

Fading, Twisting, and Weaving: An Interpretive Ethnography of the Black Barbershop as Cultural Space

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Barbershops in the Black community are discursive spaces in which the confluence of Black hair care, for and by Black people, and small talk establish a context for cultural exchange. This interpretive ethnography describes the barbershop in a Black community as a cultural site for ethnographic exploration and description. The article defines a cultural site not only as the chosen geo-social locale of the ethnographic gaze but also as a centralized occasion within a cultural community that serves at the confluence of banal ritualized activity and the exchange of cultural currency. It is the social experience of being in the barbershop that the article focuses on, knowing that social experience meets at the intersection of culture and performance, and at the confluence of reflection and remembrance.

Keywords: *interpretive ethnography; cultural space; practiced place; imagined communities; cultural performance*

As a child, I remember the meaningfulness of going to the barbershop.¹ Those experiences were mixed with dread and excitement. The dread was of my father's tyranny about us getting a haircut. The excitement was the social context of the barbershop. In the Black barbershop of my childhood, there were always old men sitting in the corner playing checkers, reading magazines, and talking trash, talking community, and talking culture. The difference and confluence of these three serve as the basis of this project.

Although going to the barbershop is a "practice of everyday life . . . ways of operating or doing things," I wish to explore and comment on this practice so that as Certeau (1984) suggested, it "no longer appear[s] as merely the obscure background of social activity" (p. xi). The barbershop and hair salons are integral and specific cultural sites within the Black community. Although the word *salon* refers to a site of hair care and comfort, it can also be defined as a constructed community for social and intellectual talk on agreed issues. Within the barbershop of my childhood, young boys observed and listened to their elders engage in the ritualized act of cutting/fixing hair and community

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building. Adults used this space as a cultural thrift store of services and information. Barbershops in the Black community are discursive spaces. And although this may be true in most barbershops, crossing borders of race and ethnicity, my primary interest is in the Black barbershop; where the confluence of Black hair care, for and by Black people, and small talk establish a context for cultural exchange.

This project is interested in looking at a barbershop in a Black community as a cultural site for ethnographic exploration and description. I define a cultural site not only as the chosen geo-social locale of the ethnographic gaze but also as a centralized occasion within a cultural community that serves at the confluence of banal ritualized activity and the exchange of cultural currency. I use the term *cultural currency* as Pierre Bourdieu referred to the concept of cultural capital, suggesting “that different forms of cultural knowledge—such as language, modes of social interaction and meaning, are valued hierarchically in society” (McCarthy, 1996, p. 155).² For me, currency also refers to the fact that cultural communities provide and circulate information in ways that add to the collective knowledge of what’s happening, bringing members up to date—establishing relationships and orientations to people, space, and time.

Leda M. Cooks (1998) stated that “cultural spaces are infused with the past, markers of identity that are creative and created through historical events and experiences” (p. 230). A cultural space is a particular site marked by the cultural practices of the people who live there (or lived there in the case of ritual burial grounds and battlefields). These spaces serve as a register of cultural identity denoting but not delimiting bodies distinguished by race, practices, and stylistics that signal cultural membership. In their book *Stylin’: African American Expressive Culture From Its Beginnings to the Zoot Suit*, White and White (1998) stated, “In African cultures, the grooming and styling of hair have long been important social rituals” (p. 41). These social rituals have not been limited to issues of aesthetics or reductively thought of as vanity. In fact, hair and the moment of grooming hair become discursive and signify meaning within culture. Kobena Mercer (1994) extended this logic when he added,

[The] hair is never a straightforward biological fact, because it is almost always groomed, prepared, cut, concealed and generally worked upon by human hands. Such practices socialize hair, making it the medium of significant statements about self and society. And the code of value that bond them, or do not. In this way hair is merely a raw material, constantly processed by cultural practices which thus invest it with meaning and value. (pp. 100-101)

Hence, the discursive quality of cultural spaces also produces cultural artifacts and performances that signal cultural affiliation. Wendell Berry (1977) offered the notion that “our culture must be our response to our place, our culture and our place are images of each other and inseparable from each other” (p. 22). Hence, a cultural space is a discursive site. It is both a call and a

response; it is both a geographical location and conceptual nexus of need, desire, and expression, as Michel Foucault (1984) suggested, in treating discourses as practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak.

Within this sense, although barbershops and salons occupy specific and practiced spaces and although they present the opportunity for sociocultural interactions, they are also what Benedict Anderson (1991) called "imagined communities." They are imagined in that members of racially, culturally, or geographically defined sects may "never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion" and a sense of kinship (p. 6). It is perhaps this impulse, the desire for cultural communion and affinity, coupled with the need for personal grooming, that motivates the engagement and initiates the effort toward building a realized community, or what Anderson called a "deep, horizontal comradeship" (p. 7).

Over the years, in moving from state to state, seeking employment or education, the test of establishing community for me has often been grounded in locating a barbershop—a place where I could not only get my hair cut or cared for but also achieve affinity in the assumption and desire that the hair care professional and his community of clients were Black. I thumbed through the yellow pages looking for the racial signifiers of those who do Black hair—the literal words or African/Afrocentric symbols and images that signified Blackness. And I asked the Black men that I came into contact with for direction and counsel. In these acts, I sought the services of and communion with the cultural familiar, in a geographical site that was unfamiliar.

I imagined myself achieving community through cultural performance. Kirk Fuoss (1995) reminded me that a "dialectical relationship exists between cultural performances and community; communities not only produce but are produced by cultural performances" (p. 82). The Black barbershop is a cultural space marked by ritual and cultural enactment. The performance of culture is accomplished in the signaling of cultural traditions (handshakes, verbal greetings, language, etc.), the nature of talk and social play, the acknowledged awareness and concern of issues relative to the community, and the negotiated understanding of Black hair and Black hairstyles.

