "number" fell. Everybody knew his number was single-1 and that he played it backed up as 0-1 and forward 1-0. A dollar on each. Every day. The rest of the men in the shop were the hodgepodge who were to be expected every day, hard men who had hands like slabs of granite and fingers that looked like mangled pieces of wood. Their eyes were sad but their laughs were loud and deep.

Although I was the only child in there that night, I was not pushed away or made to feel small, but when we entered the open door, there was no magical Hollywood moment where everybody froze and the music stopped. They continued to cuss and drink, not even trying to hide the mason jars filled with the clear liquid. But there were the

stares that went right to my grandfather, then to me, and back to my grandfather. They didn't have to use words. They seemed to sense that it was my time to be welcomed into the sanctuary of men, but there was no lowering of tone; they laughed and lied, cussed and screamed, and looked each other in the eye, knowing they were the same. No one would tell anybody in here to quiet down. Each man knew the others - if not by name, by circumstance. With his eyes and his finger, my grandfather motioned for me to sit down and that I was not to speak. Granddaddy often said that sometimes a "child don't need to do nothing but hush and listen." The solid look he gave me that night made it clear that this was one of those moments. But his look did not mean that I could not respond if spoken to. That would be rude. He looked at me as if to expect that I knew where I was and that in this place of men I was to listen.

The men I left that place knowing were somehow different than they were before that Friday. Though they talked about me, they didn't talk to me directly. When they talked about other situations, I knew somehow they were talking about *my* situation. With everything except the passing of liquor to me, I knew that there was something going around in that room that night and it was warmly scary. That feeling of fear mixed well with the scent of talcum powder and the buzz of the electric clippers. Even to this day, the sight and smell of a bottle of barbershop talcum powder sends chills down my spine. Although that initial scary feeling gave way to a feeling of belonging, I knew better than to speak that night; but the men would look at me and make sure my eyes told them that I understood. When I did, they kept talking. When I didn't, they kept talking. They knew I'd be back.

Those were the days when Granddaddy would say something like “sometimes a man needs to hear a lie and laugh about it to keep the truth from killing him.” I understood early on that in the barbershop the difference between not telling the truth and lying was enormous. Barbershop talk taught me that ‘there is truth in every lie and a lie in every truth.’ It also taught me that ‘everything said ain’t meant to be heard’ and that ‘there is always a reason why somebody doesn’t know something and that reason sometimes needs to be left alone,’ That night, I discovered how to deal with white boys in school and still hold on to a sense of dignity without running or getting kicked out of school. They told me how to find situations when I could hit back, like playing football. They said to pick the biggest meanest white boy on the field and “hit his ass! Hit him hard! Knock his ass down and look him in the face and say “Good Game.” They told me about rules and how to use rules to my advantage. But I still left with the knowledge that “rules don’t mean shit ‘cause they change them when you get to knowin’ em too good anyway.”

Somewhere in the space of the hours in the shop that night, I saw into the bloodshot eyes of those men a reality that one can’t ever know before his time. There, along with those RC Colas, yellow Moon Pies, and boiled peanuts, I consumed my awakening. Now that I had been granted permission to come in on Fridays, I relished any opportunity to go. Whether I needed a haircut or not, I went as much as I could.

Over the next few years they taught me that “man-talk was man-talk cause sometimes a man can’t do nuthin’ but talk,” but the stories my grandfather and these men told me were the stories of their lives. These men became the characters of my childhood stories. They were my heroes; they were my villains; they were ultimately my way of

seeing the first part of my life in this world as a Black male. Men like these might not have gone to church every Sunday or to work every day, but there was rarely a Friday night they weren't in the barbershop. A man could go to the barbershop without going anywhere else, but a trip to the shop would always precede a trip any where else. After leaving the barbershop that first time, I began to understand that I could go to the barbershop for help in dealing with the world that was to come at me as a Black man and that these men, with or without my grandfather there, would help me.

