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On Shaving: Barbershop Violence in American Literature

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ON SHAVING: BARBERSHOP VIOLENCE IN AMERICAN LITERATURE

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT .......................................................................................................................... v  
INTRODUCTION ................................................................................................................. 1  
CHAPTER 1: THIS PLAY OF THE BARBER: WHITE MYTHS, BLACK BARBER .......... 6  
CHAPTER 2: MURDERER IN THE MIRROR: DELILLO'S SUBVERSION OF BARBERSHOP NOSTALGIA ................................................................................ 22  
CONCLUSION .................................................................................................................... 35  
APPENDIX ......................................................................................................................... 36  
NOTES ................................................................................................................................ 40  
REFERENCES ................................................................................................................... 42  
BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH ................................................................................................. 51
ABSTRACT

This thesis identifies and examines the trope of barbershop violence in American literature. Drawing on a wide range of literary, scholarly, and historical documents, I explore the way that certain authors subvert traditional ideas about barbershop discourse and use the quintessential American setting as a stage for failed nostalgia, tragic miscommunication, and outbursts of irrational violence in order to craft fictions that call on readers to strive for a more authentic and humanistic identification with their fellow man.

In the first chapter I take a close look at Herman Melville’s tableau of barbering in the 1855 novella Benito Cereno within a socio-historic context and then trace allusions to this seminal barbering scene in a number of works to show how many authors depict barbershop miscommunication and violence in order to highlight the racial disparities at the heart of American society. In Chapter Two I borrow the sophisticated methodology of James Joyce scholar Cheryl Temple Herr to examine contemporary American novelist Don DeLillo’s numerous depictions of the barbershop through the prism of Heideggerian ontology.
INTRODUCTION

The act of shaving and setting of the barbershop serve as vital elements in a wide spectrum of American fiction. This thesis examines one major pattern in the depictions of shaving and the barbershop: the ways authors bring the trope of barbershop violence into play in order to craft fictions that deal with the themes of racial strife in America, the failure of nostalgia, and the dangers of not communicating. In this thesis I analyze a number of texts from across time periods and genres in which American authors link the quintessential American setting of the barbershop with violence. Herman Melville, Charles Chesnutt, Ernest Hemingway, William Faulkner, Flannery O’Connor, Robert Lowell, Yusef Komunyakaa, Thomas King, and Don DeLillo utilize this trope of barbershop violence to transform the barbershop from a hub of discourse and bastion of masculine and cultural identity into the site of unexpected depravity and turn routine shaves into dramatic parables of trust and communication.

Chapter One provides a socio-historical contextualization of Melville’s barbering scene in Benito Cereno to show that the novella is part of an enduring tradition: authors using the barbershop in their work to critique the racial inequities at the heart of American society. In Chapter Two, I employ a framework of Heideggerian ontology—a critical approach I have adapted from the work of James Joyce scholar Cheryl Temple Herr—to explore the ways contemporary author Don DeLillo depicts the failure of barbershop nostalgia in a number of his novels to investigate “being-in-the-world.” This introduction will provide a brief history of the barbershop as a civic institution in Western society in order to furnish readers with an understanding of the millenniums-old associations which certain American authors are subverting. In addition, I look at the way two literary luminaries trope the barbershop in order to emphasize the fact that the subsequent chapters address only a few manifestations of a much larger pattern in American literature.

In his landmark 1962 study The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere, German sociologist Jürgen Habermas focuses primarily on the coffeehouse as the cornerstone of the public sphere and does not mention the barbershop at all. Don Herzog, in “The Trouble with Hairdressers,” questions this omission: “How much time did people spend in coffeehouses, anyway? And didn’t they talk politics in other settings?” (33). In fact, the barbershop has a much longer history of association with discourse than the coffeehouse. As Brian Cowan points out in his 2005 The Social History of Coffee, while the coffeehouse was a new phenomenon in Europe in the late seventeenth century, the barbershop was already a long-established part of life in Western society; rather than parallel institutions, Cowan, quoting from Margaret Pelling’s 1998 medical history of Britain, The Common Lot, explains: “the closest forerunner to the coffeehouse or bagnio in early modern Britain was not the alehouse, but rather the barbershop, which often served as an important center for the care of the body and personal hygiene, as well as providing ‘places of resort for men, offering music, drink, gaming, conversation, and news’” (120).

We can in fact trace the history of shaving back for thousands of years and see that it is intrinsically linked to civilization; Shaving implements survive from as early as the Neolithic period, barbers were a regular feature of Egyptian life by roughly 4000 BC, and, while the exact date is unknown, the barbershop appears to have first emerged in
Greece sometime around 1000 BC (Plumb and Lee 9; Nicholson 41; Flather and Smith 85-86). William Stearns Davis’ 1914 history A Day in Old Athens provides a picture of daily life in the ancient city circa 360 BC. He notes that in Athens, a slave state, “genteel idleness develops peculiar institutions. For example, the barber shops are almost club rooms” (24). Davis’s methodically researched text presents the barbershops of the Agora as established and “essential portions of Athenian social life” (25). While having their hair cut or waiting for their turn before the barber, the patrons engage in lively discussions on subjects ranging from chariot race odds and council decisions to Euripides and Plato (25). Davis’s description illustrates not only the longevity of the association with discourse, but also the conflicts between this idealized conception of the barbershop and the barbershop as it exists in reality; the men—and only men—in the shop are members of a newly emergent leisure class dependent on the inequities of a slave-based economy. Their conversations touch on philosophy but also on barbaric blood sports, and although they talk politics, we know that only men from their strata of society were able to participate.

One example of the continued identification of the barbershop as a fundamental civic institution in the American mind emerges in an anecdote Vice President Dick Cheney told in a 2004 campaign speech; Cheney recalls his early days working on Warren Knowles’ 1966 Wisconsin gubernatorial reelection campaign and that as they traveled from town to town Governor Knowles would, without fail, visit the leader of the local Republican Party, the newspaper, and then the barbershop. The Vice President gives an account of asking the Governor why he always visited the barbershop and recalls Knowles’ answer:

He said, look, that’s the communications center for the city, the community. Everybody has to get their haircut—well, most of us, anyway. (Laughter.) And they talk politics when they’re in the chair. So you want the barber on your side. And it was a very valuable lesson. It stood me in good stead later on.

The authors I focus on in this thesis vigorously challenge the traditional notion of a barbershop as a haven for meaningful dialogue and representative institution of the public sphere, constructing texts in which they show the American barbershop, and by extension the greater society, to be corrupted by capitalist greed, small-minded bigotry, and a self-perpetuating nostalgic mythology that seems comforting but in the end is an insufficient tonic for the ailments of modern existence. Time and again they show the barbershop to ferment violent degeneracy instead of rational-critical discourse.

Anton Chekhov famously remarked, "If in Act I you have a pistol hanging on the wall, then it must fire in the last act" (Rayfield 203). A straight razor to the throat functions in much the same way, and this literary dictum imbues barbershop scenes with a dramatic gravity from the very onset. In “Britva” and A Farewell to Arms, Vladimir Nabokov and Ernest Hemingway respectively warn of the potential danger of nostalgia for the barbershop in tightly restrained scenes of looming violence which remains, somehow, purely psychological. This term ‘nostalgia’ first appeared in a 1688 dissertation by Swiss medical student Johannes Hofer. As formulated by Hofer, nostalgia was a medical condition. Hofer arrived at the term by combining the Greek ‘nosos,’ meaning return to native land, and ‘algos,’ for suffering or grief. Swiss mercenaries were among the first to be diagnosed with the condition, and even into the time of the
American Civil War the term was mostly associated with soldiers away at war (Lowenthal 10).

In *A Farewell To Arms*, Hemingway chronicles the debasement of traditional prewar American values through the first-person narrative of a young American officer serving as an ambulance driver in the Italian army during the First World War. Through the lens of Frederic Henry’s experience, Hemingway shows us the terrible realities of combat, and in detailing the story of one man’s disillusionment and frustration, he illustrates the destabilization of conventional values—patriotism, religion, and valor, to name a few—that he saw as the defining characteristic of the epoch.

When he is badly injured in a trench mortar explosion, Lieutenant Henry is evacuated back to Milan. Even after being transferred to the American Hospital in Milan, he must still wait in pain for a few days before the doctor arrives to operate on his leg. In spite of his gruesome knee injury, he remains dedicated to the war effort. Even in the seemingly interminable wait for the doctor’s arrival, Henry bides his time and keeps his mind off his shrapnel-riddled legs by reading news accounts of developments at the front (87).

Henry wakes up one morning during his convalescence and asks his nurse if he can have a barber before breakfast. In the scene that follows, Hemingway turns the barbershop conventions of discourse and masculine camaraderie on their heads, crafting instead a scene of miscommunication, mistaken identity, and threatened violence. Instead of comradely conversation and news from the front as he expects, Henry is greeted with a bristly standoffish demeanor. Lt. Henry asks the barber, “What’s the matter? Don’t you know any news?” His hopes for a friendly and informative dialogue are dashed when the barber with the upturned mustache explains that it “is time of war” and “the enemy’s ears are everywhere.” The barber instructs Henry to hold his face still and tells him flatly, “I will tell nothing.” Henry can not understand why the barber is treating him so poorly, but when the man tells him that he “will not communicate with the enemy,” Henry decides wisely to stop pursuing his line of questioning, reasoning that “If he was crazy, the sooner I could get out from under the razor the better” (90).

Hemingway makes clear the deadly seriousness of the situation when the barber warns Henry, who has craned his neck in an attempt to get a look at his tormentor, “Beware, the razor is sharp” (90). Henry sends the barber away after he refuses a substantial tip and then demands an explanation from the porter who had hired the barber. The porter explains that the barber misunderstood and believed Lt. Henry to be an Austrian officer. Barely able to contain his laughter at the mix-up, the porter tells Henry that “One move from you he said and he would have—“ and draws a forefinger across his throat (91). As much as Frederic Henry would like to be fully accepted by the Italians, this misunderstanding is indicative of his status as an outsider.

Hemingway does not end his chapter with the departure of the barber and porter. Instead he meaningfully juxtaposes the failed communication and irrational violence of the barbering scene with a moment illustrative of the transformative capability of love. With the laughter of the porter still sounding in the hall, Henry receives a much more agreeable visitor, British nurse Catherine Barkley. Henry comments that, “When I saw her I was in love with her. Everything turned over inside of me” (91). Lt. Henry experiences the rush of sentiment as a physical sensation; Hemingway shows us here that Lt. Henry’s loyalties are shifting. After his visit with Catherine, Frederick is left with the
feelings of physical and spiritual renewal that being shaved had failed to provide. It is the sensual act between man and woman (which Hemingway signifies with a line break), and not the masculine ritual of shaving that leaves Henry feeling “wonderful” (93). The botched attempt at camaraderie in the shaving scene foreshadows the chaos and random violence that occurs during the disastrous retreat after Henry returns to action, when members of the battle police single him out as a potential traitor on account of his rank and accented Italian (222-23). After lining up on the banks of the Tagliamento to be executed with other officers, Henry dives into the river and forever deserts his military commission and misconceptions about the glory of war.

Vladimir Nabokov’s 1926 short story “Britva,” or “Razor,” which was not translated into English until the nineties, has a clear resemblance to Hemingway’s aforementioned shaving scene, which it actually preceded by three years. Nabokov transforms the story of a shave one quiet Berlin morning into a case of torture-by-nostalgia. Ivanov, a former White Russian soldier, disillusioned by the senseless bloodshed of the Bolshevik Revolution and torture at the hands of his countrymen, has moved to Berlin and assumed the quiet life of a barber. Still embittered by the injustices he has endured, Ivanov fantasizes about taking his revenge:

> Without a doubt scissors and razors are weapons, and there was something about this metallic chirr that gratified Ivanov’s warlike soul. He was a rancorous, keen-witted man. His vast, noble, splendid homeland had been ruined by some dull buffoon for the sake of a well-turned scarlet phrase, and this he could not forgive. Like a tightly coiled spring, vengeance lurked, biding its time, within his soul. (180)

As it happens, on this particularly warm slow summer morning, “a thickset gentleman in black suit and bowler” appears in his chair as patron. Ivanov knows immediately that the thickset man had been his interrogator six years before in a Kharkov prison. The man doesn’t recognize Ivanov at all, however, and fails to comprehend his predicament. Nabokov writes, “Ivanov had opened his razor and begun to sharpen it on a strap when he recovered from his amazement and realized that this man was in his power” (180-81). As he sets about shaving the man, Ivanov immediately apprises his customer of their true relationship. While tenderly shaving the man’s cheeks, Ivanov warns, “One little slip of the razor, and right away there will be a good deal of blood. Here is where the carotid throbs. So there will be a good deal, even a great deal of blood” (181). The roles of torturer and victim reversed, the man has no choice but to hold still and be shaved as Ivanov recounts the details of his capture, imprisonment, escape, and exile. As Ivanov tells his prisoner, “The point, comrade, is that I remember everything. I remember perfectly, and I want you to remember too….” (181). When he has finished shaving the man and recounting his biography, Ivanov is content to let the man go free.

Lt. Frederick Henry requests a barber in the hopes of finding in the ritual act of shaving both physical renewal and a moment of solidarity with his adopted countryman, only to have his nostalgic conception of barbering undercut by bloodshed he only narrowly avoids. Ivanov’s torturer, on the other hand, wants nothing more than to enjoy an anonymous shave one morning, but he is instead forced by threat of violence into contemplating the tragic results of the Russian Revolution for both sides. Ivanov is bitterly nostalgic for a homeland that ceased to exist in 1917, and he forces the thickset
man is to reflect on his moral culpability for torture—and probably murder—committed on behalf of an idealized conception of a homeland that never came to be.