The performances are patterns of interpersonal communication within a shared community. And in this sense, cultural performance "represents the use of particular criteria for determining inclusion in and exclusion from a given community" (Fuoss, 1995, p. 89). James W. Cheseboro (1998) supported this approach when he defined cultural performance

[as] a series of exhibitions and public presentations which demonstrate an affiliation with one's own culture. These cultural performances function as "evidence" of one's identification with the norms, values, and behavioral patterns which reflect the preferred intellectual activities, thoughts, speech, beliefs, and social forms as well as the racial religious, and social attitudes and beliefs of

one's culture. In this sense, a cultural identification is a "demonstration" of one's social alignment. (p. 316)

Cultural performances serve as intragroup display for audiences who know the behavioral script. The performance moves from the individual member outward to those within the larger shared cultural community.

This approach to cultural performance, like the nature of this study, focuses primarily on communal ritualistic practices that transmit social culture. It is the social experience of being in the barbershop that I am most interested in focusing on, knowing that social experience meets at the intersection of culture and performance and at the confluence of reflection and remembrance.

ETHNOGRAPHY, ENGAGEMENT, AND ENQUIRY

"Ethnographies are documents that pose questions at the margins between two cultures. They necessarily decode one culture while re-coding it for another" (Van Maanen, 1988, p. 4). Although ethnography has often been interested in and used to report on the cultural Other—Other, in relation to the ethnographer's reporting body and the body to which the ethnographer reports—I am continually interested in using ethnography as a tool to excavate the meaningfulness of familiar cultural sites. In which case, the reporter (ethnographer) holds a dual membership in both the cultural community that he or she reports on and the cultural communities in which he or she reports to—the intricacies of which offer greater opportunities for interpretation, translation, and transference. This dual membership positions the reporter in the study as an "indigenous ethnographer," one "who enters culture where they resemble the people they are studying and writing about" (hooks, 1994, p. 126).

The interstices of these positions also help to fulfill Victor Turner's (1988) notion of *performative reflexivity*, in which a member of a cultural community turns inward to critique its own practices. I link this to a significant attribute of cultural performance. Turner argued that "cultural performances are active agencies of social change, representing the eye by which culture sees itself and the drawing board on which creative actors sketch out what they believe to be more effective or ethical 'designs for living' " (p. 24) or, in this case, validating and acknowledging the meaningfulness of sociocultural exchange.

Yet ethnography is a representational act fraught with the danger of imperialism, colonialism, academic puffery, and self-aggrandizement. It risks foregrounding individual insights over collective human experience. As Judith Hamera (2000) suggested, "It is a very specific technology of translation, a look rebounding between two differently framed [experiences] into lan-

guage" (p. 147). And although Hamera was concerned with a kind of ethnography of the body in dance and, specifically, virtuosity in performance—it seems that ethnography is always and already interested in documenting the fantastical and meaningfulness of cultural performance and cultural impressions of experience.

I struggle with my representational positionality as an indigenous ethnographer claiming membership in the cultural communities that I explore—but held at arm's length, distanced at (by) the academic impasse of documenting experience. Although I want to resist being Caliban, I want to engage the utilitarian and elusive act of capturing cultural images and practices in words. This task is of course difficult, not because the cultural performances are illusory or ephemeral, but the repetition of the practices is sedimented in the collective consciousness of many Black folks and those who recognize these descriptions as meaningful to their experience. The images are slippery, not that they are not qualifiable or even quantifiable, which are sometime interests of ethnography—in terms of capturing "articulated experiences of people in concrete places" (Denzin, 1997, p. 247).

The slipperiness comes in my own hands. It is in my ability to always focus my eyes, ears, and senses to denote moments of flex and flux. It comes in my own facility with language. It happens between my roles as participant and observer, and the negotiation between my own lived experience and my observation of experience. Thus, I am engaged in that tensive practice that Norman Denzin (1999) referred to as an "interpretive ethnography for the next century":

One that is simultaneously minimal, existential, autoethnographic, vulnerable, performative, and critical. This ethnography seeks to ground the self in a sense of the sacred, to dialogically connect the ethical, respectful self to nature and the worldly environment. In so doing, it recognizes the ethical unity of mind and nature (Bateson and Bateson, 1987, pp. 8-9, 11). It seeks to embed the self in storied histories of sacred spaces. (p. 510)

And it is because I am so embedded in the *storied histories of these sacred places* that the slippage occurs. The slippage often occurs within my own desire to represent without reducing culture, to simultaneously capture and release, to celebrate but not exoticize, to signal and signify without "reading" culture—in that Black cultural tradition of calling others to task and engaging in some reifying struggle over cultural authenticity or establishing an ethnocentric positionality offering commentary and critique (Smitherman, 1994).

This project locates the Black barbershop as a specific cultural space where Black people convene and commune for cultural exchange. The ethnographic descriptions in this article work in a confluence between my own childhood memories of going to the barbershop and my participation observation at Luke Walker's Beauty Care Center in Pasadena, California.

RECALLS, REFLECTIONS, AND REMEMBRANCES

I am the fourth boy of five boys, but my childhood memories of going to the barbershop related here really begin and end with me being the youngest of the first four boys in my family. There is nearly a 10-year difference between my younger brother and me. People in the neighborhood used to describe us as “steps on a ladder.” We were roughly 2 years apart with 2 inches’ difference in our height.

My father had a rule about hair when we were growing up. He would say, “Comb it or lose it!” To test and apply his rule, we were given a small black comb. For young Black boys with natural hair, untouched with chemical relaxers or perms, this was a part of a charge and a signal. When we could no longer easily comb our hair with this comb, or if there were teeth missing from the comb (evidence of the difficulty of combing), it was time to get a haircut. The variation in growth patterns of the four boys served as the least common denominator. The need for one signaled all.

