

## “Shaving the Tale”: Barbers and the Narration of Racial Relations in Melville’s “Benito Cereno” and Chesnutt’s “The Doll”

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This essay argues that Herman Melville’s “Benito Cereno” (1855) and Charles W. Chesnutt’s “The Doll” (1912) elaborate narrative form from the racial US trope of the shaving scene. The stories present innovative uses of narrative frameworks, simultaneous silenced and spoken narratives, and misperception and delusion in order to produce a narrative ambivalence that contains the conflict of African American barbering as a trade. The essay traces the historical controversy about barbering within African American political debates and the development of the trade from the eighteenth century up to the twentieth so as to disclose the ambivalent position of African American barbers serving white costumers. Black barbers saw themselves as businessmen helping to build an African American middle class, but were eventually accused of servilism and compliance with established racial hierarchies. This essay demonstrates that by deploying the shaving scene and the razor as the epitome of this ambivalence, these stories offer a narrative form that singularly expresses this particular conflictive labor and racial situation.

Keywords: African American literature; narrative theory; labor history; barbers; race relations

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## Barberos y la narración de las relaciones raciales en “Benito Cereno” de Melville y “La muñeca” de Chesnutt

Este ensayo argumenta que “Benito Cereno” de Herman Melville (1855) y “La muñeca” de Charles W. Chesnutt (1912) elaboran su forma narrativa a partir del motivo norteamericano de la escena del afeitado. Ambos relatos presentan usos innovadores de los marcos narrativos, con narraciones simultáneas relatadas y silenciadas, y de las técnicas del engaño y la percepción equívoca, generando una ambivalencia narrativa que a su vez expresa muy bien el conflicto laboral de los barberos afroamericanos. El ensayo traza el debate sobre los barberos

en el contexto de los debates políticos afroamericanos y el desarrollo de este oficio desde el siglo XVIII hasta el XX, dando cuenta de la situación controvertida que afrontaban los barberos afroamericanos que atendían a clientes blancos. Estos barberos se consideraban a sí mismos empresarios que ayudaban a formar una clase media afroamericana, pero se les acusó a menudo de servilismo y de complicidad con las jerarquías raciales. En este ensayo se demuestra que, al utilizar la escena del afeitado y la navaja de afeitar como el epítome de esta ambivalencia, “Benito Cereno” y “La muñeca” presentan una forma narrativa que encapsula magistralmente esta situación racial y laboral tan particular.

Palabras clave: literatura afroamericana; teoría de la narración; historia del trabajo; barberos; relaciones interracial

When the protagonist of Richard Wright's *Pagan Spain* (1957) enters a barbershop in Barcelona for a haircut, he is taken aback by the cordial conversation quite naturally struck up by his "dark-complexioned little barber in a soiled white coat" ([1957] 2008, 90).<sup>1</sup> He is so perplexed by this that he feels the urge to confess: "'I hesitated about coming into your shop,' at which the barber recoiled, gaped in astonishment, and wished to know why. 'Well, you know [...] some people have very strong racial feelings.' The barber eagerly replies: 'But that's insane! [...] You are a man, a human being. Why should I refuse to cut your hair? The cutting of hair is my profession. I've heard that in some countries such things happen [...] Look, sir, the sun made your hair crinkly; the cold made mine straight. All right. Why should that make such a difference?'" (Wright [1957] 2008, 92). In stark contrast to this, a foreigner in the United States is readily made aware that barbershops, especially African American ones, are loaded with cultural value. Richard Wright's anecdote brings up at least two key features that have converted barbershops into cultural motifs. In the first place, as he notes, African American barbershops have historically served as intimate loci of intra- and inter-racial relations, offering relaxed and supportive public forums to black costumers, or, often, becoming the site of heightened tensions when white customers are attended. The second aspect alluded to by Wright is that barbershops are places where conversations and narratives take place within a rather conventional framework.