While reinforcing the fact that I deal with only a fraction of the manifestations of the trope of barbershop violence in the following chapters, these uncannily parallel early fictions from Hemingway and Nabokov demonstrate the viability of barbershop violence as a literary device and the universality of the preconceptions about barbering that authors subvert when they employ this device. This comparison of *A Farewell to Arms* and “Britva” is an example of the new and meaningful connections we can make between seemingly disparate texts and authors when we view them through the prism of barbering.
CHAPTER 1: THIS PLAY OF THE BARBER: WHITE MYTHS, BLACK BARBER

“When snatchin devils up by the hair—then cut his head off”
-Robert Diggs a.k.a. RZA “Cuttin’ Headz,” 1995

Melville’s 1855 novella Benito Cereno is the logical starting point for any consideration of the barber and barbershop in American literature. Benito Cereno is not only one of the earliest examples of an American author drawing on the tonsorial arts in fiction, but Babo’s midday shave of Don Benito remains one of the most memorable and dramatic portrayals of barbering in literary history. Moreover, one can view the scene as a virtual blueprint for many of the barbershop fictions that would follow. In Melville’s masterful shaving scene, we can discern the elements of miscommunication, violence, and racial tension that characterize the trope of the barbershop to this day. In this chapter I analyze the complex racial interplay Melville depicts in light of recent historical and literary scholarship. I also juxtapose Benito Cereno with a variety of works—Edgar Allan Poe’s “The Murders in the Rue Morgue,” Charles W. Chesnutt’s “The Doll,” William Faulkner’s “Dry September,” Flannery O’Connor’s “The Barber,” Robert Lowell’s The Old Glory, Thomas King’s Green Grass, Running Water, and Yusef Komunyakaa’s “Captain Amasa Delano’s Dilemma”—to chart the enduring American literary tradition of authors troping the barbershop as a means of holding up a mirror to society and exposing the racial injustices that belie our ideals.

Too complicated for general audiences upon its initial release, the novella suffered misreadings or worse during Melville’s lifetime. Readers now see it as one of Melville’s most important achievements and among the most nuanced examinations of American racial tensions in antebellum fiction; the reputation of Benito Cereno has benefited tremendously from a renaissance of scholarship which seeks to contextualize the novella while addressing Melville’s treatment of race issues head on.1 With the perspective of 150 years and a focus on the “topicality” of Melville’s work2, we can see Babo’s shaving of Don Benito for what it is—a horrific exploration of race originating in the midst of an escalating crisis over slavery that would soon reach a breaking point. Melville layers his story with historical detail, religious allusion, and gothic symbolism to craft what is both an important and successful work of American literature and a calculated entrée into the national dialogue on race.

Melville tells the story of a strange encounter at sea in 1799. The American sealer, the Bachelor’s Delight, lies at anchor in the harbor of St. Maria, in South America, when its crew spots a ship in distress, which turns out to be a Spanish merchant vessel with a cargo of black slaves, moving dangerously close to a nearby reef. Seeing that the wayward ship faces imminent doom, Captain Amasa Delano of Duxbury in Massachusetts, a man “of singularly undistrustful good nature,” sets out in a small whaleboat to warn the crew and offer his assistance in the matter (36).

What follows stands out as a cautionary tale of American exceptionalism, what one critic called, “the great American text of the horror of racial separateness” (Rainer). “Sappy Amasa” (75) terribly misreads the dire situation in which he has unwittingly become entangled. Onboard the rotting Spanish ship, Delano meets the sickly captain,
Benito Cereno, who, with much assistance from his trusted slave Babo, seems to exert some semblance of command over a much-diminished Spanish crew and large and unruly mob of blacks. The reality of the situation is quite different—Babo, who has lead the slaves in mutiny, is in control of the ship and the captain. Shackled to notions of ethnic superiority and blind to every cue because of the foolish stereotypes that inform his worldview, Amasa doesn’t realize his terrible misreading of the situation until Babo leaps into the whaleboat in an attempt to stab Cereno.

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The knife Babo wields in his suicidal attempt on the whaleboat is not the first he threatens Cereno with. Perceptive readers are aware of the looming violence well before Amasa manages to put it together. Recent Melville biographer Andrew Delbanco described reading the text as “something like being teased with a promise of sexual relief but having it continually deferred. About halfway along comes a scene in which the teasing reaches a point of intensity that is almost cruel. It begins with an authoritative-sounding statement of how well suited blacks are to such personal services as manicuring, hair-dressing, and barbering…” (187). It is through the prism of barbering that Melville reassures readers that something has in fact gone terribly wrong aboard the San Dominick, and the shaving scene, occurring, as Delbanco points out, almost exactly in the middle of the text is Melville’s pièce de résistance in the novella.

**Babo’s Tonsorial Tableau**

Recent scholarship demonstrates an approach to Benito Cereno that pays special attention to the ways Melville adopts conventions of the popular form of the melodrama, particularly the tableau, to great effect. Proceeding in this direction, Jean Yellin, Eric Sundquist, Wyn Kelley, James Kavanagh, and others have provided new vantages from which to study Melville’s text. However, it is Melville himself, early in the story, who suggests we read BC this way: “The ship seems unreal; these strange costumes, gestures, and faces but a shadowy tableau just emerged from the deep, which directly must receive back what it gave” (40). The Oxford Literary Dictionary defines a tableau as, “a ‘picture’ formed by living persons caught in static attitudes. Tableaux were sometimes used at the ends of acts in 19th-century melodrama and farce […]. In a story or poem, a description of some group of people in more or less static postures is sometimes called a tableau” (Baldick). Wyn Kelley, in her excellent introduction to the Bedford edition of BC, explains how “the tableau provides a moment of intense awareness, a space for strong emotion, and a meaning that escapes language and depends on sensation. Using a typology of gestures, it arouses automatic rather than considered responses and suggest that humans everywhere are the same underneath their social masks and protective skins. By exaggerating experience and representing it visually, the tableau stops action” (26). With the hopelessly unobservant Amasa as the one-man audience, Babo directs the captive Spaniards and mutinied slaves in a personalized melodrama, and Melville leaves readers to watch in horror as he builds his horrific tableau.

When Delano begins to question specifics in Cereno’s recounting of the ship’s misfortunes, Babo overhears and announces that the time has come for Cereno’s midday shave: “Then if master means to talk more to Don Amasa,” said the servant, “why not let Don Amasa sit by master in the cuddy, and master can talk, and Don Amasa can listen, while Babo here lathers and strops” (71). Melville wants readers to recoil in horror when
Amasa agrees. He drives home the mortal consequences of what is about to transpire as he limns the scene: “There were also two long sharp-ribbed settees of malacca cane, black with age, and uncomfortable to look at as inquisitor’s racks, with a large misshapen arm-chair, which, furnished with a rude barber’s crutch at the back, working with a screw, seemed some grotesque, middle-age engine of torment” (72).

Delano’s prejudices are so ingrained in his thinking that he is unable to comprehend the peril into which he has cast himself. Although he had been beginning to grow wary of the goings on of the San Dominick, his dangerously misguided assumptions of racial superiority, tied to the craft of barbering, lead him to further let down his guard. Melville writes forebodingly, “Captain Delano took to negroes, not philanthropically, but genially, just as other men to Newfoundland dogs…in the cuddy, relieved from his former uneasiness, and, for various reasons, more sociably inclined than at any previous period of the day, and seeing the colored servant, napkin on arm, so debonair about his master, in a business so familiar as that of shaving, too, all his old weakness for negroes returned” (73-74). When Babo takes a Spanish flag from a locker and fixes it around Cereno’s lank neck as a barber’s bib, Delano dismisses the subversive symbolism of Babo’s choice of the flag as a product of dire circumstances and a reaffirmation of a stereotype, the “African love of bright colors and fine shows” (74). A spellbound Delano eagerly watches as Babo prepares the final props and lathers Cereno:

Setting down his basin, the negro searched among his razors, as for the sharpest, and having found it, gave it an additional edge by expertly stropping it on the firm, smooth, oily skin of his open palm; he then made a gesture as if to begin, but midway stood suspended for an instant, one hand elevating the razor, the other professionally dabbling among the bubbling suds on the Spaniard’s lank neck. Not unaffected by the close sight of the gleaming steel, Don Benito nervously shuddered; his usual ghastliness was heightened by the lather, which lather, again was intensified in its hue by the contrasting sootiness of the negro’s body. (74)

Melville presents a frightening still image—a dark black Babo, freshly stropped razor held high, lording over a trembling and defeated Cereno as a clueless Delano stands by and does nothing. Eric J. Sundquist explains that Melville’s “play of the barber” works by “compress[ing] Delano’s blind innocence, Benito Cereno’s spiritual fright, and Babo’s extraordinary mastery of the scene’s props and actors into a nightmare pantomime symbolic of the revenge of New World slaves upon their masters” (158). If only for a brief moment, the tableau of Babo shaving his ‘master’ Cereno illuminates Amasa’s purview: “Altogether the scene was somewhat peculiar, at least to Captain Delano, nor, as he saw the two postured, could he resist the vagary, that in the black he saw a headsman, and in the white, a man at the block” (74). Amasa quickly dismisses his fear of black insurrection as an “antic conceit,” but Melville shows how apt the comparison between barber and headsman had truly been when Babo begins to shave Don Benito. Melville reveals the true nature of master-slave power relationship when Babo the barber subordinates Cereno at razor’s edge: “‘Now, master,’ he said, readjusting the flag, and pressing the head gently further back into the crotch of the chair, ‘now, master,’ and the steel glanced nigh the throat (75).
Black Barbers in the Republic

Understanding the fear that Melville plays into with his barbering tableau requires that we take into account the ways he is actively toying with cultural assumptions and everyday behaviors. A thorough cultural contextualization helps to situate Melville’s shaving scene. Abolitionist Thomas Wentworth Higgins wrote in 1858, “I have wondered in times past, when I have been so weak-minded as to submit my chin to the razor of a coloured brother, as his sharp steel grazed my skin, at the patience of the negro shaving the white man for many years, yet the razor outside the throat.” Higgins specifically links barbering with slave revolt, warning, “The American slave might soon act on his own. We forget the heroes of San Domingo.” As this ominous observation by Melville’s contemporary makes clear, the practice of blacks shaving their white masters is one of the clearest distillations of the irrational incongruities and complex dualities inherent in American slavery. In Babo’s shaving of Cereno, Melville turns a practice that would have been intimately familiar to most of his readers into the height of gothic horror and the cause for a reexamination of the principles (or lack thereof) on which the republic operated.

Sundquist’s “Benito Cereno and New World Slavery” is an important touchstone in the Americanist resurrection of Melville’s text. Sundquist observes the flowing together of social concerns and formal authorial mastery in the shaving scene. In an eloquent summation of the scene’s allegorical power, he writes, “Delano’s ‘old weakness for negroes,’ surging forth precisely at Melville’s greatest moment of terrifying invention, the shaving scene, is the revolutionary mind at odds with itself, energized with the ideals of fatherly humanism but, confounded by racialism, blind to the recriminating violence they hold tenuously in check” (102-03). Sundquist’s painstaking work to situate Benito Cereno in the social and historical contexts from which Melville wrote helps to shed light on the specific fears he hoped the novel would elicit in readers. As the ever-growing body of scholarship on BC attests, the specific historical detail that Melville incorporates into the novella benefits from a little unpacking. While the real slave ship revolt that inspired the basic plot transpired in 1805, Melville tellingly moves the date to 1799, an especially turbulent time in world history. Melville intentionally evokes an image of America in one of her greatest periods of chaos and uncertainty; the United States at the turn of the nineteenth century was a country on the brink of a second violent revolution. Bitter partisan politics revealed the dark side of representative democracy and irrational conspiratorial fears—sparked by a wave of blood-soaked revolutions in Europe and the Caribbean—prevailed in the fledgling republic. A reactionary response to these fears would typify the age, and it was within this atmosphere of panic and apprehension that Melville chose to set BC. He goes even further, explicitly linking the events that transpire in the text to the Haitian Revolution by changing the name of the wayward ship Delano boards from the Tryal to the San Dominick (Sundquist 140).

In addition to linking BC to specific historic events, Melville plays off of cultural assumptions about the barbershop. In stark contrast to the way Hawthorne portrays the barbershop as a crucial hub of discourse during revolutionary times in his 1840 children’s historical fiction, “Grandfather’s Chair,” the cuddy in which Babo shaves Cereno is, like Babo’s head, a “hive of subtlety” (104). The discourse in Babo’s barbershop is anything
but free. Melville shows the ideal of barbershop discourse to be utterly destabilized when Delano begins to question the unusually long passage of the San Dominick around Cape Horn and up the western coast of South America, and Babo reminds Cereno, with a slip of the razor, just who is in control of the situation. As droplets of Cereno’s blood stain “the creamy lather under the throat,” Babo, “back to Captain Delano, and face to Don Benito, held up the trickling razor, saying, with a sort of half humorous sorrow, ‘See, master—you shook so—here’s Babo’s first blood’” (75). Melville was not the first American to write about the threat of being shaved by “another.” An anonymous letter to the editor published in Charles Brockden Brown’s Monthly Magazine in 1799 which warns of the dangers of patronizing a barber voices the same revolutionary and xenophobic fears that Melville’s “play of the barber” would later employ:

To shave, has, indeed, been hitherto, in some degree, a trade; but as the timid may be averse to resign their throats to so keen an edge in the hands of another; as the industrious are subjected to numerous inconveniences by the unseasonable engagements and delays of the artist; as the indolent are condemned to uneasy postures or long walks; as the delicate may justly shrink from the unwashed hands, and from brush and soap polluted by indiscriminate use; and, lastly, as the vain are deprived of an excuse for contemplating their features in a mirror, an adept at the trade believes himself entitled not only to attention but to gratitude, by enabling every man to shave for himself. [qtd. Fliegelman xii]

As Ancient and Honorable Barber Profession, a textbook for barbers published in the 1970s has it, “as more of the wealthy people became slave owners, the duties of the barber were shifted to the servants. Thus from the high social level enjoyed in earlier years, particularly in England, the barber’s prestige slipped to its lowest ebb” (Plumb and Lee 18). What the authors fail to appreciate is that for many African-Americans, previously drowning in a sea of white racism and inequality, the low tide of prestige associated with certain occupations is the only thing that allowed them to achieve a first substantive foothold in an economic system predicated on their subservience. Paul Gilje and Howard Rock in Keepers of the Revolution, highlight the difficult tradeoff black barbers were faced with: “In the early nineteenth century, a black could thrive, become a boss, and own a business. To do so and ensure gentleman customers however, the black entrepreneur had to subscribe to the white man’s racial barriers” (235).