Mr. Brown’s Barbershop was located one block away from our house (see Figure 1). It was a white, freestanding building about the size of our living room with an attached bathroom. It had the obligatory barber’s cane, the red and blue twirling pole that was turned on when the shop was open and off when it was closed. In going to the barbershop, we were charged to hold each other’s hands as we crossed the street. Trailing along the one block, we would look back to the house only to see my dad standing on the porch making sure that we went there directly. Come to think about it, I cannot remember my dad ever going with us to get his hair cut. It was something that we were forced to do, that he never engaged, at least not with us. But I do remember over the years hearing my mother tell him that it was time for him to get a haircut. He too would moan and groan and disappear in the car. Somehow, going to Mr. Brown to get a haircut was good enough for us kids but not for him. Yet he would return looking trimmed and neat.

In the barbershop, Mr. Brown had a partner, Mr. Francis, who seemed much older than he did. We always assumed that they were father and son, but as kids we could not quite figure out about the difference in their names. Although Mr. Brown seemed young, at least the age of our dad, Mr. Francis was old. He was the kind of old that you could never picture yourself being—with gray hair, folds of wrinkles, hands that perpetually trembled, and that old man smell partially covered over with the aroma of Old Spice or Aqua Velva. And either his hearing was bad, which was signaled by how loud he spoke, or he just didn’t listen when you said, “Just a little off the top.”

But of course we knew that our father had already spoken to them about what he wanted for our heads. He always requested what they used to call an ivory lee. The haircut consisted of cutting the hair down to the scalp leaving only a shadow of its existence. What remained on the head was not enough to comb and not enough to cushion the bristles on the brush. If you were lucky



Figure 1: Brown's Barbershop as It Currently Stands

Note: Mr. Brown passed away in the early 1990s. His shop was taken over by a younger man. Now the business is called Robert's Ultimate Cuts.

enough, you could also get a bald fade, a gradual reduction of hair in the back of the head and the sides that would eventually trail to baldness closer to the ears and the hairline. The contrast between the actual baldness on the sides and back and the shadow of hair on the top gave the illusion that you had much more hair than you actually did. Yet if you were unlucky enough to get Mr. Francis, he would leave a "gop" in your head—an uneven removal of hair that looked like a hole or a gash. So, blaming our dad, we always politely resisted Mr. Francis's offers to cut our hair and waited for Mr. Brown.

Mr. Brown was a gentle man, who also drove the school bus that picked us up right in front of his shop and took us, at varying ages, to Vermilion Elementary School. Though he saw us constantly because of our frequent haircuts, driving us to school, and the fact that our grandmother lived right across the street, I am not sure if he ever knew our individual names. We were just called by our last name. This said less about his memory and more about the categorizing of kids and households in my neighborhood. All of the older people just seemed to say, "Aren't you Velma's boy?" or "Aren't you one of Joseph's sons?"

Mr. Brown would call us one by one to his chair. And we would fall in line. We always went in reverse order, the youngest to the oldest. This was primarily because my older brothers always used me as the warm-up head. The

hope was that once he would get to them that his bald fade would be tight, meaning it would be gradual, smooth, and clean. They would also hope that Mr. Brown would be more willing to listen to their pleas when they said, "Just a little off the top, please." But he never did.

Walking to or waiting at the barbershop, there was always a sense of dread, the confusion between choice and voice—knowing that until we would be 15 years old, that no matter what haircut we said we wanted, Mr. Brown would give us the haircut my father wanted. But there was some anticipation in going to the barbershop. I liked walking through the door. There was a screen door, the kind that always appears on old Southern houses, the kind that we had on our house. The screen door, although functional for the climate, also signaled a kind of domesticity—suggesting that the shop was more home or social arena than business. Before I would walk into the shop, there was this aroma of hair oils and pomades and the sound of talk that rushed into my head, signaling my arrival. Today, whenever I smell those scents, I think about that shop and the men who talked their way into my memories.

SIGNIFYING, SOCIAL EXCHANGE, AND ENCULTURATION

The nature of talk by the old men in the barbershop served both as a functional component of social exchange as well as perpetuating culture and community. In the process of their talk, I came to understand that they were not just spinning their wheels but promoting the cultural community in ways that were based in talk. Hence, the barbershop becomes framed as an occasion for developing and maintaining culture. Referencing his work in India, Singer (1959) said,

Indians, and perhaps all peoples, think of their culture as encapsulated in such discrete performances, which they can exhibit to outsiders as well as to themselves. For the outsider these can conveniently be taken as the most concrete observable units of the cultural structure, for each performance has a definitely limited time span, a beginning and end, an organized program of activity, a set of performers, and audience, and a place and occasion of performance. (p. xii)

Although the barbershop was the site for cutting hair, the act of cutting hair seemingly became secondary in this occasion of performance. Like "word workers,"³ it was through talk that they re-created the world that existed in-between Carmel Avenue and Surrey Street in Lafayette, Louisiana, the geographical markers of our neighborhood.

And although they often seem to be in conflict over the facts of the story, these old men were enacting the spirit of community. In this way, I use Eric Freedman's (1998) notion of *community* as a term "under which we can speak

of collective involvement, or even unified resistance, while at the same time respect (and expect) difference" (p. 251). I also want to buttress Freedman's definition up against Michael Oakeshott's (1962) notion of community in which an aggregate of people recognize that they are attending to ongoing social arrangements, where the recognition makes them a community, not some particular bonds, common goals, or even geographical borders. The salience of this definitional construction of community features elements that we choose to focus on (and why), as opposed to a reduction to those corporeal features that would link members of certain racial or ethnic sects, or the geographical borders of particular locations. Thereby, community is built on and around communicative and discursive strategies that mark shared interests and desires.