While haircuts were an important part of the barber's trade, shaving became a venerated skill, which came to encapsulate the tension inherent in US race relations. As Douglas Walter Bristol Jr. documents in his path-breaking study *Knights of the Razor: Black Barbers in Slavery and Freedom* (2009), in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century barbering became one of the most productive businesses for African Americans, who often learned the trade as domestic slaves, even earning their freedom and being able to start their own businesses. Since shaving and hairdressing in this period were considered luxury services, the customers were generally white.<sup>2</sup> Black barbers' extremely successful invention of the luxurious first-class barbershop in the first half of the nineteenth century facilitated and generalized what would become a typical encounter, namely of black barbers shaving and hairdressing wealthy and influential white costumers. Both in its slave form, and that of the independent free barber, the practice of shaving constituted a significant challenge to the existing racial order, of which the razor and the very act of shaving became telling images. As Eric Sundquist declares: "The razor [...] is a charged icon of African American resistance and revenge, and the black barber the simulacrum of the loyal retainer with mask torn off and revealed to be a murderous rebel—almost" (1993, 452). Yet both razor and

<sup>1</sup> I wish to thank Vincent Brown and Werner Sollors for their generous comments on this essay.

<sup>2</sup> Different from the US context, up to the early nineteenth century, in Brazil barbers were normally slaves who practiced healing methods, and were known as surgeons, as part of the trade legacy from West Africa. De Carvalho Soares explains their crucial role on Brazilian slave ships and in cities (2013).

shaving were ambivalent images. Indeed, shaving became a curious concatenation of slave revolutionary power and slave intimate fidelity towards and care of the master. After Emancipation, on the other hand, it became the image of black fear as well as the instrument of an independent, albeit ambivalent, business.<sup>3</sup>

This essay analyzes the understudied shaving motif in the short story “The Doll” (1912) by Charles W. Chesnutt comparing it with Herman Melville’s “Benito Cereno” (1855). As an elaborated racial motif foreshadowing violence and slave revolt in American literature, the razor, especially in the shaving scene, historically appears to indicate moments of heightened racial tension, from Herman Melville to William Faulkner to Alice Walker. By comparing “Benito Cereno” and “The Doll” I will argue that the shaving scene as a racial motif has striking effects in narrative form. Its apparent relationship to storytelling is obvious, since what does anyone do in a barbershop other than engage in conversation and storytelling? Storytelling is, indeed, one of the main functions of barbershops, as shown most recently in Craig Marberry’s compilation of stories, *Cuttin’ Up: Wit and Wisdom from Black Barber Shops* (2005). However, this function serves a different purpose depending on historical context, and on the racial configuration of slaves and masters, or barbers and customers—a subject that deserves further investigation. While historical investigation of the subject is still scarce, this is especially true in regard to narrative form. Trudier Harris (1979) and Hortense Thornton (1979) have contributed notably to the study of the motif, focusing on black barbershops serving black customers, a recurrent theme in African American literature. Thornton extended the discussion to beauty parlors, drawing a neat definition of gendered parallel spaces. Even though I only refer to male barbershops, and will not go into the important discussion of gender relations, the reinforcement of gender in this space is fully relevant and deserves further attention.<sup>4</sup> Harris and Thornton rightly read the space of the barbershop as a private sphere where black men can voice their personal problems, which frequently extend to their social and economic concerns, and build a strong sense of community through supportive storytelling. In Thornton’s words:

Like the Black church, the barbershop and beauty parlor provide an environment conducive to unrestrained community expression. Through recreating this environment, in which hair is cut, pressed, curled, or “conked,” in which nails are manicured and other tonsorial matters attended to, in which the patrons bring themselves up-to-date on community gossip (many times amusing themselves with racy, good-laughing-lies), and in which not only personal issues, but community concerns are aired, Black American writers provide

<sup>3</sup> Martha Banta (1995) analyzes the definition of pistols and razors as icons for white and black crimes as represented in *Life* magazine in 1896-1907, and discusses them in William Faulkner, associating the razor with questions of black identity.

