

Prelude: The Barbershop

By Vershawn Ashanti Young

Preface from *Your Average Nigga: Performing Race, Literacy, and Masculinity*

- 1 While sitting in the only black barbershop in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, on the morning of writing this prelude, trying to think of the best way to acquaint you with what this book is about and who I am as the author behind it, I was struck with just how different I am from a lot of other black men, and yet again I was compelled to acknowledge my desire to be like them. The men I observed walked with that lanky dip I wish I could perfect; they talked casually but passionately about sports, basketball especially, with the deep resonance that reverberates in my hungry ears. Many spoke a spicy black lingo, the hip linguistics that even white kids from Iowa crave. The men wore pants that sagged. Their feet were adorned with the latest two-hundred-dollar sneakers endorsed by Allen Iverson or Shaq. Their self-assurance made me want to mimic them, to give a gender performance that would say unequivocally to everybody—white folks, black folks, everybody—that I too am a black male with balls. That’s part of why I was at the barbershop—and to get that fresh bald fade, one of the trendy hallmarks of black masculinity.
- 2 However, because this barbershop is located smack dab in the middle of Mostly White, Iowa—a state that unapologetically leads in incarcerating black men—my vicarious revel in black masculinity was sobered by the statistics: while only 2 percent of those who live in Iowa are black, blacks comprise 25 percent of the state’s prison population. Thus in addition to enchantment, I felt a conflicting fusion of fortune and tribulation—fortune because my language and demeanor often mark me as educated, separating me from those who exemplify the stigmatized (and paradoxically romanticized) black male profile, and consequently excusing me, though certainly not always, from the plight that follows that image. I am troubled because the black men who suffer most from the educational and judicial systems are poor, from the underclass, from the ghetto, like me. And although many flee the big city, looking for a small haven in mid-America, they sometimes find that their situation gets worse. I both identify with their predicament and disidentify with it because I am and am not exactly one of them, and both do and do not want to be.
- 3 To embrace my blackness, my heritage, my manliness, I identify with men who represent the ghetto. I no longer want to deny my class background or the racial experience associated with it. I identify to belong. I disidentify to escape racism, to avoid the structures that oppress black men. But I also disidentify to retaliate against black men—to punish them for what I perceive as their efforts to disown me. This ambivalence provokes me to imitate and just as often to dissociate from the black men I envy. Both efforts fail. Neither alleviates my racial anxiety. Instead, they heighten the angst I experience. As a result I am hyperaware of how masculine I am (not) and how black I (don’t) act.

- 4 I can't neatly explain why my visit to the barbershop brings all this to mind and spurs my unease. I mean, the barbers are only courteous. They take me ahead of clients who come less frequently. They even call me sir, although I'm not much older than they are and tell them to use my first name. Still, I can't shake the way I feel. For although I know that some of my discomfort is self-induced, a consequence of not conversing much with the barbers and their customers about their racial and gender performances and not allowing them to give their take on mine, I also know there's reason for my worry, that my experience is not unique.
- 5 Shelly Eversley aptly summarizes part of the reason for my concern in her book *The Real Negro*. Offering an anecdote about the time she felt uncomfortable in a black barbershop in Baltimore, Eversley concludes that the barbershop is "a racial and cultural distinction" from the university campus, the site where we both trained as intellectuals and currently work as professors. Because we participate in both sites, we suffer from the conflict that exists between them. So in order to get along on the (white) campus and in the barbershop, we must alter not the color of our skin but the ways we perform race in each location. These racial performances are most often carried out through language, the way we communicate.
- 6 Eversley, for instance, was "uneasy in her barber's chair" as "she listened to the men ... discussing their plans to [participate in and] make a political statement" during the Million Man March. In what she terms "her best graduate-student speak," she expressed her belief that the march perpetuated the oppression of black women and gays. "For a few seconds, the men ... seemed to listen," she writes, "[but] then continued with their conversation." Prompted by her barber to persist (he whispered: "Try it again, college girl"), "she offered a picture of her thoughts." She explained that the "sexism and homophobia" of the march "mirrored the logic of white supremacy." As she left, the men told her she was "still 100 percent black." As she made her way to campus, however, she says she "felt triumphant and sad"—triumphant because, although the men "had read the education in her language as proof of her 'imitation whiteness,'" she was able "to shed her academic self-consciousness" and belong, to be seen as "part of the group, as authentic." She was sad because, "when she arrived on campus," her performance of black authenticity lost its cachet; she realized that the benefits she garnered in the shop were now distinct disadvantages.
- 7 Why did Eversley feel split in two? Had she become the twenty-first-century incarnation of Du Bois's double consciousness, an embodiment of racial schizophrenia? One moment she spoke as an "imitation white woman," and after a switch of the tongue, she became an authentically black one. What endowed the barbers with the authority to make her feel race-fake and then authentic? Did her linguistic performance really have such transformative power? Whatever the answers to these questions are, it's clear that Eversley was compelled to contend with the consequence of her performance: the transformation of her political commitments into identity ambivalence.