But even in their conflict, these old men engaged in a playful exchange—testing the borders of conversation, friendship, and community. As they played checkers or cards, the old men in Brown's Barbershop spoke a whole lot of trash. In *Black Talk: Words and Phrases From the Hood to the Amen Corner*, Geneva Smitherman (1994) defined "talkin trash" as

the art of dissin one's opponent during competitive play (as in basketball, Nintendo, Bid [or in this case checkers]) so as to erode their confidence, get them rattled or distracted so they'll make poor plays and lose the game. [Or it is] the art of using strong rhythmic, clever talk and forms in the African American Verbal tradition—e.g., signifyin, woofin—to entertain, to promote one's ego, to establish leadership in a group, or to project an image of BADness. (p. 221)

Their banter back and forth reflected the kind of trash talking that the younger boys did in the athletic arena and even when it came to girls and their sexual prowess. Yet these were not just moments of observation in the barbershop; unwittingly, we often became objects of their playful teasing. The old men would tease us about the growing fuzz on our faces—a first mustache and the shadowy presence of sideburns. They teased us about having girlfriends or not having girlfriends.

In the barbershop, these old men played a verbal game with us that was clearly designed to both tease and make fun of us and each other, while engaging in a social and cultural process of sense making. Their ability to engage each other on this level spoke to the nature of building community and perpetuating culture. Their inclusion of us was a form of community building and enculturation.

As the term suggests [*enculturation*], there is an encompassing or surrounding of the individual by one's culture; the individual acquires, by learning, what the culture deems to be necessary. There is not necessarily anything deliberate or didactic about this process; often there is learning without specific teaching. (J. W. Berry, Poortinga, Segall, & Dansen, 1992, pp. 18-19)

Sitting there and listening to their stories, I heard who was sleeping with whom. I heard who missed church that Sunday or the meeting of the Knights



Figure 2: Luke Walker's Beauty Care Center in the Renaissance Plaza

of St. Peter Claver. I heard about whose child was born, whose mother died, who was sick or ailing, and the latest shenanigans in city government. I heard about the cultural politics of our community and sometimes what it meant to "talk the talk," both to share meaningful information or just to be engaged in social and cultural exchange. David Guss (2000) suggested that when exploring cultural ethnography and the specificity of cultural performance, "what is important is that cultural performance be recognized as sites of social action where identities and relations are continually being reconfigured" (p. 12).

LOCUS, LOCATION, AND LUKE'S

Unlike Brown's Barbershop, which was a small stand-alone structure located on a residential street in a predominately residential Black neighborhood, Luke Walker's Beauty Care Center is located in a strip mall at the intersection of two major thoroughfares in what is becoming an increasingly commercialized Black and Hispanic community (see Figure 2). The shop sits in the center of the Fair Oaks Renaissance Plaza between Tastee Donuts and Burgers and *Chinese Food on one side and Sally's Beauty Supply, Stewart Plus Women's Fashion, and Pansy's Dry Cleaners on the other. The names of these

businesses offer no allusions of clever commercial advertisement. The names signal the product or service that is being sold.

Yet the product/service advertisement component of these shops is also accompanied by what could be considered the given name of the owner—such as Luke's or Sally's⁴—and thereby personalizes the service. The other linguistic accompaniments signal a descriptive adjective such as *tastee* or an Asian symbol that signals authenticity of the product—as if to say, “real” Chinese food. These small shops are pressed between a SUBWAY (sandwich shop) and VONS (a large grocery store). The positioning of these large chain stores further establishes the strip mall as a commercial zone of one-stop shopping, similar to those that stretch across the cultural landscape of the country.

In the far end of the parking lot, the construction of a Starbucks (coffee house) and a Hollywood Video is underway. It confirms the growing intervention of pop cultural icons in this community. Yet the barbershop as a “space is a practiced place” (Certeau, 1984, p. 117). This is in the sense that its functional design and location are realized not only in the act of cutting hair but the type of hair, the gathering of particular bodies, and the nature of the social exchange that occurs. So, whereas place designates activity, space particularizes the nature of human engagement.

When entering Luke's, there is a small foyer flanked with a glassed-in reception counter. Luke's daughter, an attractive peanut-colored woman with blond hair, often sits behind the glass and offers assistance. She greets me by name. Most people know that she is his daughter, which signals that this is a family-operated business. If I turn to the left and walk forward, I begin to enter the general seating area for the barbershop. The flooring throughout the shop is those black and white intermingling blocks that give the impression of a checkerboard, like in those nouveau art deco centers where the flooring is a feature of the room competing against the furniture.

A quick right turn leads you down a long corridor to a back hallway, restrooms, and a newly installed massage and aroma therapy center. In the barbershop, you will find seating for 10 waiting customers. The chairs are placed against the glass wall of the front of the building facing the communal space of the shop. There are a total of six barber chairs with individual sinks and workstations. There are five males and one female barber. There are six elevated televisions located at each station positioned in such a way that from any barber's station, the customers have a view of a television. The channels vary but move between sporting events and the local news. I have attended this shop for 2 years while wearing and maintaining my hair in a short flat top with a bald fade on the sides and back.

Luke Walker, the owner and operator, a charming, bald-headed, caramel-colored, middle-aged man, claims the first station as you walk in. His friendly demeanor reminds me much of Mr. Brown. As he greets me, there is that moment of familiar recognition as he says, “Hey man.” Then consciously or

unconsciously, he glances at my head to see the condition of my do (as in hairdo). If the shop is busy, as it usually is, he will tell me to take a number and find a seat. The pull-tab numbering system is a reminder that this is a business that does volume. Bodies translate into heads, heads into numbers, and numbers into money.

When possible, I often sit in the far back chair from which I can see the expanse of the room and listen to the exchange of men talking. The conversations that range from sports, music, local and national politics, and more are not unlike my experiences in Mr. Brown's shop. But my adult status offers me greater access to message and meaning.