<sup>4</sup> Barbering has also been historically related to gender. In Europe barbering and depilation were associated, in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, with “barbarism,” and to notions of effeminate men and sodomy attributed to the Ottoman Empire and to North Africa. See Patricia Parker (2004).

their readers with an intimate view of a significant Black institution, often forgotten, which effectively services the real and imagined needs of the community. (1979, 76)

The shaving performed in the context of the barbershop, or the slave-master relationship, as well as beauty services, produces different effects from the self-shaving motif because it is performed by others. In contrast to self-shaving, as portrayed for instance by the poet Robert Lowell and studied by Thomas Austenfeld (2012), being shaved by others destabilizes the private bathroom space in which the shaving takes place, so that the practice and the space become partially public. Only partially public because the shaving by others still remains a gendered sphere of male intimacy, at the same time as becoming the site of a male public forum. These conditions contribute to the reinforcement of patriarchy both in the private and public realms.

Even though the literary trope of shaving demands fuller research, in this essay I will concentrate on the conflictive act of the shaving of white customers by black barbers, and the highly ambivalent narrative situation that this literary motif produces. Because of its historical development, this particular encounter differs from the situation of black barbershops attending to black customers. For the reasons mentioned above, rather than comfort and intimacy, these interracial interactions provide an opportunity to portray in literature climactic moments of the highest racial tension. I argue that in most fictions the act of shaving provides a narrative framework, a predetermined setting for a narrative situation within which the story is told. As I demonstrate, the particular disposition and function of participants in the stories predetermines the conditions of the telling and the intricate interactions in the narrative. This cultural narrative framework exposes the complexity of race relations, and in particular the disjunction between racial discourse and actions, in a terrain prone to ambivalence and *double-edged blades*. "Benito Cereno" and "The Doll" reveal the narrative potential of the shaving scene as a racial motif. By relating shaving narratives to the history of barbering as an African American occupation, I would like to further emphasize the interplay between historical cultural practices and narrative strategies.

"Benito Cereno" tells the story of a slave revolt aboard the Spanish vessel *San Dominick*. The revolt is kept secret by the slave leader Babo and the rest of the rebellious slaves who pretend they have not revolted, while the American visitor to the ship, Captain Delano, fails to identify the actual rebellion and completely misreads the situation on board the *San Dominick*. Captain Delano becomes aware of the slaves' whisperings and increasingly relaxed attitude, and senses the anxiety of the ailing Spanish captain of the revolted vessel, Don Benito Cereno, and the whistle of the hatchets being polished. However, the American Captain suspects nothing more than a possible alliance between the slaves and the Spanish sailors against him.<sup>5</sup> With a

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<sup>5</sup> New sources for Melville's depiction of the hatchets and African music that contribute significantly to the misperception of the atmosphere aboard the *San Dominick* have recently been analyzed by Sterling Stuckey (2009). On the legacies of African stereotypes see Gloria Horsley-Meacham (1991).

number of suspicions rising to the surface, the crucial shaving scene where the slave Babo shaves captain Benito Cereno in Captain Delano's presence, deploys the cultural resonance of the motif to foreshadow the actual revolt on board. In this scene, the careful, trusted Babo "accidentally" cuts Benito Cereno's face, symbolically enacting the bloody revolt. Babo's cut of Benito Cereno replays the warning that transforms the silent, harmonious, and pleasantly intimate moment of the shaving into one that brings back Delano's perception in which "in the black [Babo] saw a headsman, and in the white [Benito Cereno] a man in the block" (Melville [1855] 1990, 74). The shaving scene is a microcosm of the brewing slave revolt aboard the ship—and beyond, of the *Amistad* revolt, and of the Haitian Revolution invoked by the vessel's name.<sup>6</sup>