In his essential study of free blacks in the antebellum south, Slaves Without Masters, Ira Berlin explains how the concept of “nigger work,” that is, work the society deemed to lowly or demeaning for whites, changed the social and economic landscape of the south, often to the advantage of blacks. Berlin states that “the stigma of ‘nigger work’ greatly enlarged the free negro’s economic opportunities…and the most important ‘nigger work’ was barbering. Free negro barbers could be found in every southern city, and despite the prescriptive pressures free negroes faced in other trades, the number of black barbers grew steadily during the antebellum years” (234-35). In a table presenting data gathered in an 1860 manuscript census of Richmond, Virginia, Berlin shows that barbering was the leading occupation for free blacks in the city. Of 174 skilled free blacks in Richmond in 1860, thirty-three, or nineteen percent, worked as barbers (237). In the 2004 article “From Outposts to Enclaves: A Social History of Black Barbers from 1750 to 1915,” Douglas Bristol Jr., a protégé of Ira Berlin, provides the most thorough
and in-depth look at black barbers to date. Bristol wastes no time getting to the complex dynamic of the black barber and the white patron, even citing BC as an example, remarking that, “A perceptive understanding of their customers, in the sense of W.E.B. Du Bois’s concept of double-consciousness, allowed black barbers to capitalize on racial stereotypes. Because they understood how whites saw them, they were able to create masks that white customers found appealing” (596-97). Just as Babo creates a mask of black complacency that lulls Delano into a false sense of security, African Americans were able to achieve relative prosperity by exploiting stereotypes. By playing the part of the humble skilled servant, Babo is able to invert the normal power relationship and turn Cereno into “in toilette at least, the creature of his own tasteful hands” (77).

Bristol details the way that, even as black barbers lost the majority share of the market with the influx of immigrants in the 1850s, they were still wealthier on average than their white counterparts by way of a continued dominance in the upscale market even as other black businesses failed and lost white patronage (596-98). The black barber’s “willingness to accept and exploit” whites’ racial stereotypes was not without its detractors within the black community. In 1851 the Convention of the Colored Free Men of Ohio resolved, “that a colored man who refuses to shave a colored man because he is colored, is much worse than a white man who refuses to eat, drink, ride, walk or be educated with a colored man because he is colored, for the former is a party de facto to riveting chains around his neck and the necks of his much injured race” (qtd. in Foner 277).

The biography of Robert Wier, published in 1977 as A Black Businessman in White Mississippi 1886-1974, explains very poignantly the direct impact of the politics of racial separateness in the south on black barbers. Wier, the proprietor of The City Barbershop, the first black-owned business on Main Street in Starkville, Mississippi (29), was a black man, admittedly so white he could have passed for white, but still a black man (or ‘colored’ as he referred to himself), running a barbershop for white clientele. The barbers who worked for him were black, as were the youngsters who shined shoes, but the customers were all white. Robert, in fact, did not know how to cut black hair. All his training was on white hair, and so, even had he wanted to cut black hair in his shop (and this would definitely have hurt or even ruined his business) he couldn’t have because he did not know how. (Marszalek and Wier 34)

Eventually, uneasy over the potential outcome that integrating his shop would bring about, Wier closed the doors of the City Barbershop permanently in 1966 (74). More than eleven decades after Benito Cereno’s first appearance and 101 years after the adoption of the Thirteenth Amendment, fears of racially motivated violence in the barbershop were enough to drive a well-respected mainstay of the community out of business after forty-five years.

**Influence and Parallel: Situating Melville’s Shaving Scene in American Literary History**

Looking at the way barbering figures in another Melville text and studying some possible literary antecedents provide further contexts for Melville’s troping of the barber
and barbershop. Melville had begun to explore the dramatic potential of barbering on the high seas in an earlier work. His 1850 novel *White-Jacket* contains an entire chapter, “Men-of-War Barbers,” in which he outlines the numerous risks involved in maritime shaving. The novel’s title character explains that the crude setup of the gun-deck barbershops were “hardly equal to the sumptuous appointments of metropolitan barbers” and had about them “nothing, in short, that makes a shore ‘shave’ such a luxury” (351). The crude tools were not much better. *White-Jacket* explains that there are only two razors, both of which are of “the simplest patterns, and from their jaggedness, would seem better fitted for the preparing and harrowing of the soil than for the ultimate reaping of the crop” (352). Because shaving days fall on Wednesdays and Saturdays regardless of inclement weather, shaving often occurs in less than ideal circumstances. *White-Jacket*, half joking, remarks that it is “excellent preparation for a sea-fight” to fortify oneself by visiting a sea-barber on a rough day, with the ship rocking even “as they flourish their edge-tools about the lips, nostrils, and jugular” (352). *White-Jacket*’s meditation on maritime barbering is Melville’s own “excellent preparation” for the shaving scene in *BC*.

The parallels between Babo and that most famous of villainous barbers, Sweeney Todd, warrant consideration. Caleb Crain, in a 1994 article in *American Literature*, makes the tantalizing connection between Herman Melville and George Dibdin Pitt, the man who adapted Sweeney Todd into a melodrama in 1847 (28). Crain makes his connection on the basis of a reference to Dibdin which appears in this same novel *White-Jacket* (383). By way of this mocking aside in *White-Jacket*, it would seem, we can infer that Melville would have known of Pitt’s most enduring melodrama *Sweeney Todd*, at the time he composed *Benito Cereno*. However, contextual evidence and further research indicates that the reference Melville makes is to poet Charles Dibdin, known for the sort of sea-songs the men aboard the Man-of-War *Neversink* are singing in the passage in question, and not to George Dibdin Pitt. While Melville may well have been familiar with Sweeney Todd or some folk antecedent—the basic story was already something of an urban legend by the time of *Benito Cereno*’s serialization—explicit connections between the two works remain elusive. Merton M. Sealts does not list the Prest or Pitt adaptations of *Sweeney Todd* in his exhaustively compiled *Melville’s Reading*. What seems most likely a red herring of literary influence is nonetheless an interesting parallel to consider, especially when, like Crain, we pay close attention to the element of cannibalism, explicit in Todd’s meatpies and implied in the flesh-stripped corpse of Aranda, former owner of the slaves, which, crudely lashed to the bow, replaces Christopher Columbus as the ship’s figurehead (88).

Hans-Joachim Lang was the first to acknowledge important similarities between *Benito Cereno* and its clearest literary antecedent—Edgar Allan Poe’s short story, “The Murders in the Rue Morgue,” which originally appeared in 1841 (Newman 106-07). Lang, publishing in 1973, shows how both authors exploit racial hysteria in order to stir latent fears in their audiences. The grisly details of the murder weapon C. Auguste Dupin reads about in the paper have an interesting tonsorial bent: “On a chair lay a razor, besmeared with blood. On the hearth were two or three long and thick tresses of grey human hair, also dabbled in blood, and seeming to have been pulled out by the roots” (11). The condition of Madame L’Espanaye’s corpse, “her throat so entirely cut that, upon an attempt to raise her, the head fell off” continues the pattern (11-12).
By carefully reading the clues, examining the site of the crime, and keeping his mind open to all possibilities, Dupin is able to solve the case that has stumped police. The keen observation and elegant investigatory method of Poe’s Dupin, a coolly rational and extraordinarily perceptive amateur Parisian detective, is in many ways the complete opposite of Melville’s overly trusting and foolishly prejudiced Delano. Where we can see Dupin as an archetype for the preternaturally brilliant detective in popular culture (e.g.; Sherlock Holmes, Batman, Columbo), Delano seems to prefigure the frustrating protagonists in horror films who utterly fail to perceive dangers apparent to audiences and whose every action seems a slap in the face to rational human behavior. Delano fails to read the clues, does not pay close attention to his surroundings, and is in turn sabotaged by his own close-mindedness. Melville shifts the burden of carefully reading and unpacking the myriad clues to the audience.

Dupin finds strange hair in the apartment of the murder victim and focuses on the unintelligible cries which all the witnesses report. On the strength of this evidence, Dupin reveals his solution to the narrator, his unnamed friend. Dupin produces a text and instructs the narrator to read a passage, an “account of the large fulvous Ourang-Outang of the East Indian Islands. The gigantic stature, the prodigious strength and activity, the wild ferocity, and the imitative propensities of these mammalia are sufficiently well known to all” (33). After enticing the sailor who owns the orangutan to come forward, Dupin and his companion learn the exact circumstances precipitating the gruesome murders. On returning home one night, the sailor finds his pet had escaped from the closet that had served as its makeshift cage. What’s more, “Razor in hand, and fully lathered, it was sitting before a looking-glass, attempting the operation of shaving, in which it had no doubt previously watched its master through the key-hole of the closet” (38-39). The alarmed sailor brandishes a whip, and the alarmed orangutan fled into the night, razor in hand. Poe’s unnamed narrator recounts the sailor’s story of the violence he was witness to when he followed the orangutan: “As the sailor looked in, the gigantic animal had seized Madame L’Espanaye by the hair, (which was loose, as she had been combing it,) and was flourishing the razor about her face, in imitation of the motions of a barber […] With one determined sweep of its muscular arm it nearly severed her head from her body” (40).

While the barbering aspects of the murders in Poe’s story are obvious, in order to fully comprehend the racial implications of “The Murders in the Rue Morgue,” we must understand the socio-historical climate in which Poe wrote. Leland S. Person notes that when one takes into account “the common nineteenth-century association of orangutans with African Americans, the racial dimensions of this revenge plot become obvious” (219). The arrival by ship from exotic lands, status as property, fear of whipping, escape and violent revenge through careful imitation all have clear correlations to the plight of a slave (Sundquist 87). Furthermore, Cuvier, the orangutan authority Dupin instructs his companion to read, is not a fictional creation. Georges Cuvier, a leading French naturalist and a proponent of scientific racism, conducted an autopsy on Saartjie Baartman, a South African woman of Khoisan descent who gained considerable fame and notoriety as a sideshow attraction in early nineteenth-century Europe under the stage name “The Hottentot Venus” (Holmes 7). Baartman lived a tragically short life. Arriving in England at age twenty-one in 1810, she was dead by the end of 1815 (Holmes 53). In “Report on Observations Made on the Body of a Woman Known in Paris and in London as The
Hottentot Venus,” Cuvier remarks that, “The Negro race…is marked by black complexion, crisp woolly hair, compressed cranium and a flat nose. The projection of the lower parts of the face, and the thick lips, evidently approximate it to the monkey tribe: the hordes of which it consists have always remained in the most complete state of barbarism….Her moves had something that reminded one of the monkey and her external genitalia recalled those of the orang-utang.” At the 2002 state funeral that followed the repatriation of Saartjie Baartman’s remains, South African President Thabo Mbeki read aloud this very selection (Holmes 179, 225).

Edward Long, a representative of the East India Company, wrote a 1774 history of Jamaica that includes a lengthy treatment of orangutans drawing on personal encounters and indulgent speculation. After describing orangutans and African slaves for comparison, Long asks, “Has the Hottentot, from this portrait, a more manly figure than the orang-outang?” He answers himself, “I suspect he owes, like the orang-outang, the celerity of his speed to the particular conformation of his foot; this, by the way, is only my conjecture, for he has not as yet undergone anatomical investigation. That the orang-outang and some races of black men are very nearly allied, is, I think, more than probable” (365). Even more startling is the hierarchy of intelligence he suggests a few pages later: “We observe the like gradation of the intellectual faculty, from the first rudiments perceived in the monkey kind, to the more advanced stages of it in apes, in the orang-outang, that type of man, and the Guiney Negroe; and ascending from the varieties of this class to the lighter casts, until we mark its utmost limit of perfection in the pure White” (374-75).

Sidney Kaplan is one of many readers of BC to make the etymological link between Babo and baboon (42). Kaplan even includes a note which points to a letter to the editor appearing in the same issue of Putnam’s as the final installment of Melville’s serialization, which warns, “with all this jollity and waggishness, the nigger has terrible capacities for revenge and hatred (which opportunity may develop, as in St. Domingo), and which ought to convince the skeptic he is a man and not a baboon…” (47).

**Babo’s Grandchildren**

Robert Lowell’s *The Old Glory*, Thomas King’s *Green Grass, Running Water*, and Yusef Komunyaka’a “Captain Amasa Delano’s Dilemma”—a play, novel, and poem, respectively—find American writers retelling or directly alluding to Melville’s story. Other American authors—Charles W. Chesnutt, William Faulkner, and Flannery O’Connor—continue the cultural work of looking at race in America through the lens of the barbershop without directly alluding to BC. A variety of fictions find American writers following in Melville’s footsteps and exploring the barbershop as a microcosm of racial tensions.

In his story “The Doll,” Charles W. Chesnutt, like Melville and Poe, examines the white myth of the murderous black barber. Chesnutt’s presentation of the barbersing tableau from an African-American perspective offers surprising insights. Published in *The Crisis*, in April 1912, “The Doll” is the story of Tom Taylor’s shaving of Colonel Forsyth. Taylor is the proud proprietor of the Wyandot Hotel barbershop, “the handsomest Barber shop in the city” (249). His state of the art shop is equipped with electric lights, white tile floors, mirrored walls, and ten luxurious chairs—each manned
by a dapper and skilled black barber and occupied by a white customer, as the Wyandot
serves an entirely white clientele. Tom Taylor is a hard working and respected member of
his community who has managed to succeed despite the limited employment
opportunities his second-class citizenship affords him. As Chesnutt explains, “Committed
by circumstances to a career of personal service, he had lifted it by intelligence, tact and
industry to the dignity of a successful business” (249).

As Tom leaves his house to head back to the shop after his lunch break, his
daughter Daisy gives him her broken doll to have mended that afternoon. Shortly after
Tom arrives back to work and hangs the doll on the wall so that he will remember his
errand later, the loudmouthed Colonel Forsyth, a southern politician in town for a
conference of Democratic leaders, interrupts the calm atmosphere of the shop and sits in
the vacant chair in front of Tom. “I want a close shave, barber,” the uncouth Forsyth
barks (249). A local man, Judge Beeman, who has been charged with showing the
colonel a good time during his stay, is observing the proceedings at Forsyth’s behest; by
being shaved, the colonel means to prove his claim that blacks are “born to serve and to
submit. If they had been worthy of equality,” he argues, “they would never have endured
slavery. They have no proper self-respect; they will neither resent an insult, nor defend a
right, nor avenge a wrong” (249). In a move even judge Beeman finds to be in “hardly
good taste,” the colonel continues his bigoted harangue even as Tom skillfully sets about
his task. His “impassive countenance betray[ing] no interest,” Tom expertly strops his
razor and listens to Forsyth brag about how, long ago, he’d “killed a nigger to teach him
his place” (250).

Listening to the details of the story, Taylor realizes that Forsyth is talking about
the day he murdered the barber’s father. Faced with this realization, Taylor is at a
difficult moral crossroads. As Chesnutt explains, “The brown boy who had wept beside
his father’s bier, and who had never forgotten or forgiven, was now the grave-faced,
keen-eyed, deft-handed barber, who held a deadly weapon at the throat of his father’s
slayer” (251). Taylor finds himself with his razor at the throat of an evil man who has
done him great wrong. Having dreamed his whole life about settling the score with his
father’s killer, Tom can’t help thinking that with “one stroke of the keen blade, a
deflection of half an inch in its course…a murder would be avenged, an enemy
destroyed!” (251).