Young boys get special treatment in this shop—both in that playful way in which older men tease and in that meaningful way in which young Black boys are socialized. It is not uncommon to see a young boy sweeping hair from the floor as a part-time job. But unlike Mr. Brown, when I enter the chair, Luke asks, "What are we doing today?" It is in these moments, like when he is shaving my beard and mustache, that I gleefully feel that I am a man—no longer living in the shadow of my father's desire and no longer under the critique of older men, at least not because of my hair.

If when standing at the main entrance once again I take a right turn, I would then enter the salon. To my immediate right is a manicurist station. The entrance requires a sharp left turn. The room flows into an open space. There are five chairs for waiting customers. Flanking the north wall of the room, there are four workstations with four female stylists. On the south side of the room, there is a series of four dome-shaped hair dryers, two large thrown-like pedicure chairs, and a hair-washing station with two sinks. At each workstation, the women have individual televisions that also serve as viewing monitors. The televisions are equipped with small video cameras that can be stretched out and pointed so that the customers can see an image of the back of their heads.

The flooring throughout this section of the shop is covered with large ceramic tiles. Although a cleaning lady will pass with a broom and dustpan, the floor is often covered with bits of multicolored hair—some of which is cut human hair, whereas the rest is synthetic hair used in weaving and extensions. This is a space marked by the work that the women do. But although the physicality of the location marks the space as a salon, it is the presence of people caught in the act of cultural performance that gives this location its life.

The aromas in the salon remind me of my mother's kitchen—but not her food. The kitchen in my childhood home was also the place where my mother would press my sisters' hair. My mother would sit on a chair near the stove with one of my sisters sitting on the floor between her legs facing in the opposite direction. To the left of her, the iron comb would sit in the fire on the gas stove. To her right, she would have her supplies—often a large towel, a large and small toothed comb, a brush, and a jar of Sulfur 8 scalp and hair-

conditioning grease. She would detangle and section off my sisters' hair and then reach for the hot iron and methodically pass it through their hair. Under the heat of the comb, the short and kinky hair would be straightened, leaving long and silky hair. The skill of my mother's hands would position the hot comb near but never on the scalp, pulling the hair up from its roots to its ends. But this would never stop my sisters from flinching from the fear of being burned.

I would watch in amazement and curiosity at the process of pressing hair and the talk that came out of it. Although it was the smell—the combination of heated metal, hair, and grease—that triggered my memory, the smell was only punctuated by the talk between my mother and sisters. These conversations seemed like coded encryptions, secret exchanges that only they really understood. When I would ask them questions, my mother would say, "Stay out of this—this is women's talk." She intentionally used the plural possessive of "women's talk" common to Black vernacular.

She used the phrase *women's talk* to claim both a privacy of her conversation with my sisters (as it related to subject matter) and also a specified gendered relational exchange. She claimed this to be unique to women—the type of exchange that I only noticed during the process of doing hair. And yet the Black vernacular use of this term does not simply "emphasize the distinction between women's and men's" talk (Langellier & Peterson, 1992, p. 157). It claims a specified discursive space that is influenced by gender and race. Hence, it is not only women talking but Black women talking, which from my lived experience has the potential to turn the world.

For the past year and a half, I have been a customer in the salon. I started by wearing my hair in what my stylist calls twists. Twists are tightly strewn curls that lay close to the head. The process of transforming my growing kinky hair into an average of eighty or so spirals takes an average of 2 hours. The twists were a precursor for developing what is popularly called "dread locks" or what many progressive African Americans seeking to subvert oppressive systems now call "brother and sister locks."⁵

In making the translation, the twisting technique is simply continued on a long-term basis, until the hair is locked (entangled). Every 3 to 5 weeks, I return to the shop to have my hair washed and tightened. In that time, like the boy I was in my mother's kitchen, I am privy to the women talking. They engage each other in issues that range from family (children and child rearing), church (religion and spirituality), food, fashion, media (television and film), news (local and national), racial and sexual politics, and what my mother might refer to as the untranslatable intimacies of "women's talk." On any given day, and especially on the weekends, spaces like Luke Walker's Beauty Care Center (in Black neighborhoods) are filled with the hustle and bustle of activity, where the traffic between talk and trade signals cultural performance.

BORDER CROSSINGS

When I enter Luke's—before his daughter greets me by name and either directs me to the barbershop, where I still get a shave, or confirms my appointment with Deanne, my stylist—there is a moment when I am just standing. I am standing at a threshold of a cultural site, a space that is inscribed by social practice and divided by gender difference. Yet the two are bridged together by the cultural performance of an imagined and assumed community. This is not a liminal space, like in Victor Turner's (1977) discussions of liminality, in which I am trapped "betwixt and between," either as customer or researcher, or where I am reduced to some "homogenous social matter," in the process of becoming something new (pp. 46-47; see also Turner, 1969, 1982). Yet I do agree that in this space, the social does matter.

My position is liminal, in the sense that I am standing at two border crossings. First, I am entering a space that is marked by the performance of Black culture and Black people, and although I am Black, the everydayness of my experiences is not performed exclusively or primarily in their company. As a university professor, I walk out of the ivory tower into this culturally marked space knowing, like in so much of the work of Dwight Conquergood (1988, 1989), that culture is performance. The facticity of my race serves as a visible recognition of similarity but not familiarity. So in my process, I engage in an intentional shift, an adjustment in my presentation of self. I assume a cultural performance that I hope to be accepted and recognized, and one that affords me (re)entrance each time—knowing that I still carry some of the residual traces and the stench of my academic culture and training—in my verbiage, logic, and manner.

Second, as a Black gay man, I am standing "betwixt and between" a site designated for men and one designated for women. And though my desire is specific and my manner is determined, to enter either of these spaces means that I must acknowledge the politics of gender performance that cross borders of neighborhood, race, and culture. I must also resolve myself to understand that the spirit of *communitas*, or what Turner (1977) further described as the "social antistructure" of these spaces, is gendered "between definite and determinate identities" (p. 46). And although my identity is gendered, it does not always fit comfortably within conversational spaces marked by heterosexual discourse, which is often the case in the barbershop/salon.