The barbershop was my first true school. I learned more about life there than I would ever learn in a book. One of the fundamentals I learned is that the difference between the knowledge I got in the barbershop and what I absorbed in school is that books really can't teach you anything if you are not actually out among the living. What I was told in school, I learned in the barbershop. When the math didn't make sense in the classroom, the men in the barbershop could make gambling my lesson on multiplication and division. When one train left point A at noon and another left point B at 1:00, they made sure I understood how to get to point C before either of the trains. Nonetheless, the quest for book knowledge would lead me to realize how much the barbershop shaped my life, how much it was so entangled in my school learning. That day in the barbershop, all those years ago, what those men bestowed to me with their looks and words made my personal experiences drop back in relief and allowed me to *see* things. They told me of other times and places and the pain of memories. They opened up to me in ways that I had never seen men do before, and rarely since. Those men took me to places in their stories that were unlike what I had read about in school or seen in the movies. Stories of time and presence, stories of survival. Stories that only Black men who had lived them

could tell. For me, these evenings were better than school. Those men became my teachers and my texts, history that breathed, that smelled. My understanding of things became three-dimensional because I could read on their bodies the consequences of dreams deferred. And I learned to trust things that I knew for myself. I learned how important reading was to men who couldn't read. And I learned how important it was to know how to listen to a man cry when the last thing he'd every do would be to shed a tear. The talk in this living classroom took me on fieldtrips into their homes, into their jobs, into their sorrows, and it let me understand why they lived life trying to suck the marrow from any bone they were able to have. They depended on one another, although they could never have said as much. But the proof of that was in the way they held on together in rough times.

I left the world of those stories when I moved to the Midwest in 1996 to pursue graduate study at the University of Iowa in African American Studies, of all things. When I arrived in Iowa City, race was of course nothing new to me. I simply began to *understand* race and the politics of racial identity in America more clearly there. I had grown up during the 1980s in the trailer parks and shotgun houses of a city in the bowels of South Georgia. It was a place ruled by race much as it had been in the most stereotypical days of Jim Crow. That is to say, the economy of my home town still clung to a way of life anchored in agriculture and the underpaid manual labor of Blacks' . knuckle-crunching, back-breaking work. We knew enough about race as children to know that white people lived on one side of town and we lived on the other, though the residual aftermath of Brown v. Board of Education was supposed to give us the illusion that we all lived in the same place. But we knew that the haves and the have nots were

often divided chiefly by race. We knew that there were still people that accepted the local sheriff as God and the Law as His judgment against Black folks. There was not much a Black child growing up in the Deep South, even in the 1980's, didn't come to understand about race in America. There is even less that we, the children of places like Tifton's south side, were spared from knowing. Somewhere between the avenues that defined our world of Black and White we understood that race was always there with us like the heat and the dust of the Georgia clay. And as children on playgrounds we played out these dynamics. But Iowa City was a different place, a different kind of white people, a different kind of race difference. I guess the only way to explain this difference for me is to share how I felt being in Iowa.

I am not sure which is worse, being in the South where race and racism is in your face and honestly blunt or in a place where there are so few Blacks that you are ignored. At least in the South for me there was a support network to deal with race. Iowa only provided the lies of multi-cultural harmony. There are pictures of my time in Iowa denying me the lie I often tell myself that it never happened, that I had never been to a place that lacked what I knew as community. In one photo in particular, I pity the sad eyes of the guy in the picture there presenting a lie to the world that all was perfect behind that smile. It was taken after a spaghetti potluck dinner I had reluctantly attended at the home of another grad student. I had only agreed to take the picture after wiping away the tears that day. I look back on that picture with a sense of confusion. I know it's me in that photo but then again, that's not me. I still have that same pullover Iowa sweatshirt. That's not me; but, it is me. I think.

I have a lot of tangible things that I brought out of Iowa with me, but that photo is glued to my memory like old Jack Johnson bills on walls that have been painted and plastered over. When we look at those frozen moments of time we don't think what the person in the picture was doing before that shot was taken. What he walked off to do when it was over. Pictures tell the truth only of the exact moment the camera captures.

Hours before someone took that picture, I had completed an unplanned sojourn into the deepest understanding of what it meant to be lost in the wilderness of an American identity as a Black man. This took place in the *Heartland* of America, not the heart of darkness. It was nothing fantastic, nothing that would be reported in the newspapers. I still think about the way it happened, and I still cry when I allow myself to think about that specific day too long. I could never talk about it until I got out. I felt that no one could possibly understand.