Without ever alerting the colonel to his peril, Taylor considers the implications of
his choice. Taylor knows that his is the last black-owned barbershop in town, the final
relic of a time when blacks flourished in the trade. Providing readers for the first time
with the perspective of the black barber, Chesnutt gives voice to the conflicting impulses
that must have dominated the thoughts of many poorly treated blacks. “Should he slay
this man now beneath his hand,” Taylor thinks, his shop, “a center of industry, a medium
of friendly contact with white men, would be lost to his people—many a good turn had
the barber been able to do for them while he had the ear—literally had the ear—of some
influential citizen, or held some aspirant for public office by the throat” (252). Despite all
the good that his shop does for the community and his race, Taylor’s razor is moving
towards the colonel’s throat when the sight of Daisy’s broken doll reminds him that
enacting his violent revenge is not worth sacrificing his ability to provide for his young
daughter. Rather than concerns about the future of his business, it is his paternal instinct
that saves him from giving in to his desire for revenge if not for justice.
Taylor decides that he will be the better man and displays in his release of Forsyth Christian charity and forgiveness: “If there was a righteous God, who divided the evil from the good, the colonel would come to get his just deserts. Vengeance was God’s; it must be left to him to repay!” (253). The story does not end on such a positive note, however. Chesnutt has another surprise in store. After paying Tom and leaving the shop, the Colonel boasts that he has proven his theory of black complacency. “The barber,” he tells Beeman, “is the son of the nigger I shot” (253). Instead of a neat conclusion, Chesnutt leaves readers, black and white, to question whether Taylor did the right thing in letting Forsyth escape.

In his early short story “Dry September,” William Faulkner captures the complicated dynamics and ethical uncertainties of southern racism by examining, from five different points of view, the events leading up to the lynching of Will Mayes, an innocent black man. By presenting the story from so many angles, Faulkner suggests that absolute truth is fleeting and that the burden of culpability in the lynching rests on an entire community. In the stifling heat of an unusually hot Yoknapatawpha summer, the rumors of Will Mayes’ violation of Minnie Cooper are the subject of lively debate in the Jefferson barbershop. Henry Stribling, the barber nicknamed Hawkshaw, expresses serious doubts as to the validity of Cooper’s claims.

Hawkshaw is familiar with both the accuser and the accused and senses that something about the story doesn’t add up. “I know Will Mayes,” Hawkshaw tells the men in the barbershop, “He’s a good nigger” (169). A brash young man and a drummer from out of town, operating purely on the basis of wild speculation and ingrained racist attitudes oppose Hawkshaw, whose appraisal of the situation is the product of earnest observation and interaction with the individuals in question. Shortly after John McLendon, a decorated World War I veteran, enters the shop and causes a commotion by asking if the men are, “going to sit there and let a black son rape a white woman on the streets of Jefferson,” a lynch mob forms (171). The drummer that Hawkshaw was shaving joins McLendon’s group. Hawkshaw implores them again, “Boys, don’t do that. Will Mayes never done it. I know,” but the screen door slams closed with a crash and the armed men are already on their way (172). Hawkshaw puts his razor away, grabs his hat from the wall, and with a sense of urgency rushes out of the shop in an effort to head off the mob. (173). Instead, when he catches up to them in an alley, they assume he has had a change of heart and decided to join in after all. Hawkshaw gets in the car with the ex-soldiers and they head towards Mayes’ place. During the ride Hawkshaw tries to reason with the men, but to no avail. Again, he begs McLendon and his gang to get all the facts before setting off on a path of violence (176-78).

Futilely arguing for Mayes’ innocence even as they reach his home on the outskirts of town, Hawkshaw ends up a party to the violent revenge of the mob. Hawkshaw sweats and feels nauseous as the men drag Will from his home and handcuff him. When Mayes defies McLendon’s order to get in the backseat, the mob violently attacks him As the men rain down upon him with random blows, a terrified Mayes strikes out at the attackers he can barely see in the dark of night. Mayes “whirled and cursed them, and swept his manacled hand across their faces and slashed the barber upon the mouth, and the barber struck him also” (178). On the way back to town with the mob and their prisoner, Hawkshaw wants nothing more than to flee the violence of which he has become an involuntary participant. He asks McLendon to stop the car and let him out, but
McLendon, without slowing down, tells Hawkshaw to “Jump out, niggerlover” (178). Will Mayes tries to appeal to Hawkshaw’s basic dignity as the car speeds down a bumpy country road: “Mr. Henry,” he pleads, “Mr. Henry” (179). Hawkshaw is overwhelmed by his inability to help Mayes, who he knows personally to be a good man, and throws himself from the speeding vehicle. After dusting himself off, the defeated Henry Sibling limps back toward town (180). Faulkner turns the trope of the barbershop into a parable of helplessness in the face of cruel injustice. Melville wrote about the dangers of white complacency during slavery whereas Faulkner depicts the peril of compassionate southern whites who, born into a toxic atmosphere of institutionalized racism they feel helpless to change, are left, like Hawkshaw, with the unpleasant option of either going along for the ride and perpetuating the unfair way of life or throwing themselves from the speeding vehicle to escape. In the suffocating heat of Faulkner’s Jefferson, the cool and conversation of the barbershop and the efforts of the good-hearted barber are powerless in swaying the townspeople from their violent course. Faulkner uses the trope of barbershop violence to explore racial tensions in the South again in *Light in August*, the novel he published the following year. Sundquist asserts that Faulkner consciously alludes to Poe’s “Muders in the Rue Morgue” in the details of Joanna Burden’s murder: “Insofar as Poe’s story should be read in part as an oblique libidinous racial fantasy, the details of the murder, the fear of whipping that initiates it, and the focus on the beast’s mimic shaving with his murder weapon all have their relevant analogues in *Light in August*” (87).

Another Southern writer, Flannery O’Connor, also examines the ugly racial realities of life in the south and associates the breakdown of traditional values with the barbershop in an early short story. “The Barber” is the second story in O’Connor’s *The Geranium: A Collection of Short Stories*, which she submitted as her Master’s thesis to the Department of English, in the Graduate College of the State University of Iowa in June 1947. In “The Barber,” O’Connor writes of the frustrations of being a liberal academic posted in the provinces of the Jim Crow south. “It is trying on liberals in Dilton,” her story begins, employing a place name that evokes an actual town in rural Georgia, near the Tennessee line. Rayber, a professor at the nearby college sits in a chair at the barbershop three weeks before the Democratic white primary.

As he shaves Rayber, the barber asks whom he plans to vote for in the upcoming election. Rayber states his preference for Darmon and is appalled by the rude question the barber follows up with: “You a nigger-lover?” (15). Rayber replies in the negative, but is too rattled by the barber’s nonchalant racism to deliver the eloquent oration he feels the situation calls for. Rayber, face half-shaved, sits captive as the barber points the razor at him and quotes the segregationist candidate Hawkson’s thoughts on blacks: “Said a hunnert and fifty years ago, they was runnin’ each other down eatin’ each other—throwin’ jewel rocks at birds—skinnin’ horses with their teeth…. ain’t nothin’ gonna be good again until we get rid of them Mother Hubbards and get us a man can put these niggers in their places” (15-16). Incidentally, in the barber’s recapitulation of Hawkson’s discriminatory rhetoric, O’Connor provides another intersection of barbering and cannibalism, perhaps making a veiled reference to BC. Rayber’s indignation multiplies exponentially when the barber shouts across the shop to ask George, a young African American who is sweeping up, if he hears. “Sho do,” comes George’s reply (16). The barber matter-of-factly warns that “If a nigger come in my shop with any of that haircut
sass, he’d get it cut all right” (16). After being tortured with highlights from most of Hawkson’s speeches, Rayber is able to get the barber back to the task of shaving. He departs without further incident, but the episode weighs heavily on his mind for the rest of the day and even as he lies down to sleep that night.

Eventually Rayber forgets all about it. The next time he is in the barber’s chair, Rayber’s thoughts are occupied by his wife’s routine for baking canned meat with a slice of cheese for his supper every Tuesday. That is until the barber prods him back into political argument by asking if he is still a Mother Hubbard and then steering the conversation to the desegregation of public schools. This time, a fat executive joins the barber in his arguments on behalf of Hawkson. O’Connor writes, “Rayber had a blind moment when he felt as if something that wasn’t there was bashing him into the ground” (19). He is reduced to fantasizing about kicking the fat executive in the mouth and muttering under his breath about reasoning. To further push Rayber, the barber gets George to answer, “Wouldn’t like that,” when asked about attending a white school (19). The executive quotes Hawkson’s thoughts on integration, arguing that the time has come when “we got to sit on the lid with both feet and a mule” (19).

Rayber tries to keep his cool by looking out the window towards the park, but three zoot-suited black teens post up in front of the shop, “making a hole in the view” (20). Privy to Rayber’s thoughts, we can see the incongruity between the liberal rhetoric he espouses and his personal views. Only moments after arguing for the desegregation of schools, Rayber is annoyed by having his view obstructed and angrily wonders to himself, “Why the hell can’t they park somewhere else?” (20). Considering this passage in light of George Ralph’s formulation of Lowell’s Amasa Delano as “a prototype of the American quasi-democrat who will ambiguously reject crude subjugation of the black man on the one hand and deny him genuine equality on the other” (157), makes clear the similar themes explored by Melville and O’Connor in their very different texts. Rayber espouses equality but, like Delano, fails to see how his own tacit complicity in Dilton’s institutionalized racism is counterproductive. Rayber, after all, receives his pay from a segregated college and fraternizes with openly racist members of the community. His thoughts about the zoot-suited youths and George demonstrate that his true thoughts towards individual blacks never stray far from the patronizing extremes of scorn and pity. Rayber promises to return in a week with an argument that will convince the men in the shop to vote for Darmon. Rayber works all week on his response, only to have it fall flat when he delivers it in the barbershop. George tells the barber that if they let him vote he will vote for Hawkson and Rayber loses his cool. Rayber punches the barber and knocks him down. The barber is still trying to calm him down as he runs out of the store.

O’Connor leaves readers with a powerful image that evokes both the heat symbolism and hazy moral ambiguity of “Dry September”: “The blood began pounding up Rayber’s neck just under his skin. He turned and pushed quickly through the men around him to the door. Outside, the sun was suspending everything in a pool of heat, and before he had turned the first corner, almost running, lather began to drip inside his collar and down the barber’s bib, dangling to his knees” (25). Now perhaps more Cereño than Delano, Rayber is a decent and rational man morally compromised and driven half-mad by his own paralysis in the face of horrendous injustice. Channeling his disgust into an eloquent screed only to have it fall on deaf ears, Rayber feels intense frustration as he
flees the shop—probably not too different from the way many of these authors felt as they sat down to write their stories about barbers.

The Old Glory, the only foray into drama of American poet Robert Lowell, opened at the American Place Theatre in New York in November 1964, eleven months and twenty-one days after the Kennedy assassination and less than four months after the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. The work, which Albert E. Stone hailed as, “an important cultural event,” consists of Lowell’s adaptations of two stories by Hawthorne along with Melville’s BC. When Lowell’s version of “Endecott and the Red Cross” proved too difficult to stage, the planned triptych became a diptych and audiences only saw “My Kinsman, Major Molineux” and “Benito Cereno” (Stone 467).

The Old Glory still stands out as an incongruous feature in Lowell’s career and the American literary landscape. After receiving Ford theater fellowships, Lowell and fellow poet William Meredith set out to adapt Benito Cereno in the style of operatic libretto, a project that was quickly abandoned. Following the dissolution of this collaborative effort, Lowell worked toward adapting the story as “an acting play,” one that would place as much importance on language as plot (Lowell). Lowell described an early draft of his “Benito Cereno” as “iambicky free verse, full of horror, charade, and scenes” (386). Given Melville’s borrowing of strategies from melodrama, “Benito Cereno” was a particularly successful dramatization. While adhering closely to Melville’s plot, Lowell deliberately deviates from his source material in a few instances. Stone remarks that “Melville’s Benito Cereno seems to surrender its gray web of subtleties to Lowell’s strident black and white assertions” (469). Sacrificing the ambiguity that is the defining characteristic of Melville’s text allows Lowell to explore the racial dimensions of the plot in a much more forthright manner. Melville’s cautionary themes of American exceptionalism and the blindness to reality that Delano suffers for his bigotry still shine through in Lowell’s dialogue:

Who could want to murder Amasa Delano?
My conscience is clean. God is good.
What am I doing on board this nigger-pirate ship?” (160-61)

In a clever solution to the problem of adapting a text that relies so much on Amasa Delano’s private thoughts for the stage, Lowell invents for him a companion. Along on this doomed voyage is John Perkins, a young relative of Delano’s who serves as boatswain. “Delano plays the man of the world with Perkins; together,” as Baruch Hochman writes, “they make a caricature of American smugness” (131). For Stone, Lowell’s splitting Melville’s character in two demonstrates his “recognition of American history both as innocent promise and corrupt fulfillment” (477). Lowell changes Babo to Babu, perhaps in order to maintain the suggestion of baboon when characters speak the name aloud.

Lowell also ratchets up the allegorical detail present in Melville’s text to a near farcical level; the San Dominick becomes the San Domingo, and the Bachelor’s Delight the President Adams. In case Melville’s setting of the story in 1799 off Chile did not carry with it enough historical weight, Lowell sets his version on July 4, 1800 and moves the action to the Caribbean. Lowell irreverently amplifies Melville’s own symbolism in scenes like the one where Amasa discovers the reason for Aftufal’s punishment was using the Spanish flag as toilet paper. Amasa’s observation—“That was a terrible thing to do with a flag; everything is untidy and unraveled here—this sort of thing would never
happen on the *President Adams*” (148-49)—perfectly captures the spirit of Lowell’s exaggerated allegory of exceptionalism.

In a 1960 letter to William Meredith, Lowell expresses his desire that the adaptation reflect the difficult racial tensions of his day. Even with the work in an embryonic stage, Lowell is working out how to make “Benito Cereno” reflect “what’s happening now, wrong blazing into a holocaust, no one innocent” (360). A survey of critical reaction to this adaptation of “Benito Cereno” shows that Lowell was successful in connecting his retelling to contemporary American life. Despite appearing “so remote in theme and mood from our own time,” Lowell’s version of Melville’s story is, George Ralph writes, “one of the few really significant statements about race to have been made in the theater recently” (155).