But while I am standing at this threshold, I am once again engulfed in the aroma of hair oils and pomades. The sound of talk rushes into my head, and I am transported not back to Mr. Brown's barbershop, or even my mother's kitchen, but to a place of comfort and familiarity that is not exclusive to the site but the occasion. I hear people engaging each other through laughter and the telling of tall tales. I hear the politics of the community unfolding as people tell their versions of what happened or what did not happen. I hear people

arguing over issues and engaging in the negotiation of culture and community. The protean, ritual, and cultural act of manipulating hair occasions the nature of their engagement.⁶ So I enter what Alicia Arrizón (2000) called the “discursive spatiality” of the barbershop—seeking services, desiring company, and engaging in the active performance of culture that defines all social spaces—while striving to maintain and achieve both an “individual and collective identity” (p. 27).

In the following sections, I continue with an interpretive ethnographic analysis of the articulated experiences of being in a Black barbershop and a Black salon. I describe the sensate sounds and unspecified voices that emerge and present themselves in the cultural milieu of the shop. I also try to articulate my own experience, as researcher and customer, participant and observer, and someone negotiating the tensiveness of the outsider/insider role within a cultural community.

ETHNOGRAPHY OF A MANLY EXPERIENCE

I must admit that as an adult, I have always enjoyed getting a haircut and getting my beard shaved. I must admit though (and I am sure that other men may not want to admit it), it is one of those forbidden sensual experiences. The first thing that Luke would do, like Mr. Brown used to do, is palm my head—rubbing his large hands over my head as if trying to sense what would be the most appropriate cut—like a phrenologist trying to read the bumps on my head for direction. Instinctively, he then turns the chair counterclockwise. The chair is then lowered and tilted backwards as he leads my head to the bowl to wash my hair. Like a father preparing for the bath of his child, he tests the water then slowly angles the nozzle over my head. He moves his hand across my head making sure that the water saturates the entirety. Then he applies shampoo to his hands and begins the process of massaging, until I can hear the sounds of suds bubbling around my ears, the clean smell of the shampoo tickling my nose, and the worries of my day draining away.

He rinses my hair thoroughly and then towel dries it with a gentle massaging action. He moves expertly through his process while managing at the same to maintain a conversation, briefly with me—but I am not a big talker; I like to listen. Most often he is talking with a waiting customer or the barber across from him. The barber across from Luke is another older guy. Maybe through seniority, the two of them have claimed the front chairs in the shop, leaving the younger guys and the one woman to claim back spaces. They talk as old friends talk—overlapping their conversations and laughing at inside jokes that only they really know. I am always both tickled and disturbed by these conversations. They are entertaining, in that way that you vicariously enjoy the pleasure of other people. But they are coded conversations. They

reference familiar people and places, situations and occurrences, shared histories of lives, and the politics of living within a Black community.

There is a certain construction of Black masculinity in this barbershop. Unlike the stoic images of Black masculinity that we see on television; or the rough, mean, and/or aggressive images that we see in film; or the violent, sexualized, and sometimes ineffectual images that we are expected to take as real, the images of Black masculinity in the barbershop are of smiling faces, brothers engaged in friendly exchanges, negotiating space and intention. It is a resistant performance against the public consumption of our image. It is a place where Black men "find sustenance" (Wilson, 1995, p. xii).

The recrafting of Black masculinity in this barbershop is one that is done within community by and with other Black men. It is done through the buzz of clippers, the drone of televisions, or the smooth grooves of soft jazz. The construction is done within talk—laughing, joking, and engaging the intimate and not so intimate aspects of shared communities. The construction is done with delicate razors—controlling quaffs, straightening hairlines, and defining lips by shaping mustaches, jaw lines, and beards. This is a site where Black men can engage in an "ethnophysicality, or an ethnography of [their] bodies" (Jackson, 1998, p. 172). It is a site where the cultural and racial familiarity of Black male bodies is acknowledged as meaningful.

After cutting my hair, Luke, without asking, looks at my facial hair and makes a move toward trimming it. But unlike Mr. Brown, I need not say, "Don't cut that please!"—because I am a man not a boy, and he knows it. Before cutting my beard, Luke places a hot towel on my face to loosen my beard. He removes the towel and then applies hot shaving foam. He then, with expert care and a straight razor, begins to etch away excess. The trimming of a man's facial hair is an act of trust and intimacy. It requires close proximity.

Luke leans his body against mine when he is trimming my facial hair. I am not sexualizing Luke or the experience, for he is a father figure. But I find that it is one of those few moments when men—and for me, Black men—come into an unacknowledged yet sanctioned intimate contact with each other. We understand the meaningfulness of the engagement, not only in the functionality of the action but in the knowing. The knowing—that a Black man who knows and understands the growth pattern of Black hair and the sensitivity of Black skin—is caring for another Black man. For many Black men with coarse facial hair are prone to severe razor burn and ingrown hairs if their faces are not properly prepared before and cared for after shaving.

So I allow Luke to cut my facial hair, and I enjoy the sanctioned trust of that engagement. And I know that for me, this act becomes a symbolic representation of the meaningfulness of the Black barbershop as a site for cultural exchange and maintenance.

A MAN IN A WOMAN'S SPACE

I must admit that when I am sitting in the chair in the salon, I feel out of place. I almost hear the phantom voice of my mother saying, "Stay out of this—this is women's talk." But now I am the one in the chair, not my sister. And although I am not engaged in a lot of talk, other than the initial phatic communication of introductions and current events, I am a paying customer. In essence, I have bought my way into women's space. Thus, I am a welcomed but oddly misplaced member of this cultural community.