"The Doll" on the other hand tells the story of Tom Taylor, the proprietor of the Northern Wyandot Hotel barbershop. Colonel Forsyth, a Southern Democratic politician, meets Judge Beeman, a Northern liberal, to discuss political candidates for the presidential campaign. From a desire to prove his theory that "the Negro's place is defined by nature" (Chesnutt [1912] 2002, 795), Colonel Forsyth invites Judge Beeman to accompany him while he is being shaved in Taylor's barbershop. Following several racist claims, the Colonel tells the Judge that: "The nigger [...] is the creature of instinct; you cannot argue with him; you must order him, and if he resists shoot him, as I did" (797). At this point he tells the story of him murdering his mother's former servant. The mother had kindly hired the ex-servant's daughter to wait on her, but she misbehaved, and upon receiving her due reprimand, the girl's father threatened both mother and son. The Colonel promptly shot him, and evaded punishment. The story takes a new turn when, by switching focus to the barber, the reader is told about the missing details, and the deviant tale, since Taylor happens to be the son of the murdered ex-slave. Taylor recalls the story of the abuse suffered by his sister at the hands of the Colonel's younger brother, the father's murder and the impunity enjoyed by the murderer. He has been waiting for the right moment to pay back some of the pain and anguish the Colonel has inflicted on the family, and finds himself with the perfect occasion for revenge. Yet his sense of duty toward his own daughter and his employees, who are making a living thanks to the barbershop, finally prevents him from using the razor to cut the Colonel's throat. On leaving the shop, the Colonel tells the Judge that Taylor is the son of the man he shot, his failure to react meant to serve as proof of the essentially submissive nature of blacks.<sup>7</sup>

As these literary texts seem to suggest, stories filling the chatter that breaks up the awkward silences during the shaving turn out to be crucial in narrative development,

<sup>6</sup> On the slave revolt in "Benito Cereno" and the contemporary debates on American slavery see, among many others, the collection edited by Robert E. Burkholder, *Critical Essays on Herman Melville's "Benito Cereno"* (1992), and particularly the essays by Vanderbilt (1992), Adler (1992), Swann (1992) and especially Karcher (1992). For the historicity of the tale in relation to the Haitian Revolution, see Elmer (2008). A decisive discussion of the subject is provided in Sudnquist (1993, chapter 2).

<sup>7</sup> For an overview of Chesnutt's short fiction see Wonham (1998), and for the Northern short stories Duncan (2004).

enhancing the narrative potential of the shaving as a cultural motif. Several rituals enacted in the cultural practice of shaving in the US combine to draw a rich narrative situation. Of special interest for these stories are: discussion of racial matters, the participants' roles and interactions, the enactment of complex race relations, the narrative performance and exchange, delusion or misperception, and narrative and historical ambivalence. These cultural aspects draw the possibilities of a sophisticated narrative development. Certainly, neither Melville nor Chesnutt fail to take advantage of these shaving scene sources for their depictions of violent contemporary race relations.

During the shaving scene in Melville's "Benito Cereno," following the orders of slave leader Babo, Benito Cereno tells Captain Delano a made-up version of the *Saint Dominick's* past difficulties, so as to hide the revolt to the American Captain visiting the ship, and explain the present disorder on board and his own poor condition. Captain Delano responds to this made-up version of past events:

"Ah yes, these gales," said Captain Delano: "but the more I think of your voyage, Don Benito, the more I wonder, not at the gales, terrible as they must have been, but at the disastrous interval following them. For here, by your account, have you been these two months and more getting from Cape Horn to Sta. Maria, a distance which I myself, with a good wind, have sailed in a few days. True, you had calms, and long ones, but to be becalmed for two months, that is, at least, unusual. Why, Don Benito, had almost any other gentleman told me such a story, I should have been half disposed to a little incredulity." (Melville [1855] 1990, 75)