- 8 This racial ambivalence is what makes me so self-conscious about and analytical of other men in the barbershop—because my linguistic performance is rated in relation to theirs. And not only do I feel as if my racial performance is judged, but I know my gender performance is too. Because the barbershop is a masculine space, the performance of heterosexuality is the gold standard. Talking sufficiently black is not enough for me to be heard; I must also speak and act acceptably masculine. This performance is even more difficult for those who are gay or are taken as gay, as I sometimes am, because we are often estranged in these spaces. Quincy Mills offers Eric as an example in this regard in his ethnography of a black barbershop on the South Side of Chicago.
- 9 Mills describes Eric as “one of the regulars in the shop.” But unlike other patrons, “his identity is shrouded in suspicion and innuendo,” because “the barbers and many customers assume that Eric is gay.” As a result, unlike other regulars who become key players in the discourse community, Mills writes that Eric “is silenced as an agenda setter. . . . When [he] would initiate conversations, the men would turn away, ignore him, or patronize him for a short while only to move quickly to other topics.” Instead of engaging Eric, they would “act annoyed by his mannerisms and voice.”
- 10 Mills doesn’t describe the particulars of Eric’s voice and manner, but it’s conclusive that for the others his masculine performance is insufficiently heterosexual. What’s interesting about the other men’s perception of Eric’s sexuality is that it’s not based on facts but on how he acts. On this Mills is clear: “Eric never came out to me” or to the other men, he says. “There was no confirmation of his sexual identity in the months I spent at the shop.” Eric’s insufficient heterosexual performance cast him “outside the boundaries of blackness because his demeanor and speech,” Mills writes, “are beyond the narrow definitions of masculinity.”
- 11 My personal history is replete with anecdotes like Eversley’s and experiences like Eric’s, and I’m trying to keep them from adding up, which is why I keep my mouth closed in the barbershop. It’s also why I was nervous about reading the novel I brought with me to help pass the wait. It’s not that novel reading itself is off-limits in the shop. I’ve seen other men read. But given my past, my profession, and my dubious masculine performance, I hesitate.
- 12 Literacy habits, like reading novels of a certain kind and speaking what might appear to be standard English, have always made me seem more queer, more white identified, and more middle class than I am. When I fail to meet the class, gender, and racial notions that others ascribe to me, I’m punished. In some ways, living in a mostly white town and being an assistant professor at a Big Ten school heightens—not lessens, as I had hoped—the conflict that stems from the sometimes converging, but oftentimes diverging, racial and gender expectations that are held out for black men and that we hold for each other.

- 13 I recognize the problem, and I'm working so that it doesn't consume me. "Hell," I say to encourage myself, "I'm an English professor; that justifies my reading a novel in a barbershop. And what's this nonsense of trying to fit in, to avoid alienation, to avoid name-calling: 'Sissy!' 'Faggot!'" But I wonder: What does not fitting in cost me? This issue of trying to fit in but never succeeding, of being perpetually on the margins of various communities and never finding a way into any one of them, is the trope of my life, making me something of a black Sisyphus. Academic literacy is my heavy rock.
- 14 You see, my Sisyphean experience in Iowa is a continuation of troubles that began while I was growing up in Chicago, in the late 1970s and '80s, in the notorious Governor Henry Horner Homes, the same site that Alex Kotlowitz writes about in his journalistic ethnography, *There Are No Children Here*. In fact, as Kotlowitz was gathering material for his book, I was still living there. But unlike his subjects, Lafayette and Pharoah, who are portrayed as boys who must fight the criminalizing lure of the ghetto in order to succeed in school, I was seen as an anomaly. Kotlowitz sees Lafayette and Pharoah as having identities compatible with the ghetto even as he describes their striving to get out. My identity, however, was atypical, alienating me from my neighbors and hood and excluding me from representations of "authentic" ghetto life. Thus I didn't have to fight to get out of the ghetto. I was kicked out.
- 15 It might seem like a good thing that I was kicked out. It might seem as if this exile expedited the leave I was seeking. But the problem that this bit of personal history presents, the problem that my monograph theorizes, the problem that my trip to the barbershop illustrates is this: because I ain't no homeboy—though I long to be and would do anything short of killing to gain that identity—I'm not ghetto enough for the ghetto. Because I'm not a white boy, I'm not white enough for white folks. And because I wasn't born into the middle class, I'm not completely accepted by the mainstream. And sometimes, if you can believe it, I'm not ghetto enough for the mainstream or middle class enough for the ghetto or black enough for white folks! The psychoemotional pain that this liminal existence creates, the pain of negotiating multiple cultural and racial worlds, is far too great for many. I've been doing it for a long time and have been able to cope only by transforming my personal problem into an intellectual one. In some ways I'm chipping away at the burden. But far too many are not able to do this. And why should they have to?
- 16 Perhaps some black men in that barbershop are also trying to avoid racial and cultural punishment. Instead of negotiating two worlds, maybe they have chosen to live in only one—a microcosm, a subculture of white society that accepts and mandates a certain sociolinguistic performance of masculinity. Because they have chosen and are accepted by a community, perhaps they have no need to envy me as I do them. But then what do they lose when they don't try to imitate what I represent? It's my desire to reconcile my ghetto past with my middleclass aspirations and possibly be of assistance to others in the process. I want to expose the factors that make black racial identity incompatible with literacy, especially for males. Thus masculine panic, racial anxiety, and their relation to language and academic literacy (as the prescribed means for class climbing) constitute the three-part theme that I explore in this book.