Lately, I have had mixed feelings about being in this space. My feelings travel along three vectors of dis-ease. First, it is a struggle over the tendency to domesticate the work of these women. As Hall (1997) suggested, this would follow a long tradition of disavowing "the economic value of women's domestic labour." And like my perception of male barbers, "the domestic is political [and] the political is gendered" (p. 280). For my first experience of watching my mother doing my sisters' hair lays the foundation for my viewing. My mother did this work in the kitchen, which is already a site that domesticates the lives of women. And although I know that many of these stylists also "do hair" in their homes—this is a business. Their skill is a "marketable commodit[y]" that transcends pedestrian notions of just doing hair (Conquergood, 1992, p. 234). There is an exchange of commerce and professionalism that occurs here.⁷ And although there are also a cultural exchange and a cultural reproduction that occur in the process, it is the work—the skill and artistry—that initiates the contact and reaps its own reward.

Second is my presence in the company of the conversations that these women have—a discourse not intended for my ears, a world of talk that is established by the parameters of gender and experience. When they are talking about this guy or that guy, husbands or boyfriends, television actors or local access men, the struggles of motherhood or being a wife, and so forth, I wonder if they acknowledge my presence. I wonder if they care. I wonder if by sitting in this chair having my hair done, if I have given up something—maybe my perceived masculinity. I wonder if for the moment, I am considered a eunuch and hence no threat to their sex or to reveal their secrets—an honorary (wo)man. When they were recently talking about the immorality of the new Showtime program *Queer as Folk*, I wondered if they wondered what my thoughts would be. I wondered if they assumed that the ring on the middle finger of my left hand signifies a traditional marriage, an assumed sexuality, and, hence, an assumed agreement.

Third, I experience discomfort in the tensiveness between having my hair done in this space and studying this cultural work site. I am feeling trapped in an ethical quandary, the ethnographer as eavesdropper or spy. And although I have not secretly infiltrated this culture, or entered with pen and pad taking notes, or asked them questions about this or that, I am recording and docu-

menting what is happening. I am trying to make sense of it as an ethnographer and a man, knowing that the sensed observation of each influences the other. Ethnography is often about infiltration and filtration, the entering of intimate spaces and the processing of substantive worth. I know that my intention is not to exploit these women or this cultural site. I also know that this is a valued cultural space, as is the barbershop.

Black women walk into this space with knowledge and ease that their needs will be met. They know that women who know Black hair will do their hair and nails to their specifications. They also know, because most of them do, that they will engage in an exchange with other Black women on issues that are meaningful to their daily lives. And I sit in the chair as Deanna, my stylist, engages in talk with these women. Like women engaged in a quilting circle, her hands seem to operate separately from her conversation, or maybe it is in tandem. She grabs my hair (which is now locked) and pulls it toward her. At the base of the hair, she applies a protein styling gel, and gripping the hair, she pulls and twists, extending and refreshing the lock. She repeats this process for each lock as she “spinstories”⁸ with the women in the shop.

In these regular sessions, it is clear to me that we are indexing time. Not only on my head but also collecting, categorizing, and comparing experiences, which is at the core of communal cultural performance—a mirroring and reflecting of membership. My locks are slowly getting longer, but more important, through an intricate coiling of hair, it has formed knotted digits that enumerate my time in this space: digits that can neither be untangled nor delineated from the whole of the experience. Stories have been twisted into my hair, my natural hair. These stories, like my “brother locks,” are not exotic. And although they signal an ancient history, a performative resistance of culture—like the salon itself—it is in the localization of experience, an organic unity, that they find their meaningfulness.

Deanna comments on the growth each time that I am there. So do the other women in the shop, who always acknowledge my presence. I am the only man sitting and waiting. At first, these women thought that I was waiting for my wife, but soon I became a familiar fixture and gained my own significance. Some now joke with me saying things like, “Now you understand what us women have to do for you men.” Others say, “That looks really good. I have been trying to get my husband to get twists, but he will not come into the shop.” And still others make fun of me as I close my eyes during the process and fall asleep. In some ways, I am gradually accepted into this community but not as a member. The maleness of my body tells a different story. I am accepted. Yet I assume it is like the primates accepted Jane Goodall, certainly not as one of them but a cultural familiar, for surely she had begun to acknowledge the accepted cultural performances and thus performed accordingly. And so do I.

LABORED REFLECTIONS

This project is grounded in the labor of my reflection. But it also comments on the physical labor of work, care, and cultural communion that occur within the space of the barbershop/salon. I have entered these spaces as a cultural member and client, as well as an academic and ethnographer. My motivation to enter and make commentary has not been to mark uncharted territory but in fact to engage familiar territory, to seek both the services and the familiarity of these cultural spaces, and to explicate the significance of this cultural site. Traditional ethnography as a representational act would require the separation between locality and positionality, the relationship between where I am and who I am, and the distinction between why I am and what I am, to articulate when I see and what I experience within a cultural field.⁹ Yet as an indigenous ethnographer, I understand that the very confluence of these binaries greatly informs my appreciation for these spaces and the nature of the cultural exchanges that occur within them.

The Black barbershop/salon is a physical and acoustically sensual cultural site—a site where Black people come in contact with each other through touch, the manipulation of hair (length, shape, texture, and form), the sounds of talk, information sharing, and the deep penetration of cultural memory. The doing of Black hair is a “specifically cultural activity and practice,” and the Black barbershop/salon is a site where through the act of “socializ[ing] hair,” people also socialize themselves in community (Mercer, 1994, pp. 99-100).

In momentarily closing this aspect of my documentation of experience, I wonder if other Black folk will confirm the nature of my observations. I wonder this both as a nervous academic and in the desire to be a loyal cultural member, being true to a meaningful cultural ritual. And in saying that, I also realize the slippage and reordering of my desire from Black cultural member to a member of academic culture. Certainly, the written medium of this articulation engenders its own influence. But I come to believe what Jonathan Crary (1999) told me in *Techniques of the Observer*. I quote him at length to outline the breadth of his argument as I apply it specifically to this ethnographic experience.