The conversation, ostensibly nothing more than a momentary diversion, becomes the crucial moment in which Don Benito makes an involuntary expression in response to Captain Delano's verbalization of the real falsehood of the story, which is immediately followed by a nick caused by the servant's unsteady hand—"the razor drew blood, spots of which stained the creamy lather under the throat" (75)—in which Don Benito foresees his own assassination: Captain Delano witnesses Benito Cereno's expression of terror, yet he downplays the white fear of slave revolt present in the scene by settling on the comforting sentiment that "[p]oor fellow [...] so nervous he can't even bear the sight of barber's blood" (75). Ironically, the weapon of slave revolt here prevents the revelation of the real conspiracy that attempts to hide the slave revolt, thanks to the sense of harmony engendered by the servant's devotion and fidelity displayed in the shaving practice.

The story belonging to the conversation during the shaving scene is also key in "The Doll." The story told during the shaving is the crux of the short story, in a way that the shaving scene provides its only framework. The Colonel's story renders the topic of race relations dramatically, locating racial murder at the heart of the story. In this sense, the Colonel's narration already exposes racial ideology and racist violence, it brings up the failure of justice, and the tense relations between North and South. Chesnutt gives full weight to the story told during the shaving by tightening the focus on this particular moment.



As highlighted in Richard Wright's experience, the shaving moment implies not only the appearance of racial issues but also verbal exchange, in particular the narration of personal stories. More specifically, the moment creates a narrative framework, which predetermines special discursive conditions. In order to establish some technical basis for what follows, I will propose a definition of narrative framework drawing from the concepts of framed narrative and narrative situation, before proceeding to analyze its function in the shaving motif, and these stories in particular. According to the *Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory*, "[f]ramed narratives occur in narrative situations when events are narrated by a character other than the primary narrator or when a character tells a tale that, although unrelated to the main story, contains a moral message for the listener in the text" (Herman, Jahn and Ryan 2005, 186).

Before addressing the concept of narrative framework, I should turn to the sometimes-overlapping concept of narrative situation. The concept of narrative situation has more recently been understood as

[c]ognitive 'frames' containing 'default' instantiations that predict presupposition-based inferences (Jahn 1997) [...] On this view, assuming or attributing a narrative situation is an interpretative strategy which can be employed to make sense of textual gaps and indeterminacies [...], or to 'narrativise' texts whose narrative status is uncertain. (Herman, Jahn and Ryan 2005, 365)

I use the term "narrative framework" to describe the way in which the moment of the shaving offers an embedded narrative in these stories, that is, a narrative within the broader narration. I will use the term because the shaving interrupts the action, stepping into an intimate moment of daily life and presupposes that there will be some kind of telling within it, its separation from the rest of the story also marked by crossing the physical threshold (frame) of the captain's cabin, or of the barbershop. From this understanding of narrative situations as frames I would like to borrow the idea that narrative frames provide default conditions of the telling. Yet I would like to add to Manfred Jahn's theoretical description of narratological conditions of the telling cited by Herman, other conditions that seem equally relevant, namely, historical conditions.<sup>8</sup> I understand the narrative framework created by the very space in which the shaving is conducted as generating a narrative situation in which the participants of the embedded narrative engage in a storytelling that is highly conditioned by the cultural and historical connotations of the physical space and the practice of shaving, including, for instance, domesticity, tools such as the razor, conversation, intimacy,

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<sup>8</sup> Manfred Jahn's broadening of the idea of the frame as applied to narrative situations marks a significant shift in our ideas on the functioning of embedded narratives and their interactions, drawing from concepts of cognitive narratology (1997). In "Conrad and Sebald: Aspects of Narrative Perspective and Exile," Jakob Lothe (2011) has argued for the importance of the relationships occurring between narrative situations and exile, in line with my present aim of historicizing narrative frameworks.



and race relations. These preconditions established by the narrative framework of the shaving intervene in the narrative situation that occurs within the shaving scenes. By incorporating the cultural and historical aspects with the narratological concepts of narrative framework, narrative situation and framed narratives this essay demonstrates the crucial role of history in the functioning of narrative technique.