Lowell’s pessimistic view of race relations in America crystallizes in the tableau of the barber. Like Melville, Lowell masterfully plays “the tragic melodrama of Don Benito and Babu” against “the ironic comedy of Delano’s numb incomprehensions” (Stone 131). Delano hardly bats an eye when Benito tells Babu, “You belong to me, I belong to you forever” (166). Babo responds coolly while applying salves to Benito’s face and cleaning his master’s blood from the razor: “Ah, Master, spare yourself. Forever is a very long time; nothing is forever” (167). As the play races to its violent conclusion, Delano, far from being fearful, has been completely disarmed by Babu’s exploitation of white stereotypes and cannot wait to tell Perkins about all he has seen in the cuddy:

> Even shaving here is like a High Mass.  
> There’s something in a Negro, something  
> that makes him fit to have around your person.  
> His comb and brush are castanets.  
> What tact Babu had! What noiseless, gliding briskness!

> What’s more, the Negro had a sense of humor.  
> I don’t mean their boorish giggling and teeth-showing,  
> I mean his easy cheerfulness in every glance and gesture.  
> You should have seen Babu toss that Spanish flag like a juggler,  
> and change it to a shaving napkin! (167-68)

Lowell casts aside Melville’s ambiguity about Delano’s innocence with the merciless brutality on display in his final scene. Babu, waving a white flag of surrender, tells Amasa in no uncertain terms, “Yankee Master understand me. The future is with us” (194). Amasa raises his pistol and tells Babu that “This is your future,” before shooting him dead and emptying his revolver into Babu’s corpse. The audience can see Lowell’s tragic and bloody finale as a reflection of the, “development of American racism between Delano’s first incarnation in 1855 and his second in 1964. Between the two dates, Lowell reminds us, has intervened a century of war, reconstruction, lynching, and racial discrimination” (Stone 477).

For an established poet like Lowell to strike out in a new direction and produce an unabashedly politically and racially charged historical drama while the country fought a war in southeast Asia and saw racial frictions at home too frequently spill over into violence “came in 1964 as a rather startling novelty” (Ralph 156). Stone credits Lowell with helping to reignite critical interest in the socio-historical dimensions of American
fiction. He praises *The Old Glory* for giving “fresh impetus to a movement, the revival of interest in historical literature, much underrated by some critics of contemporary American culture,” and locates in Lowell’s play “further proof of the fact that the Fifties and Sixties were actually decades in which many of our most imaginative artists were engaged in confronting the national past and finding forms for its configurations and complexities” (468).

Melville’s depiction of barbering continues to serve as an important intertextual element in the work of even more contemporary writers. Thomas King’s ambitious postmodern 1993 novel, *Green Grass, Running Water* is a curious but raucously entertaining amalgamation of Native American oral storytelling traditions with popular culture and the Western canon. King includes in his sprawling novel a character named Babo Jones who, as it turns out, is Babo’s great-great-granddaughter, and she tells detectives Cerenzo and Delano, “Now, my great-great-grandfather could handle a blade. Have I got stories…. Got to be careful under the nose and around the neck” (98). King’s portrayal of the wise and mischievous Babo Jones mirrors contemporaneous developments in critical treatments of *BC* that focus on the way Melville, perhaps unintentionally, “transmit[s] fascinating and powerful incarnations of not one but two African and African American trickster folk traditions: the Old Master and John-the-slave tale, and the Brer Rabbit trickster story” (Bickley 99). King seems to recognize in Babo the same manifestations of trickster folk traditions that scholars like Bruce Bickley assign him.

Yusef Komunyakaa provides another interpolation of *BC* in “Captain Amasa Delano’s Dilemma,” a poem in his 2004 collection *Taboo*. The poems Komunyakaa collects in *Taboo* focus on what Michael Collins identifies as “Western slavery in general and on the subject of artistic perspectives on slavery and/or race relations in particular” (630). In the poem, Komunyakaa uses the barbering scene to spotlight Delano’s crippling inability to overcome his bigotry:

I would have sat
in the captain’s chair
& said, “Shave me,
Nigger.” To me, Babo
could only have been a body
servant.

(33)

As Komunyakaa’s poem and comments illustrate, a century and a half after the publication of *BC*, the barbering tableau lives on as an effective literary device for exploring the American legacy of racial violence and as a way for writers to enter into a dialogue with their forbears.
CHAPTER 2: MURDERER IN THE MIRROR: DELILLO’S SUBVERSION OF BARBERSHOP NOSTALGIA

Gordon Lish writes in his afterword for Don DeLillo’s first play, The Engineer of Moonlight, that, "Where we are and where we are going is where DeLillo is. He is our least nostalgic writer of large importance" (47). Not only the least nostalgic contemporary writer of major importance, DeLillo has made the malfunction of nostalgia one of the major themes of his work. In her review of DeLillo’s 1977 novel Players in the New York Times, Diane Johnson recognizes early on DeLillo’s sobering treatment of nostalgia in his fiction: “Recently, people seem to look around for a small town where the people, ostensibly alive today, are not like the people of today but sit in a scene of pumps and privies talking of old times in the style of John Gardner. This nostalgia, one of DeLillo’s many targets, is an implicit comment on the present...” (1). DeLillo revisits the theme of nostalgia again and again in his fiction. In pinpointing for interviewer Thomas LeClair the salient features in works by Vladimir Nabokov, James Joyce, Malcolm Lowry, Hermann Broch, and William Faulkner, DeLillo offers an insight as to his personal attitude on the inverse relation of nostalgia and the meaningful creative endeavor: “No optimism, no pessimism. No homesickness for lost values or for the way fiction used to be written. These books open out onto some larger mystery” (10). It is fitting then, that DeLillo recognizes and revisits the barbershop as a dramatic setting for violence in his work. He has returned to the barbershop for crucial scenes in many of his writings since the early 1990s; in the novels Underworld (1997), Cosmopolis (2003), and Falling Man (2007), as well as the film Game 6 (2004), DeLillo scrutinizes the limitations of nostalgia by way of the barbershop.

The 1976 novel Ratner’s Star, a romping slapstick subversion of science fiction genre conventions that borrows its structure from Lewis Carroll and probably DeLillo’s most Pynchon-esque novel, finds the author already delving into the potential for violence in the seeming comfort of the traditional American barbershop. Although the two barbershop scenes in this long novel are very short, each is important to both the structure and plot of Ratner’s Star. In these early examples, we see that DeLillo is already beginning to work out the way the barbershop fits into his anti-nostalgic vision. A careful unpacking of these brief scenes in Ratner’s Star provides perspective on DeLillo’s later fictional treatments of barbering.

DeLillo turns this early novel’s parallel barbering scenes into a microcosmic distillation of some of his larger themes. In accord with foundational element of “pattern, pattern, pattern” (158) that he establishes in the novel, DeLillo fits the barbershop scenes into a complex framework. The first barbershop scene occurs as Billy Twillig is getting to know some of his neighbors in Field Experiment Number One, a super-secret, maze-like underground science station where he works as part of a team on decoding transmissions believed to be broadcasting from a distant galaxy. A genius in possession of powers he cannot comprehend, and surrounded by numerous factions with dubious intent, Billy is really just a lonely fourteen-year-old kid from the Bronx. DeLillo captures alienation of modern existence in Billy’s terror when Billy runs away from the off-putting Elux Troxl, the mysterious Honduran gangster, who wants to “lease” Billy’s mind in order to excel in world money markets (146). After making one in a long series of
hasty exits, Billy runs into a room, “lavishly mirrored…. all tile and ivory” (150). He recognizes the room as a barbershop, but sees no sign of a barber. The barbershop’s existence in the subterranean research station is incongruous to be sure, but by this point in DeLillo’s novel, it is clear that nearly anything is possible. In the chair he finds a man whose head is “wrapped in a towel and the body covered with the traditional tonsorial bib” with just his shoes sticking out. Not unlike Melville, DeLillo turns the seemingly inconspicuous barbershop into the setting of gothic horror. Billy sees a hand sticking out from under the bib, and since it shows no signs of “warts or raised and rampant veins,” he shakes it (150). Without removing the towel from his face, the man introduces himself as Shlomo Glottle and explains that he fell asleep and dreamed he was screaming, only to awake alone in the shop. When Glottle finally reaches up to remove the towel, Billy, fearful that because the exposed hand was normal the face might show “the effects of some awful law of reverse compensation, a counterbalancing deformity of the face perhaps, Glottle’s face, a half-mouth maybe or exposed mucous membrane,” and knowing all the while that this idea is “stupid on several levels,” flees before Glottle can unmask himself (151).

DeLillo attaches an even more negative connotation to barbering later in the novel, as the scientists try to convince Billy to have a “Leduc electrode” implanted in his scalp. The electrode, a small pink disk, would link his mind to the powerful Space Brain computer, uniting the leading human and artificial intelligences. The side effect of the procedure is that its overstimulating the left side of the brain induces “an overpowering sense of sequence” (244). The proposed operation “would be carried out in a chair-shaped operating table to save time between barbering and incision” (246). The scientists begin their practice run with Hercule Leduc going through a simulacrum of barbering before Billy wisely opts out of the procedure (247). A little later, Billy reflects on how close he came to being “barbered, slit open, and computerized” (259). Significantly, the horrific procedure that would turn Billy into something less than human would be carried out in the barber’s chair and require a haircut. The strange side effect—an obsession with “the way one thing leads to another” (244)—is a clear counterpart to nostalgia and would have a stifling effect on Billy’s ability to think in new ways about the future.

DeLillo and Joyce in Heidegger’s Barbershop

Joyce scholar Cheryl Temple Herr, in her excellent 2004 pamphlet “Joyce and the Art of Shaving,” provides another angle for looking at the ways DeLillo uses the barbershop in his fiction. The paradigm “for future work” on James Joyce that Herr “sketches” provides valuable corollaries for thinking about the ways that DeLillo, an avowed Joyce acolyte, uses the barbershop in his own work. Herr presents a detailed explication of the shaving scenes in Joyce’s hypercanonical Ulysses and makes a case for the prudence of an approach to Joyce’s text that treats the author as philosopher. Linking Joyce’s ontological concerns to Martin Heidegger’s concept of “Being-in-the-world,” Herr argues cogently that, “Mulligan’s skilled use of his matitutinal tools is hand-in-glove with Joyce’s own manual premises” (1). Herr’s focus on shaving in the text and especially her utilization of a Heideggerian terminology can be constructively applied to DeLillo’s fictions nearly entirely intact.
Heidegger’s 1927 tome *Being and Time* is one of the most influential texts in twentieth-century philosophy. It is also one of the most demanding. While a nuanced investigation of Heidegger’s complex philosophy would be both unnecessary and impossible here, a basic knowledge of some of his terminology will enable further inquiry. In *Being and Time*, Heidegger seeks to reawaken philosophical concern with the nature of being. In order to break free of language that he feels has lost its power, Heidegger creates an existentialist vocabulary of his own. “Dasein” is the term he assigns to the human being. As George Steiner explains it, “Dasein is ‘to be there’ (da-sein), and ‘there’ is the world: the concrete, literal, actual, daily world. To be human is to immersed, implanted, rooted in the earth, in the quotidian matter and matter-of-factness of the world…. The world *is*—a fact which is, of course, the primal wonder and source of all ontological asking” (81). Herr’s comparison of Joyce and Heidegger proceeds from a simplified working definition of Being-in-the-world that eschews abstraction and is firmly tied to corporeal existence. In her conception, Being-in-the-world is not “something obscure or unfamiliar: it simply consists in our everyday, unreflective abilities, abilities we employ in getting on with others and making use of ordinary things—abilities such as making use of a razor, grooming oneself, or sizing up another’s facial appearance” (15). Herr explains that “Joyce expresses the relation of body and world, through the ever-receding horizon of language, to get at the dynamics of how we encounter a world with which we share substance and with which we must engage to get anything done. In this view Joyce manipulates language in order to have the reader experience his/her own encounter with reality” (3). DeLillo works towards similar objectives in his writing.

Following Herr’s model, it is best to forgo the drudgery and futility of delving too deeply into Heidegger’s complex philosophy and focus instead on the unique vantage on DeLillo’s texts that a basic understanding of Heidegger provides. The “sense of something extraordinary hovering just beyond our touch and just beyond are vision” that DeLillo speaks of in a 1998 interview with Anthony DeCurtis (DePietro 71) comes quite close to Heideggerian phenomenology. Comparing DeLillo with Heidegger is in fact nothing new. Scholar Corneli Bonca has explored the relationship of DeLillo’s fiction to Heidegger’s philosophy in a number of works. An endnote to his 1996 article “Don DeLillo’s *White Noise*: The Natural Language of the Species” comments on the unavoidability of the association, commenting that “DeLillo's tightest philosophical connections are not with Baudrillard or Lyotard, but with Heidegger” (43). Bonca enumerates the connections, noting “similarities in their outlooks: their shared conviction that it is the ‘familiar’ or the ‘at-hand’ that yields the deepest meaning; their shared fascination with etymology; Heidegger's explicit belief, and DeLillo's performative one, that the world must be viewed from a stance of ‘radical astonishment’” (43). Bonca also identifies the extraordinary differences between the two: “Heidegger begins his philosophical system with a conviction about Being's presence, DeLillo is never less than racked with ontological doubt…. Still, Heidegger's ghost exerts a powerful presence in DeLillo's work; he hovers over it all, or under it all—a fitfully locatable roar” (43).

Heidegger’s nostalgia is problematic and another major contrast to DeLillo’s vision. Reconciling Heidegger’s philosophical writings and his biography, scholars draw out the problematic function of nostalgia in Heidegger’s thought. In *Prophets of Extremity*, Allan Meghills writes explains that “Heidegger perpetually wants to go back,
to return, to go home again, to some earlier, more primal, more immediate, less articulate, but definitely more authentic state or condition. ... *Being and Time* is dominated by a metaphoric of return” (119-20). Calvin Thomas points out that Heidegger’s “unheimlichkeit,” commonly translated into English as “uncanniness,” literally means “not-being-at-home”—almost a textbook definition of nostalgia (118). Heidegger’s association with the Nazi Party was in many ways the unfortunate product of misguided nostalgia for an ahistorical idealization of ancient Greece and the period before the emergence of Greek philosophy (Meghill 128-36). The third Reich was similarly “dominated by a metaphoric of return” to an idealized past, and by 1933, Martin Heidegger was employing philosophical constructs from *Being and Time* to champion Nazism in his public addresses as rector of the University of Freiburg (Polt 153-55). In his 1985 novel *White Noise*, DeLillo links the Nazi party to reckless nostalgia by way of a lunch table discussion at the university. Jack Gladney discusses Nazi architect Albert Speer’s designs for “structures that would decay gloriously, impressively, like Roman ruins” (257). Murray J. Siskind’s response illustrates the fundamental difference between Heidegger and DeLillo on the subject of nostalgia:

I don’t trust anybody’s nostalgia but my own. Nostalgia is a product of dissatisfaction and rage. It’s a settling of grievances between the present and the past. The more powerful the nostalgia, the closer you come to violence. War is the form nostalgia takes when men are hard-pressed to say something good about their country. (258)

In his eleventh novel, *Underworld*, DeLillo constantly associates nostalgia with the threat of violence, as when Jesse Detwiler, the infamous “waste theorist” and former “garbage guerrilla,” half-jokingly recognizes the future tourism potential of toxic dump sites: “Don’t underestimate our capacity for complex longings. Nostalgia for the banned materials of our civilization, for the brute force of old industries and old conflicts” (286).