Whether perception or vision actually changes is irrelevant for they have no autonomous history. What changes are the plural forces and rules composing the field in which perception occurs. And what determines vision at any given historical moment is not some deep structure, economic base, or worldview, but rather the functioning of a collective assemblage of disparate parts on a single social surface. It may even be necessary to consider the observer as a distribution of events located in many different places. (p. 6)

So maybe my articulation can work both as an isolated and subjective experience as well as a generalizable and collective experience that is marked in the singularity of my being and an accumulation of cultural knowledge over time. In other words, Certeau (1984) stated,

Analysis shows that a relation (always social) determines its terms, and not the reverse, and that each individual is a locus in which an incoherent (and often contradictory) plurality of such relational determination interact. Moreover, the question at hand concerns modes of operation or schemata of action, and not directly the subjects (or persons) who are their authors or vehicles. (p. ix)

And although I respond to my own concern, the impulse to question and the desire to continue to explore culturally familiar sites still remain. What also remains is my need to engage in the reflexive act of critiquing how I am implicated in these cultural sites—as participant, observer, and ethnographer.

I do not romanticize the barbershop as some idealized cultural space because I know that culture like “all performances are essentially contestatory” (Fuoss, 1993, p. 347). They are fraught with tensions, schisms, fractures, or tears that occur within the social fabric. Forces of change and conformity do symbolic battle to determine the cultural landscape. And community, like home, is always fraught with critique and challenge. As Wahneema Lubiano stated,

And that is because of its comfort and its opposite, coexisting in the same moment in the same circumstances. It is the excitement of being called out, of arguing and listening to arguments, of living day to day without the closure of final gestures which is both comforting and debilitating at the same time. (Alexander, 2001, p. 1301)¹⁰

One can find comfort in familiarity, regardless of the tensions that might inhabit those spaces and the politics of propriety. The practices, “a few words and images [in the barbershop] create links to the country where I am from” and the community that I claim membership in (Kurup, 1995, p. 37).

CODA: REPLAY AND REVISION

As a child, I remember the meaningfulness of going to the barbershop. Those experiences were mixed with dread and excitement. The dread was of my father’s tyranny about us getting a haircut. The excitement was the social context of the barbershop. In the Black barbershop of my childhood and the Black barbershop of my adult life, the experience has served as a marker and reminder of community.

These “cultural spaces are infused with the past, markers of identity that are creative and created through historical events and experiences” (Cooks, 1998, p. 230). Black people enter these spaces for cultural maintenance and cultural proliferation. As I sit in the barber’s chair, my body, like my history, is

in relation to other Black bodies, or what John L. Jackson (1998) called “relative bodies” (p. 179). Mr. Brown, Luke, Deanna, and those who came before and those who will follow are simultaneously present. The fading, twisting, and weaving of hair, of voices, and life stories are a part of the process, a part of the experience, a part of me. But these are my stories. My hair tells its own story.

NOTES

1. In the title of the article, “fading,” “twisting,” and “weaving” are references to specific Black hairstyles. Fading is “a male hairstyle, high on top and very short or completely shaved on the sides and back; the top can be natural or dreaded” (Smitherman, 1994, p. 106). Twisting is a style akin to dreadlocks in which the hair is twisted together but is not entangled. Weaving is a “female hairdo with synthetic or human hair braided into the natural hair at the roots, with the rest left loose for a long full-looking hairstyle” (Smitherman, 1994, p. 234). Although these are hairstyles, these names are used as metaphorical descriptions of the relational and interactive patterns of people, conversations, and lives that intermingle in the barbershop.

2. In this text, McCarthy (1996) drew on the work of Pierre Bourdieu and directed the reader to further insights on Bourdieu as articulated in Jenkins (1992) and Bourdieu and Passeron (1992). I also direct the reader to Bourdieu (1984).

3. In using the term *wordworkers*, I am referencing a science fiction short story by Carolyn Ives Gilman (1991) in which “wordworkers,” through language and storytelling, retell the story of their village every night in a literal attempt at reconstruction and cultural maintenance.

4. Sally’s Beauty Supply is a national chain but maintains a sort of hometown feel. The stores are often located in strip malls. In my experience, they are often present in predominately Black neighborhoods.

5.

Dreads/Dreadlocks: A misnomer for locks carries over two traditions. Firstly is the Rastafarian way of life, which refers to the uncut, unmanicured locks as Dreadlocks because of the fear they instilled in the White man. Secondly, the Eurocentric tradition of England, referred to locked hair as dreadful as they have historically slandered and disempowered any cultural feature that is not theirs. Today Africans perpetuated this slander by referring to their locks as “dreads.” The most accurate description of this hair form is Locks, or African Locks which denotes its place of origin. (Evans, 1992, p. 86)

For a different history of “dread locks,” see Mastalia and Pagano (1999). “Sisterlocks/brotherlocks” also refer to a specific technique of locking (see www.sisterlocks.com).

6. See Ingrid Banks’s (2000) project on why hair matters.

7. See the two *New York Times* articles by Williams (2001) and Tannen (2001) on the popularity, politics of hair, and the commerce of doing braids.

8. Langellier and Peterson (1992) used the term “spinstorying” to emphasize the strategic dimensions of this storytelling, which, while not exclusive to women or characteristic of all women, does emerge most clearly in studies of women’s personal narratives” (pp. 157-158).

9. In this way, I am also linking the experience of doing ethnography with Kenneth Burke's (1969) construction of the pentad or dramatic analysis that includes act, scene, agent, agency, and purpose.

10. Lubiano made this statement as a part of the closing program of "The Black Queer" in the Millennium Conference held on the campus of the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, April 7-9, 2000. The conference is documented in Alexander (2001).

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