With these concepts in mind, it is clear that the shaving scenes in these fictions enact a complex narrative. This narrative is partly an instance of a narrative mode of embedded narratives that, as Charles Duncan points out, extends to Chesnutt's *oeuvre* as a whole (1998). Duncan notes the frequency of narrations framed by a third-person narrator containing other narratives, mostly told by African Americans, which in many cases relate an experience that contrasts with the main narrative. As he argues, this enabled Chesnutt to devise "a narrative framework that combines the advantages of a detached perspective with the immediacy of an eyewitness account" (Duncan 1998, 108).<sup>9</sup> Werner Sollors takes this even further in suggesting that "Chesnutt is precisely the American writer who manages to sustain an ambivalence toward two groups in the drama he presents, in which he succeeded because of very carefully devised formal structures (including such features as a carefully balanced frame narrative opening up multiple ironies)" (2010, 7). I concur with Duncan's idea that this narrative method enables the production of divided narratives, which contain multiple and often contending narratives; and, I agree with Sollors that the effect produced is ambivalence, as I aim to demonstrate. However, I would add two more aspects of this narrative composition that appear to be especially relevant to the shaving scene. First, that these scenes not only contain contending narratives, but they do so by presenting them in two different modes of narration—spoken and silent narration; and, secondly, that the relationship between the embedded narratives contained in the shaving framework is based on misperception as a narrative strategy. The combination of these factors, as we shall see, goes beyond producing division, since they establish the more complex nature of race relations through narrative and historical ambivalence.

Going back to my previous point, a first instance of the complex narratives that the shaving scenes produce is the fact that both scenes elaborate on parallel stories, the one expressed or vocalized in the scene, and another one not told, the relationship between which is essential to the narrative progression. In "Benito Cereno," the untold story is the actual revolt, which only becomes known through the eponymous protagonist's deposition. This story is present in Babo's and Don Benito's mind during the shaving but is repressed; while in "The Doll," the untold story is Taylor's own account of the murder. While the stories told during the shaving are relevant in that they define the contemporary racial context thematically, the untold counter-accounts are much more so, since the fictions endorse them as the accounts of true facts. In "Benito Cereno" the unspoken account

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<sup>9</sup> Edward Piacentino describes the origins of the embedded stories narrated by black slaves in the plantation literary tradition, which are the main source of Chesnutt's embedded narrations, especially in *The Conjure Woman*.

of the revolt during the shaving is only rendered textual authority at the end, by the attachment of the official trial documents that explain it. In “The Doll” the veracity of Taylor’s tale is given textually, by his own narrative perspective, which enables the mental review of the missing elements and the real story after the Colonel has told a misleading tale, and is also given emotionally, by his intense contempt and efforts to withhold his emotions. As in William Faulkner’s “Dry September” (1931) the casual shaving chatter becomes a complex interplay between the story told and that which is withheld.

Both silenced stories are withheld because of the moment of racially-charged tension being created, consciously or unconsciously, by the participants in the shaving. It is precisely the context of contemporary race relations that predetermines the roles and modes of narration composing the story. The complex racial interactions in the shaving moments are reflected by the complex interplay in their narration. The triangular relationship between barber, shaved person, and companion in these scenes produces a very peculiar narrative situation. In both scenes the barber is African American and the customer, white; in both, the customer is also a wealthy and powerful master/Southern white. There are many nuances that make these two stories different in terms of their characters, yet in this essay I would like to emphasize commonalities in the motif, rather than differences. A third actor, a white companion of the person being shaved, is present in both as well.<sup>10</sup> In the shaving scenes, because of the racial status of the interlocutors, and the servitude proper to the job, the characters conducting the telling are white. In “Benito Cereno” Captain Delano recalls Don Benito’s tale of the misfortunes of the *Saint Dominick* while the latter is discouraged from revealing anything by the sharp glittering blade in Babo’s hand; in “The Doll,” Colonel Forsyth tells the story while he is being shaved by Taylor’s strained hands. Neither of the barbers respond to, or contribute to the telling—Babo only warning Don Benito, and Taylor struggling with how to proceed.