In a 1999 interview, DeLillo answers unequivocally when Maria Moss asks whether elements of nostalgia found in *Underworld* can be read as autobiography:

No, absolutely not. If there is this sense of longing, it’s not in simple terms. Nick Shay feels a longing at the end of the novel. But it’s not for lost innocence, it’s for lost guilt. It’s for the days when he was able to act, in his muscles and in his blood. When he used to beat people up, when he stole a car. That’s what he misses. That’s his foremost answer. In general, nostalgia is not something I feel myself. (160)

In *Underworld*, Don DeLillo sets out to examine our connection to history and to each other, characterize the personal and national loss of innocence, and examine the roles of nostalgia and faith in coping with this loss. Written during the 1990s and published in 1997, *Underworld* follows very disparate characters back through time to the 1951 baseball game that links them all in ways they will never know. The inspiration for the book came from the front page of the October 4, 1951 *New York Times*, where news of the incredible sporting event and the Soviet Union’s second atomic test stood side by side. In this massive novel, DeLillo works in an almost kaleidoscopic fashion to tell the small and personal stories of many characters, some fictional others fictionalized versions of real Americans, being played out against a backdrop of important events throughout the preceding 50 years of American history. It is only through the combination of these personal stories that he achieves the novel’s grand scale and wide scope. While the novel
would be difficult or impossible to do justice to in a synopsis, perhaps Joseph Dewey comes closest in one of his excellent essays on Underworld:

> It is most obviously a cultural biography, a complex weave of fictional characters and historical personages, a wide-lens look at fifty years of the American…. It is also a traditional realistic narrative, the going-into of a recognizable character, an exhaustive excavation into one man’s life-long loss of vitality, a narrative that tracks backwards the difficult dynamic that man has maintained with his family, his education, his work, and his marriage. It as well a fierce satire that examines…the contemporary lurch into wasteland, our terminal fascination with violence, the tentacled reach of domestic entertainment technologies, our deep faith in the propaganda of consumerism, our indulgence of fanaticism. (10)

In one sense, DeLillo uses the scenes of shaving and barbering in Underworld as a sort of leitmotif of allusions to James Joyce’s Ulysses. DeLillo’s intertextual debt to Joyce comes clear when we compare the shaving scenes in Underworld and Ulysses. In the opening scene of Ulysses, following stately, plump Buck Mulligan’s descent from the stairhead “bearing a bowl of lather on which a mirror and razor lay crossed,” Stephen Dedalus impatiently waits and watches as his crass associate goes about the business of his morning shave (2-3). After this ritual, Mulligan, singing, heads down the stairs to breakfast and Stephen must decide whether or not to bring the nickel shavingbowl along as he follows. Handling the bowl reminds Stephen of his Jesuit training:

> He went over to it, held it in his hands awhile, feeling its coolness, smelling the clammy slaver of the lather in which the brush was stuck. So I carried the boat of incense then at Clongowes. I am another now and yet the same. (11)

In an allusion to Joyce’s first chapter, Underworld’s protagonist Nick Shay is reminded of his long-disappeared father’s shaving ritual as he sits with his mother during Mass. Now a successful waste analyst working in Phoenix, Nick, his memory perhaps sparked by the formal ritual of the mass, remembers how

> He used to shave with a towel draped over his shoulder, wearing his undershirt, his singlet, and the blade made a noise I liked to listen to, a sandpaper scrape on his heavy beard, and the brush in the shaving cup, the Gem blade and the draped towel and the hot water from the tap—heat and skill and cutting edge. (106-07)

Joyce and DeLillo each explore “socially specific masculinity” that requires the skill of shaving (Herr 10).

For all the “heat and skill and cutting edge” implicit in DeLillo’s depictions of shaving, Albert Bronzini’s trip to the barbershop in Underworld confirms that “being-in-the-world” is and always has been a difficult task. In Part Six of the novel, “Arrangement in Gray and Black: Fall 1951 - Summer 1952,” DeLillo returns his world-encompassing epic to the Bronx streets of Nick Shay’s late adolescence, depicting his characters in the time period directly following the events of the prologue. DeLillo’s penultimate section chronicles the love affair between Nick and Klara that makes a cuckold of Bronzini and ends with Nick’s being loaded into the back of a police car after accidentally shooting his friend George Manza in the face with a sawed-off shotgun (781).
For much of this section of his novel, DeLillo focuses on Albert Bronzini, whose parallel to Joyce’s Leopold Bloom is evident, as he practices the “art” of walking through the neighborhood. Nick’s former science teacher and his brother Matt’s chess tutor, Albert is always viewing the world in what Bonca terms a “state of radical astonishment” (43). Bronzini absorbs with all five senses the simple beauty of his surroundings—from a woman buying flounder to men operating sledgehammers, social club gossip to the highly geographically-localized nomenclature and rules of children’s street games—and seems never to tire of contemplating the mysteries of everyday life (661). Albert returns from his walk feeling satisfied in the successful completion of his primordial act of gathering food for the family, experiencing what DeLillo describes as “happiness as it was meant to evolve when first conceived in caves, in mud huts on the grassy plain” as he lay in a hot bath and visits with his wife Klara and their two-year-old (681).

However, when left alone to contemplate the reality of his interpersonal relationships—a failing marriage and a dying mother—Albert feels “a transient sadness,” and DeLillo shows that his walks, no matter how observant he may be, are a form of escapism, helping Bronzini to avoid confronting Klara’s doubts about their love and his own problems: “His complacency, his distractedness, his position at school, his sneaky-pete drinking” (683). By dwelling too much on the sensory wonders of urban life, Albert misses his chance to meaningfully reconnect with his wife. One day, Albert sits in the back of the barbershop drinking rye whiskey and eating roasted chestnuts with George the Barber. Albert’s visit with George reveals DeLillo’s conscious subversion of nostalgia for the values associated with the trade:

Albert knew that George had a wife in a little house somewhere, and a married daughter somewhere else, but the man was otherwise imaginable outside his barbership.13 Stout, bald, unblessed with excess personality, he belonged completely to the massive porcelain chairs, two of them, to the hot-towel steamer, the stamped tin ceiling, the marble shelf beneath the mirror, the tinted glass cabinets, the bone-handled razor and leather strop, the horn combs, the scissors and clippers, the cup, the brush, the shaving soap, the fragrance of witch hazels and brilliantines and talcums.

George the Barber knew who he was. (708)

DeLillo fills Underworld with characters that work as slightly incongruous parallels, and here he deliberately juxtaposes the ordered simplicity George the Barber embodies for Albert with the nihilism and criminality that Nick is drawn to in his friend George the Waiter. The scene works on another level: unlike George, Albert is racked with ontological doubt; he avoids confronting the turmoil of his personal life by seeking refuge in the reassuring coziness of the neighborhood barbershop. When the opportunity for meaningful discourse arises, Albert passes it by; after sharing the gossip that Biaggio the fishmonger hit a number, George tries to ask about his friend’s marriage, but Albert evades the issue summing up all marriages as “Un po’ complicato” (709).

**Game 6 and Cosmopolis**

In Cosmopolis and the film Game 6, the barbershop figures as a major element in what Alastair McKay astutely dubbed “the symbolism of New York City.” The two very different works share a major structural element—the protagonist’s cross-Manhattan
Odyssey to get a haircut in the same barbershop that his father had his cut in. It seems that DeLillo, with the prospects of *Game 6* ever being produced dwindling, reworked the skeletal structure of the film into the novel *Cosmopolis*. This mirroring provides a unique opportunity for comparing the two works. For both Nicky Rogan, the browbeaten playwright in *Game 6*, and Eric Packer, the obscenely wealthy asset manager in *Cosmopolis*, an increasingly chaotic series of events ruins any hopes of a simple trip westward on 47th Street for a cathartic moment at the hands of the trusted barber. In fact, these misguided nostalgic journeys culminate with the barber exacerbating and even enabling the violent conclusions that follow. As DeLillo writes in a letter to the author,

> The characters in *Game 6* and in *Cosmopolis* want to remember who they are and where they come from—a place where certain kinds of problems are settled in elemental ways. The barbershop is a setting that might be conveniently revisited. “There may be themes in my work that seep from book to book but not places—at least not intentionally…. Each novel is a new world and what I find there is most often what I find in the three-dimensional world, reborn in the form of a visual image.

Albert Camus writes, “Virtue and an ordered life have a nostalgic appeal in the midst of vice” (87). The above passage from DeLillo’s letter makes plain the fact that he is more concerned with the nostalgic appeal of vice in the midst of virtue and an ordered life. Like Joyce, DeLillo uses shaving in his writing to “invok[e] the distant past in which barbarians were hairy and the barber occupied a symbolic threshold between primitive and civilized worlds” (Herr 19), but DeLillo’s characters gravitate towards the barbershop in an attempt to reconnect with the real by crossing the threshold back into barbarity.

The action in *Game 6* takes place entirely in the course of a single day. Saturday October 25, 1986 is a big day for Nicky Rogan. His play is set to open in the evening, just as his beloved Boston Red Sox face off against the Mets in the eponymous World Series contest. The star of his play has a parasite from Borneo in his brain, his teenage daughter Laurel informs him that his wife is seeing “prominent divorce lawyer,” and Steven Schwimmer, “the most powerful critic in America,” will be in the audience for the opening. Nicky presents a veneer of unflappability: “All I want is a haircut.” He recruits an old friend, Elliott Litvak to accompany him on his journey across town when they run into each other at the ATM. Elliott is disheveled in appearance, and, as we find out, he has never fully recovered from one of Schwimmer’s scathing reviews. Throughout the day Nicky is dogged by Schwimmer’s image or name on advertisements and magazine covers. After being separated from Litvak, he pays a visit to his father, still living in the same apartment Nicky grew up in on 47th Street between Eighth and Ninth Avenue. The aging Michael Rogan, portrayed wonderfully by Tom Aldredge in Hoffman’s film, doesn’t believe that it is his son at the door. As a test to prove his identity, Nicky’s father asks him where Nicky gets his hair cut. Nicky’s answer affirms at once his identity, his nostalgic ties to the barbershop, and the potential for sudden violence there:

> Across Ninth Avenue. Dodgie’s. Where you’ve been getting your hair cut for fifty years. Where Uncle Billy and Uncle Marty got their hair cut. Where Jim Rorty shot a man for cheating at poker.

Satisfied with Nicky’s answer, his father opens the door, commenting that “It was rummy, not poker. But I’ll take a chance and let you in.” In the room, which is the
obvious model for the set of Nicky’s play, the men reminisce about baseball and discuss the threat to Nicky’s new play from Schwimmer, who goes to the theater armed and is ready to take Nicky’s play about “who we were and where we came from” and “rip it apart.” Michael tells his son, “Show him who we are.”

Nicky leaves his father, who has fallen asleep on the couch, and walks west down 47th to the barbershop. Elliot is waiting for him on the stoop. As the barber begins his ritual preparations, Elliot pulls up a chair and faces Nicky. Nicky tells them that Schwimmer carries a gun to performances, and Elliot and the barber both agree that Nicky is foolish not to carry a gun himself. The barber opens a drawer, revealing an “old pockmarked revolver.” (DeLillo favors the pockmarked revolver over the more traditional straight razor as his barbershop weapon of choice—the exact term appears in Cosmopolis (169) and the Game 6 script.) Elliot embodies the danger of nostalgia when he tells Nicky that “there are things that speak to us from the past” and that “truth is locked in your past” before advising him to shoot Schwimmer and telling him where the infamous critic lives. On his way out, Nicky grabs the revolver. Instead of leaving the barbershop soothed and refreshed, Nicky is half mad and newly armed. DeLillo transform Nicky’s nostalgic visit to the barbershop of his childhood into a moment where irrational discourse and a desire to cling to the past enable irrational violence. DeLillo ends his barbershop scene with a moment of ironic humor, as Elliot tells the barber that he likes his sideburns “elegant and refined.”

Eric Packer’s visit to the barber in Cosmopolis works in much the same way. Cosmopolis begins with Packer waking up in his forty-eight-room apartment in the world’s tallest residential tower in Manhattan. Surrounded by the trappings of luxury—screening room, shark tank, borzoi pen, lap pool, and card parlor—Packer is discontent and restless. DeLillo writes, “He didn’t know what he wanted. Then he knew. He wanted to get a haircut.” Before taking the elevator downstairs to his waiting limousine, Eric walks through the apartment and takes a final look at his impressive collection of color-field and geometric abstract paintings, “all the more dangerous for not being new. There’s no more danger in the new” (7-8). From the confines of his opulent lifestyle and the advanced technologies that dominate his existence, Eric longs to reconnect with what Meghill identified in his study of Heidegger as a “more primal, more immediate, less articulate, but definitely more authentic state or condition” (119-20). From his lavish, high-tech apartment on the eastern edge of the island, he decides to head to the familiar sights and sounds of the barbershop his father patronized, across town in “the old brawl, the old seethe and heat of Hell’s Kitchen” (129).

Packer is undeterred in his mission when Torval, his chief of security, warns that a presidential motorcade will cause major traffic problems. Shiner, Packer’s young chief of technology, is waiting in the limo (11). After assuring Eric that the complex computer network they operate is secure, Shiner questions why Eric couldn’t have the barber come to the office and thereby avoid holding the meeting in the backseat of a limousine in standstill traffic. Eric explains that actually having his hair cut is not the objective:

A haircut has what. Associations. Calendar on the wall. Mirrors everywhere. There’s no barber chair here. Nothing swivels but the spycam. (15)

In a 2003 interview with Alastair McKay, DeLillo explains that he shares Eric Packer’s nostalgic view of the barbershop
to no extent. I don’t feel that way about such things. I go to a barber now who’s more old-fashioned than the barber I knew when I was seven-years old. But it doesn’t satisfy any nostalgia. I just want him to hurry up and stop talking.