Trying to tell this story without painting the place and time is impossible because without either it makes no sense. I tell it now, years later, as I peruse my journal, which reads more like a prison memoir than the writings of a free young man pursuing an education. I study the entry that reads, *God, is this the shit that Malcolm and Martin died for? I feel like I'm on display here.* In many ways I have come to understand freedom and race because of my three years in Mid-West solitude. Part of the story helps me to do justice to what really goes on in Black barbershops and why I needed one more than ever in the "heartland" of America. Because of the code of the barbershop, some things I must leave out. More than any class I could have taken, my experiences in Iowa gave me several courses in self-reflection that can't and shouldn't be told. I owe my understanding

of what they meant to those men from whom I took my strength on Friday nights down home, when they would say "Tell what needs to be told and take the rest to God."

Like all things, this one started months before that day in August of 1996 in Iowa. I sat at my mother's kitchen table with four envelopes ripped open, the contents read, the papers carefully stacked. Each one stated much the same: *On behalf of the Graduate College of Arts and Sciences, I am pleased to notify you of your acceptance*. My choice came with no grand ideas or lofty notions. Each of the places meant no more to me than the next. I needed money for school, and whichever one of these four envelops offered the most had me as a student. But I reflected in my journal the following:

If we could go back and choose the places and events in our lives that would come to define us and our outlook on the world would the end result be the same? God, I'm scared. The night I wrote that entry I had as much warning that my life was to change as a fly gets before being swatted against the wall.

Off I went to the plains of Iowa.

My first Saturday in Iowa City came with the single goal of getting a haircut. I found myself standing out front of a place said to be a barbershop. This building stood complete with barbers and chairs but it was what wasn't there that came to hurt so much. There were no photos of famous black folk on the wall; there was no little boy sweeping the rolled, nappy curls off the floor; it didn't have a chart of haircut styles on the wall! And the styles emerging beneath clippers and scissors were not any haircuts I'd ever be able to get. And I could see that the place was without the kind of laughter and trash talking that I had grown up experiencing.

I walked around all day to the same fate. Each shop I'd come to would have a barber using scissors to snip the hair that he held just above his fingers, he'd look up at me through the window, with not a hint of malice in his eyes. He'd just stand there with that doe-like expression of complete confusion on his face. I knew, just by the look each barber gave me, not to bother going in. Near sunset, I found myself back in my dorm room in Mayflower Hall, staring in the mirror crying. Although one of the barbers had actually told me I'd have to go to Cedar Rapids, Waterloo, or Des Moines to find a "Negro" barber, that was no option this first Saturday.

That night, red Wahl clippers, *my* clippers, popped on with an electrified hunger for the task at hand. They ate deep into my hair, first rolling it and then pushing it down into the sink. In minutes, I stood there Michael Jordan-bald, over a sink full of tear-soaked nappy hair and memories of barbershops a world away.

I wept that evening not because for the first time in my life I was completely bald, but because I felt humiliated that I was now, as a Black man, in the closest thing to hell a man like me could expect. All I wanted was a good cut. Instead I suddenly found myself on a spiritual journey to find myself, my bald-headed self.

As I lay there that night rubbing my bald head, I recalled times in a barber's chair as a child in South Georgia. Those memories became my salvation; they were my rock. In the years since the Friday granddaddy took me to the shop, I have learned that what I have gotten from there was strength, strength that has allowed generations of Black men to find peace and a space carved out as our own within a society that to its very core sought to void our existence as men.

When I tried to take the voices of my mentors, my ancestors, into a land that they apparently knew I would have to go into alone, I simply had to learn that the voices and their experiences were inside me all the time. Cutting my own hair that day opened my ears and my heart, and my tears were about strength, not defeat. Those voices gave me the strength to open myself to a world of opportunity and knowledge that they could not have gotten to. They perhaps did not know that the path I had chosen in my life would take me places they could only have dreamed of, but what they did know came to me abruptly. Though they had never and would never see the insides of many places my life would take me, they had provided me with the stories and the tools I would need to survive. They had taught me that the type of education the University of Iowa sought to give me meant nothing if I couldn't bring it back home to the barbershop to share. More importantly, they taught me that none of that would matter if I didn't have the strength to stay there in the first place to get it and go beyond it, a journey that has helped me "get it" in an even richer way as I have come to explore the literary representation of their place in the barbershop, and mine.

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