The narrative roles of these multiple participants produce a peculiar narrative situation in that at the intradiegetic level there is one main narrator, one narratee, and one implicit narratee—if I may call the African American barber that. It is peculiar, specifically, because neither of the stories is addressed to the barber, but rather to the other white person. However, the barbers are not only physically present, but the stories told directly affect their past, their present, and their future. They generate anxiety and contempt, which has to be suppressed.

Furthermore, the narrative framework of the shaving scene in these stories helps to accentuate the silenced pain of the stories behind the screen since what in another barbershop would have been a matter of racial etiquette becomes a matter of life and death in both “Benito Cereno” and “The Doll,” and calls for some kind of action in

<sup>10</sup>It is interesting to note that “The Doll” defines the racial profile of its characters clearly as black or white, a racial definition that is challenged in a substantial part of Chesnutt’s fiction works. Indeed, Chesnutt’s work very often strove to demonstrate the falseness of the color line, and the difficulties in racial relations, *passing* being one of his central themes. For an excellent collection of essays on *passing* in Chesnutt, see Wright and Glass (2010).

response. Listening to the doubts raised about his made-up version of the *San Dominick's* misfortunes leads to Babo cutting Don Benito, in a violent act that goes against the calmed persuasive words spoken during the conversation. The inadvertent nature of this act has to be feigned to ensure that Captain Delano draws no link between the cut and the words just uttered, in order to prevent the failure of the revolt, which is otherwise going according to plan. Babo in turn famously pretends having being cut by Don Benito in response. He complains before Captain Delano: "Ah, when will master get better from his sickness; only the sour heart that sour sickness breeds made him serve Babo so, cutting Babo with the razor because, only by accident, Babo had given master one little scratch, and for the first time in so many a day, too. Ah, ah, ah,' holding his hand to his face" (Melville [1855] 1990, 77). In "The Doll," similarly, the Colonel's unrestrained racist narrative is confronted by the barber's silent counter-narrative, which prompts action against the spoken words. At this point the disjunction between the spoken words and the silent pressure they exert on the barbers' own accounts of their respective stories is at its highest, making storytelling contend with actions.

Viewed alongside each other, the accounts in "Benito Cereno" and "The Doll"—spoken in allusion to the untold story, which weighs heavily on their minds during the shaving, and is the source of profound contempt—place the barbers in a crucible where action on their part is demanded. It is only demanded in reaction to their racial context, and it is unperceived by Captain Delano or Judge Beeman, who are unaware of the untold story. The silent listener becomes, therefore, the most important narratee of the tale, albeit implicit. The invisible man becomes here the central character, who is empowered by the brutal weapon of choice: the razor. Words, in both cases, are inversely related to deeds: those who are silent hold the razors, while those who speak produce the official tale, which the revolts aim to rewrite.<sup>11</sup>

Yet the power of the barbers is ephemeral, because the context beyond the shaving scene is marked by harsh racial hierarchies, and although these do not prevent racial revolt, they demand brutal punishment of the rebels. On the one hand, Babo has decided to lead a revolt that, at the moment of the shaving, comes close to being prematurely revealed and undone. Failure will eventually result when multiple hints, and this particular scene itself, finally make Delano aware of what is brewing, and Babo is savagely punished. On the other hand, Taylor stops just short of rebellion against the racial order because he comes to realize the tragic repercussions that would ensue for his family and community. As Duncan notes, "whether one recognizes the heroism of Taylor's restraint or not, it is clear that *any* action he takes—even verbal—while Forsyth sits in his barber chair will result in dire consequences for the barber and his family" (1998, 114; emphasis in the original). The immense power of the black barber paradoxically relegates him to the obsequious subjugation that personal service has