In the course of his picaresque journey across Manhattan to the barber’s, Eric encounters a number of friends and associates. After Eric breakfasts heartily with his wife of twenty-two days Elise Shifrin, poet and heir to a European banking fortune (15), Torval recommends that, because of a “credible threat” to the president, it would be prudent for Eric to settle for having his hair cut in one of the two salons on the next block (20). After holding another in a series of backseat meetings, all of which center on the high-risk currency speculation against the yen that he insists will pay off, Eric signals for the limo to stop in front of an apartment building between the two salons. Filles et Garçons clearly does not offer the type of return to the elemental that Packer is after, and he instead uses the brief stop to have an adulterous rendezvous with his art dealer Didi Fancher, who lives in the adjacent apartment building (25). Back in the car, he relishes watching the replay of International Monetary Fund managing director Arthur Rapp being stabbed to death, broadcast live on the Money Channel from North Korea (34). Eric and his chief of finance Jane Melman are joined by Dr. Ingram, who arrives to perform Eric’s daily physical (42). DeLillo turns the scene into the height of absurdist comedy, Dr. Ingram probing Eric’s “asymmetrical prostate,” as Eric engages in non-physical eroticism with Melman (52). DeLillo intertwines “The Confessions of Benno Levin,” pseudonymous fanatical screeds by the disgruntled former currency analyst at Packer Capital who will be Eric’s murderer, with the main narrative of thread of the journey to the barbershop (55-61, 149-55). Following the first of Benno’s confessions, DeLillo picks back up with Eric’s journey as the limousine gets caught in a large protest in Times Square. Tear gas fills the air, and dissidents costumed as rats sew chaos in the streets. In the limousine, bouncing wildly from the assault of the angry mob, Eric watches the event unfold on television and discusses the markets with his theorist, Vija Kinski (89). Kinski explains that the demonstration is a product of the “horror and death” that are inevitable in the age of “cyber-capital”:

This is a protest against the future. They want to hold off the future. They want to normalize it, keep it from overwhelming the present. (90-91)

Unshaken after watching a protestor self-immolate on the sidewalk (97) and being told that headquarters is reporting an urgent threat to his life (101), Eric replies, “We want a haircut” (102). While Eric fantasizes about having her perched naked on his chest, Kinski accurately prophesizes his death, explaining to him that, “Great men historically expected to live forever even as they supervised construction of their massive tombs on the far bank of the river, the west bank, where the sun goes down” (105). Rather than shying from danger, Eric is “moved and quickened” by the idea that someone wishes his harm: “it was the threat of death at the brink of night that spoke to him most surely about some principle of fate he’d always known would come clear in time. Now he could begin the business of living” (107). As the sun goes down, he continues to head west. The “business of living,” as Packer sees to it, consists of further grasps at attaining a primitive simplicity. First he has another sexual encounter, this time with bodyguard Kendra Hays, who, at Eric’s request, leaves her bulletproof vest on during the act. His unsatisfied craving for visceral sensation leads him to then order her to shoot him with her stun gun.
Before arriving at his ultimate destination, Eric makes a few more stops, improbably runs into his wife again and effectively ending his marriage by sharing the details of his financial collapse (122), and then briefly attends an underground rave with Danko, his bodyguard. Eric is envious of Danko’s battle-forged grit and asceticism, physically represented in his scarred face. Danko speaks with an unspecified Eastern European accent and lives “in a body hammered out of raw experience, things suffered and done to extreme limits” (125). From the catwalk overlooking the dance floor, Eric and Danko watch the young crowd dance to the pulsing rhythms of electronica. “Densely assembled and dancing as one,” the youth are under the influence of a new drug called novo that has the “dissociative” effect of “separating mind from body” (127).

After stopping for the funeral procession of Brutha Fez, the Sufi rap superstar (131), Eric is attacked by André Petrescu, “the pastry assassin,” a man who has made a name for himself by hitting prominent figures in the face with pies. Torval restrains Petrescu, allowing Eric to kick him in the testicles. Eric also attacks the photographers and video crew, “landing a number of punches, feeling better with each one” (142). The violent confrontation bonds Eric with his bodyguard and leaves him feeling truly alive: “He felt great. He held his clenched fist in the other hand. It felt great, it stung, it was quick and hot” (143). His thirst for violence unquenched, Eric shoots and kills Torval with the man’s own state of the art, voice-activated Czech handgun (146).

The barbershop, on the north side of 47th past 10th Avenue, is closed by the time the limo finally pulls up in front. Eric knocks on the door of the shop and waits until the barber, Anthony Adubato, opens the door and welcomes him in (159-60). Eric and Anthony go through the well-rehearsed small talk that constitutes a great deal of their relationship and is the main reason for Eric’s visit. Anthony retrieves take-out cartons from the refrigerator in the back of the shop while delivering his customary elegy for the father who had died of cancer when Eric was five. DeLillo describes the succor of their ritualized conversation:

> Eric had heard this a number of times and the man used the same words nearly every time, with topical variations. This is what he wanted from Anthony. The same words. The oil company calendar on the wall. The mirror that needed silvering. (161)

The men decide to invite Eric’s driver Ibrahim Hamadou inside to share in their improvised meal (162). Sitting in the barber’s chair, Eric listens to Anthony and Ibrahim discuss their common history as taxi drivers while he contemplates the violence that his driver’s badly scarred face testifies to. As the two men swap stories of late night urinations under the Manhattan Bridge, Eric falls asleep (163-65). When he awakens, the men are still talking and have moved on to dessert. Eric decides to tell the men about the “credible threat.” From the barber’s chair,

> He confided in them. It felt good to trust someone. It felt right to expose the matter in this particular place, where elapsed time hangs in the air, suffusing solid objects and men’s faces. This is where he felt safe. (166)

Anthony and Ibrahim are alarmed by his confession and ask incredulously how he plans to protect himself. When Eric explains that he discarded the only firearm he had, Anthony opens a drawer and shifts some towels to reveal an “old pockmarked revolver.” After both men insist that Eric take the gun, Anthony sets about cutting his hair. Normalcy seems to prevail as conversation turns to “routine barbershop, rent hikes and

31
tunnel traffic” (169). When Anthony is only half finished with the haircut, Eric bursts from the chair and heads for the door partially shorn, promising to return and allow Anthony, quite taken aback by the outburst, to complete his task. On their way out, Ibrahim dutifully hands the pistol to Eric (170).

DeLillo sends Nicky Rogan and Eric Packer on two very different courses when they leave the barbershop. Eric rides with Ibrahim all the way down 47th to the underground garage where he parks the limo at night. Having already “cleared the night for deeper confrontation” by killing Torval (148), Eric is primed for self-destructive violence. Although he wishes he could get some gas and turn the limo into a “riverside pyre of wood, leather rubber and electronic devices,” Eric instead stands in the empty street and watches the metal gate close behind the limo as Ibrahim drives down into the parking structure. “Empty of urgency and purpose,” Eric has, in the course of one catastrophic trip to the barbershop, attempted to reconnect to the raw realities of life through acts of debauchery and self-gratifying violence only to end up aimless and unfulfilled. Before he has much time to ponder his existential dilemma, however, someone begins firing a gun at him from the third story window of a nearby building and yelling his name (180-81). Eric’s attacker and eventual murderer is Richard Sheets, a former employee bent on settling his own existential dilemma through an act of vengeance (192). Eric tries to talk Richard, who wants to be known as Benno, into reconsidering (194). After being overcome with feelings of guilt for murdering Torval when he realizes that his violence has been utterly without purpose or meaning, Eric shoots a hole in his own left palm and sits “head down, out of ideas, and [feels] the pain” (196-7). Richard holds his own hand “in identification and pity” after Eric shoots himself, and the two find that they have asymmetrical prostates in common, but the sympathy engendered is not enough to prevent the murder that Richard feels he must commit (197-201). Eric Packer’s violent death does indeed “argue against his dream of immortality,” as Kinski told him it should (105). Rather than having his corpse, along with those of his Russian wolfhounds, flown in his Tu-160 ex-Soviet strategic bomber by remote control into the stratosphere and then, like Icarus, crashed into the earth at supersonic speed in order to create a work of land art in the desert as he often fantasized, Eric dies an anonymous and bleakly unromantic death in a blighted Hell’s Kitchen warehouse (209).

Nicky Rogan’s night is far from over, but DeLillo spares his more sympathetic character from Packer’s awful fate. Even without Nicky’s murdering anyone or being murdered, DeLillo illustrates the failure of barbershop nostalgia. Rather than reaffirming and validating his identity by visiting the barbershop, Nicky, who has spent the entire film being recognized by strangers, hails a cab just after his haircut only to have the driver, a middle-aged black woman named Toyota, mistake him for an infamous Rhode Island gangster named Frankie Lazzaro. Nicky is amused by Toyota’s error and playacts as the not unredeemable mob boss for her and her grandson Matthew, who is along for the ride. Nicky enjoys his new companions and, eager to watch the baseball game and avoid his premiere at all costs, invites them out to watch the game over dinner. Toyota’s outspoken faith in God and humanity plays an important role in curtailting Nicky’s violent path. Paul Elie identifies in DeLillo’s work, “the notion that skeptical moderns look with a kind of gratitude to religious people, who serve as surrogate believers, keeping open the
possibility of belief for those who themselves cannot believe” (19), and Toyota is an archetypal surrogate believer.

Nicky’s conversation with Toyota and Matthew is briefly interrupted when he sees his wife Lillian enter the bar. Lillian explains that she is in fact seeing a divorce lawyer and that she came to let him know in person. As the Red Sox let their lead slip away, Nicky faces the reality of his failed marriage. Nicky and Lillian love each other sincerely, as their gentle embraces demonstrate, but the relationship is at its end, mostly the result of Nicky’s infidelities. As her cab pulls away from the curb, Lillian tells Nicky, “You look awful, sweetheart. Get a haircut. Get a lawyer.” Back inside with the game tied, Toyota and her son Matthew offer encouragement and raise Nicky’s spirits somewhat:

TOYOTA. This is the time. Trust in people. Believe in life. Faith is hard work. Don’t give in. Don’t give up.
MATTHEW. Life is true.
NICKY. Life is real.
TOYOTA. Trust your team.

Nicky, riding a wave of emotion imagines the Red Sox winning and gets into a fistfight in the bathroom when faced with the truth of the Mets victory. After Nicky reconciles himself to the defeat, he heads back down to the west end of 47th Street, where he knows Steven Schwimmer keeps an apartment. Nicky, just like Eric, kicks in the warehouse door, brandishing the pistol. Nicky enters the apartment and finds Steven on the couch half-naked with Laurel.

Just when it seems the story can only end in bloodshed, DeLillo presents another way out for his characters, ending Game 6 not with another death on the Westside, but with the sunrise glinting off the glass tower they live in on the East River. Nicky drops his gun, causing it to discharge and initiating a brief exchange of poorly aimed fire before Laurel’s plea to her father and Schwimmer’s shift of focus dissolve the tension. Nicky realizes that Steven is on the verge of tears watching a slow-motion replay of Buckner’s gaffe on a newscast replay, the first he had seen or heard of the result. Nicky, pistol held to Steven’s head, asks why he cares if the Red Sox lose and cocks the hammer when Steven answers that the Red Sox are his team, warning “No. They’re not your team. They’re my team.” The critic, unworried (due largely to the fact that he has correctly surmised Nicky’s gun to be out of bullets), replies that they are his team too. The two men find they share history of disappointments as fans of the club, and in the process, the animosity and threat of violence subside somewhat. Furthermore, Steven explains that he thought Nicky’s play was the best work of his career and that he had passed up the opportunity to attend the game so that he could see the play for a second time that night after being so impressed by the previous night’s preview. Nicky is skeptical that the gun is responsible for the kind words, but Steven lets him know his gun is empty. Nicky puts the muzzle in his left hand and pulls the trigger to be sure, but unlike Packer comes away unharmed, as Schwimmer’s information turns out to be correct. Rather than the mortal enemy he thought he had in Steven, Nicky finishes the night with a new friend. The film ends with a taxi ride back across town, but this time Nicky is driving the cab, just like he used to, as his daughter encourages him on.
**Falling Man**

In *Falling Man*, his 2007 novel about 9/11, DeLillo places Hammad, a fictionalized hijacker, before the barbershop mirror in Nokomis, Florida (178). In a letter dated 11 June 2007, DeLillo writes, “I wanted Hammad to watch himself disappear. That’s why he’s in a barber chair. First his beard goes and then, on another level, his identity.” “Conveniently revisiting” the barbershop yet again, DeLillo impresses upon readers the utter failure of the traditional social institution of the barbershop, and by extension traditional social institutions in general, in alleviating the brutal realities and deathward trajectory of contemporary existence.

A Heideggerian reading of this minimal but crucial passage illuminates one practical approach to the larger novel. Ernest Daniel Carrere sums up the meaning of Heidegger’s term “Falling” as such: “One is unable to stand before the facticity of one’s own reality. In the face of one’s self and the onus of authentic Being-in-the-world, one simply collapses, escaping to the security, support, and relief of the ‘they.’ Falling is a refusal—or inability—to stand forth (ex-sist), radically individualized and nakedly oneself, into the burdens of being real—embracing the brute fact that one is” (44). Hammad is literally faced with himself in the reflection of the barber’s mirror and collapses or escapes into the comfortable trap of “they”:

Now he sits in the barber chair, wearing the striped cape. The barber is a slight man with little to say. The radio plays news, weather, sports and traffic. Hammad does not listen. He is thinking again, looking past the face in the mirror, which is not his, and waiting for the day to come, clear skies, light winds, when there is nothing left to think about. (178)

This passage is the last time we see Hammad before DeLillo depicts him keeping watch in the jump seat of an airliner barreling down the Hudson Corridor towards Manhattan, eyes full of pepper spray, clutching a box cutter, and reminding himself to “Forget the world. Be unmindful of the thing called the world” (237-8). DeLillo recognizes our alienation from one another as the cause for chaos and suffering in the world and demonstrates potential for fiction to meaningfully connect individuals, providing in his novels just the sort of connectivity and humanistic understanding of the other that the barbershop cannot.
CONCLUSION

In this thesis, I have used textual examples from works by Hemingway, Nabokov, Poe, Melville, Chesnutt, Faulkner, O’Connor, Lowell, Komunyakaa, and DeLillo to draw attention to the ways that these authors manipulate the trope of barbershop violence to subvert traditional concepts of barbershop discourse, comment on the dangers of miscommunication, and call on readers to engage with their world in a more meaningful humanistic way.

I do not intend this project to function as the definitive study of the barbershop in literature; while providing awareness of the ubiquity of the barbershop in American literature by modeling a few approaches to one pattern I locate in a finite number of works, I have in no way exhausted the potential for meaningful insight that studying fictional representations of shaving and barbershops in these and other texts might yield, nor do I intend my work to supplant the efforts of the many fine scholars who have focused on this and other aspects of fictional barbering. I hope that thesis functions instead to affirm the usefulness and potential of focusing on the tonsorial arts in fiction and might engender further critical inquiry. In the Appendix that follows I briefly touch on a number of literary and scholarly texts in an effort to situate my analysis of the trope of barbershop violence in a much larger critical dialogue and, taking another cue from Cheryl Herr, to “sketch a paradigm for future work” (1) on shaving and the barbershop in literature for myself and others.
APPENDIX

In the hopes of spurring future scholarship on the barbershop in literature, I provide here brief analyses of number of additional texts in which authors bring the trope of barbershop violence into play to stress the peril of miscommunication and nostalgia. In addition, I highlight some of the other patterns prevalent in depictions of the barbershop and show that violence is one of many tropes associated with the barbershop. I also point out some of the important scholarly studies that constitute a sound starting point from which future barbershop studies might proceed.

In an effort to keep the chapters in this thesis clear and direct, I had to limit the number of texts and authors I worked through, regrettably forgoing discussion of a wide range of relevant texts. Sherwood Anderson, Raymond Carver, Leonard Michaels, and Kevin Brockmeier each have short stories set in the barbershop that share the theme of miscommunication and chronicle the failure of individuals to connect. Violent barbers can be found in a range of texts, from Mark Twain’s hilarious 1875 rant “About Barbers” to George Saunders’ 2000 short story “The Barber’s Unhappiness.” The potential for future scholarship seems endless. Studies could focus on barbering as it appears in texts from specific figures, literary movements, or genres. One might concentrate on the ways women depict the traditionally male institution of the barbershop in their work or the way authors from Melville to Joyce to DeLillo repeatedly associate shaving with catholic ritual in literature.

Babo’s model of black empowerment links BC to a considerable number of works in which African American writers depict the barbershop in a much more positive light. Langston Hughes, Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison, and Toni Morrison all depict barbershops where blacks serve other blacks as an important and functioning hub of discourse in local communities. Trudier Harris and Hortense Thornton published articles in 1979 chronicling the history of the barbershop in African American literature, but almost thirty years out, even these venerable studies could use some updating (for instance, neither includes mention of Toni Morrison).

While the barbershop is clearly and uniquely linked to African American history and identity, Harris and Thornton demonstrate an approach centered on ethnic identity which could easily be adapted to other minority groups or subcultures: a study of the special ways the barbershop functions in the work of Jewish-American writers such as Nathanael West, Saul Bellow, Philip Roth, and Leonard Michaels, for instance.

A brief survey of how Cormac McCarthy and Philip Roth each continually associate shaving and barbering with violence and death demonstrates the potential for in-depth studies of barbering in the work of these and other literary icons. In his 1968 novel Outer Dark, McCarthy depicts incestuous Appalachian miscreant Culla Holme trying to make himself presentable to society by shaving in the creek on his trips into town (90, 134). In 1979’s Suttree, the title character runs into his friend Ulysses on his way into the Farragutt hotel barbershop (300). McCarthy shows Suttree’s relaxing experience in the barbershop to be symptomatic of his corruption; he has moved from the houseboat where he made an honest but meager living as a fisherman into town where he subsides on the proceeds of prostitution. When Chigurth seeks brief respite from a raging gun battle by ducking into the barbershop in the 2005 novel No Country for Old Men (120), McCarthy conjures images of a present day wild west and highlights the utter
collapse of values that has pervaded even small town America and, having found temporary shelter from the cannibalistic “bloodcults” that tirelessly roam the ash-filled landscape of the postapocalyptic southeastern United States in a well-supplied underground bunker, a father and son share the ritual of a haircut in McCarthy’s Pulitzer Prize-winning 2007 novel *The Road* (128).

In *Patrimony*, a 1991 memoir of his father Herman’s protracted battle with a fatal brain tumor, Philip Roth places great emphasis on his grandfather Sender’s shaving mug. When he sees it on the shelf in his father’s apartment he remembers how as a young man the simple porcelain vessel, decorated in a floral pattern and engraved in gothic script with “S. Roth” and “1912,” brought his grandfather to life for him not as a grandfather but, even more interestingly then, as an ordinary man among men, a customer of a barbershop where his mug was kept on a shelf with the mugs of the other neighborhood immigrants. It reassured me as a child to think that in a household where, according to all reports, there was never a penny to spare, a dime was set aside every week for him to go to the barbershop and get his Sabbath shave. (27-28)

Roth remembers how this simple relic had “the impact on me of a Greek vase depicting the mythic origins of the race” (28). As upbeat as these ruminations are, Roth develops the shaving mug in *Patrimony* into a symbol emblematic not just of his connection to the past but also our collective helplessness in the face of death.

In Roth’s 1998 novel *I Married a Communist*, leftist proselytizing at the barbershop—used for a throwaway laugh in Nathanael West’s 1934 farce *A Cool Million*—serves as an education on race relations for an impressionable young writer. Roth has Nathan Zuckerman recall an afternoon in his adolescence when he watched in awe as his hero Ira Ringold, better known as radio personality “Iron Rinn” debated Mr. Prescott outside the black barbershop on Spruce Street in Newark. Knowing, as readers already do, that Ira’s idealist politics will spell his undoing and that racial harmony that afternoon—“The two of us, white and surrounded by some ten or twelve black men, and there was nothing for us to worry about and nothing for them to fear” (92)—will soon be replaced by the increasing tensions that would come to a head in the 1967 riots (and the impact that all this has on Zuckerman’s life and work) the scene is painful to read. Roth’s sentimentality for the barbershop is not the product of nostalgia for old ways but like Habermas in *Structural Transformation*, sorrow over the failure of the open and honest discourse the institution once seemed to promise.

Roth returns to the subject of barbering when, in 2007’s *Exit Ghost*, the final Zuckerman novel, Amy Bellette recounts for Nathan Zuckerman the death of his mentor, the writer E.I. Lonoff:

> Barely audibly, he said, ‘I want a shave and a haircut. I want to be clean.’ I found a barber. It took him more than an hour because Manny couldn’t hold his head up. When it was over I showed the barber the door and gave him twenty dollars. When I got back to the bed Manny was dead. Dead but clean.” (153).

By depicting Lonoff’s failure to achieve some final dignity or stave off death by sending for a barber, Roth knowingly alludes to Thomas Mann’s 1912 novella *Death in Venice*. Mann’s protagonist Gustav von Aschenbach, the aging author of “a lucid and mighty prose epic” (293) is tormented by an unreciprocated infatuation with Tadzio, an
adolescent Polish boy staying in the same hotel. Mann uses the barber in *Death in Venice* not as a voice of civility and reason, but as a debaucher; It is from the barber that Aschenbach “deviously learn[s]” the details about Tadzio’s arrival (337). Aschenbach’s visit to the barbershop signals the completion of his rapid decline from a dignified and self-disciplined writer into a Dionysian hedonist:

> Viewing the boy’s sweet, bewitching youth, he was sickened by his own aging body: the sight of his gray hair, his pinched features mortified him, left him hopeless. He felt an urge for physical revival and renewal; he frequented the hotel barber.

Wrapped in a smock, leaning back in the chair, under the prattler’s grooming hands, Aschenbach peered tormentedly at his reflection. By the time the barber is finished with him, Aschenbach hair has been artificially darkened, his lips and cheeks rouged, and his face thickly caked with makeup. Rather than reaffirming his identity, his visit to the barber leaves him almost totally severed from reality; Aschenbach sees a “radiant young man in the mirror” (361) when, in fact, he has become the mirror image of the “bogus youth” he looked upon with such scorn during the boat ride to Venice (303).

In discussing patterns that abound in fictional representations of shaving and the barbershop, it is impossible to overlook the prevalence of the motif in both Hemingway and Fitzgerald. While these authors include much of the violence typical of barbershops in literature, they also use the traditionally male ritual to launch sophisticated explorations of sexuality and gender identity. Hemingway returned to hair and haircutting time and again, from his earliest journalistic work for the Toronto Star on through the major works of his career: *In Our Time* (1925), *The Sun Also Rises* (1926), *Men Without Women* (1927), *A Farewell To Arms* (1929), and *For Whom The Bell Tolls* (1940). However, it is in the posthumous *Garden of Eden* (1986) that his use of shaving and haircutting culminates, the barbershop becoming an integral part of the steady disintegration of traditional values and an avenue through which the author tackles complex questions of sex, morality, and manhood (Not unlike Mann in *Death in Venice*).

Like Hemingway, Fitzgerald uses shaving and barbershops to explore and define sexuality. From Bernice’s new do to the dollop of stray lather Nick wipes from McKee’s face just before the much discussed ambiguous bedroom scene in *The Great Gatsby* (1925), shaving, haircutting, and barbershops all figure prominently in Fitzgerald’s depictions of the violent clash between modernity and traditional values. In “Bernice Bobs her Hair” (1920), one of his most famous short stories, Fitzgerald uses a misguided trip to the barbershop and a controversial new fashion in women’s hair to chronicle society’s shifting sexual paradigms and the pitfalls of the new ideal of the modern woman. Fitzgerald sets the anticlimactic showdown at the end of his 1934 novel *Tender Is The Night* at the hairdresser’s. Discussing these works and the social environment in which Hemingway and Fitzgerald created them will necessarily juxtapose literary assessment with a social history of shifting gender roles and societal norms as reflected in the rise of the flapper and psychoanalysis, giving context to the ways these authors chronicle and critique American culture. A few scholars have keyed in on the importance of hair in Hemingway, and research in this area will be indebted to Carl Eby’s study Hemingway’s Fetishism with its emphasis on the Freudian implications of this segment of Hemingway’s writing and to Thomas Strychacz, who, while not directly addressing
barbering, paves the way for thinking of the barbershop as another of Hemingway’s “theaters of masculinity.” These scholars help provide a critical framework and suggest possible angles of attack, while Bruce Retallack’s “Razors, Shaving, and Gender Construction” provides a solid historical foundation for further work in this direction.
NOTES

1 For an excellent critical history see Robert E. Burkholder’s introduction to Critical Essays on Herman Melville’s Benito Cereno. 1-13.
2 See Allan Moore Emery’s “Benito Cereno and Manifest Destiny,” in Nineteenth-Century Fiction.
3 Adler nicely compiles the tableaux for us: “The inseparability of master and slave is expressed almost entirely by pictoral means. It is the subject of the whole series of tableaux picturing Don Benito and Babo, which unfolds steadily from the moment of their simultaneous entrance into the story to their virtually simultaneous exit: Babo standing, ‘like a shepherd’s dog.’ Beside Don Benito; Babo offering Don Benito a cordial, his arm encircling him; Babo kneeling to adjust Don Benito’s shoe buckle, rubbing out a spot on his sleeve, shaving him, curling and costuming him, placing a cushion behind his back, cooling him with a large leather fan, chafing his brow, smoothing his hair, gazing into his eyes, leading him away when he is overcome, refusing to be separated from him, making himself into a sort of crutch for him, and flinging himself into the whaleboat after him, still the faithful servant, as Delano thinks. In all these scenes, which are like photographic stills, master and slave are bound together, their social connection constituting their chain” (82).
4 Sundquist, among others, evokes Higginson’s words in discussion of Melville’s text (159).
5 Included in the seminal Reconstructing American Literary History, edited by Sacvan Bercovitch.
6 The title, Ancient and Honorable Barber Profession, seems to be a Masonic allusion. The only thing Charles Brockden Brown would fear more than a barber is a Masonic barber.
7 Another wonderful primary source documented by Douglas Bristol Jr. For his mention, see “From Outposts to Enclaves,” 601.
8 Babo’s revolutionary progress, like the razors of a sea-barber, might also be “better fitted for the preparing and harrowing of the soil than for the ultimate reaping of the crop.” To quote W.T. Lhamon, “If the story is about revolutionary action, then Babo’s activity has proved unsustainable in his lifetime. If the story is about the lore cycle in which revolutionary activity is kept alive through narrated reimaginings, then Babo’s effect remains continually resonant” (87).
9 Less than two years later, O’Connor was introduced to her future publisher Robert Giroux by Robert Lowell, the two writers having just spent a few months together at Yaddo in Saratoga Springs. See Giroux viii.
10 A quotation from David Remnicks’s profile of DeLillo for The New Yorker around the time of Underworld’s release casts Joyce as a shining ray of hope in the squalor of the Bronx: “There’s a sensibility, a sense of humor, an approach, a sort of dark approach to things that’s part New York, and maybe part growing up Catholic, and that, as far as I’m concerned is what shaped my work far more than anything I read. I did have some wonderful reading experiences, particularly Ulysses. I read it first when I was quite young, and then again when I was about twenty-five. And this was important. I was very taken by the beauty of the language—particularly the first three or four chapters. I can
remember reading this book in a part of my room that was unusually sunny” (DePietro 138).

11 For a thorough treatment of DeLillo’s intertextual debt to Joyce, see Catherine Morley’s excellent “Excavating Underworld, disinterring Ulysses.”

12 The centrality of Catholic ritual in scenes of shaving from Benito Cérenò to Underworld is noteworthy. Herr draws attention to the Jesuit training that Joyce and Heidegger share in common (4). Don DeLillo and his character Nick Shay are lapsed Jesuits themselves.

13 DeLillo’s use of the term “barbership” here is interesting. Perhaps originating from a lucky keystroke error as result of the adjacent placement of the ‘I’ and ‘O’ keys on a QWERTY keyboard.

14 Not surprisingly, DeLillo favors the writer over the investment banker.

15 The striped cape, while a traditional staple of the barbershop, is, unintentionally or not, evocative of the American flag, making the scene an interesting analogue to Babo’s use of the Spanish flag as bib in Benito Cérenò.
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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Ben Yadon was born in Jacksonville, Florida in 1983 and currently resides in Tallahassee. He received his B.A. in English from Florida State University in 2005.