<sup>11</sup> Silence is an overpresent imposition in racial relations as well as the quiet moves previous to the revolt. For the revolutionary meanings of silence in "Benito Cereno" see, Swann (1992).

been historically loaded with. For this reason, barbering harbors an ambivalence born of empowering the black individual with a razor for a close shave, and yet repressing any impulsive usage of the tool of his trade. Using it as a weapon might lead to punishment, or even losing one's head, like Babo, whose "head, that hive of subtlety, [was] fixed on a pole in the plaza" (Melville [1855] 1990, 104) or foreshadowed in Taylor's daughter's doll who "can't hold her head up," and whose "arms won't work and her legs won't work" hanging upon a spike (Chesnutt [1912] 2002, 794).

The complex narrative form that I have just described reveals the historical ambivalence with which barbering came to be perceived. The history of African American barbering was deeply intertwined with its origins during slavery, and was embedded in the sphere of domesticity and personal waiting on the masters. The free black barbers' tradition of hiring slaves made the transition to the barbering trade easier for newly freed slaves. This created opportunities for barbers to eventually become independent, and turned barbering into an occupation that brought material reward, as well as security in the form of a "network [that] functioned almost as a guild" (Bristol 2009, 49). The trade developed rapidly during the nineteenth century, but from the very beginning this success presupposed the ability to offer white customers a congenial environment. In the antebellum period, Bristol observes,

[b]lack barbers struck a bargain with white customers [...] The barbers may have conceded too much. They certainly wrestled with the consequences of their decision. Nevertheless, antebellum black barbers established ties to the white elite that would persist throughout the rest of the nineteenth century. The race relations of the barbershop hinged on black barbers' serving as reference points for their white customers. The barbers validated white privilege through elaborate rituals of deference, and, as the hosts of upscale businesses, they offered white customers an appropriate setting for demonstrating their own respectability. (2009, 42)

The barber's razors were double-edged, as they appear in literature, since they were at once the tools of personal service and manual work, and associated with African American revolt by white racists—and black barbers repeatedly used them as business weapons for the creation of an African American middle class. For these reasons, which permeated the history of the trade, barbering became a very controversial job.

Embedding the narratives in the shaving scenes, the fictions express this historical ambivalence. Indeed, shaving was viewed either as a practice threatening the racial order, or consolidating it. Both perceptions occurred simultaneously in relation to the same act. The two stories in particular make this their strongest point. Both achieve to portray the disquieting effect of shaving on race relations through the narrative technique of delusion or misperception. In "Benito Cereno," Captain Delano misperceives the slave revolt as a result of his paternalist conception of race and race relations. By keeping a narrative perspective close to Captain Delano's, yet at times drawing away from him, the narrator can subsume under the same narration not only

Captain Delano's experience of the events, but also the documents that disclose the real facts, thus revealing the delusion. Delano underestimates the slaves' power with his paternalist views, in front of Don Benito and Babo, who act out the invented account of the *San Dominick's* past. In "The Doll," the shaving scene is also embedded in a broader narrative delimited by the omniscient frame narrator, who does not give voice to Taylor but who has access to his thoughts and feelings, through which the untold story is delivered to the reader. Inside the barbershop, Taylor and the reader are convinced that it is Colonel Forsyth who is deluded, since he is telling the story that provokes Taylor's internal reaction. However, the narrator accompanies the white men out of the barbershop, where the Colonel cynically reveals to the Judge that:

"Well, judge [...] that was a good shave. What a sin it would be to spoil such a barber by making him a postmaster! I didn't say anything to him, for it don't do to praise a nigger much—it's likely to give him the big head—but I never had," he went on, running his hand appreciatively over his cheek, "I never had a better shave in my life. And I proved my theory. The barber is the son of the nigger I shot." (Chesnutt [1912] 2002, 803)

Even if softened by the Judge's skepticism, this is still a very distressing conclusion, since it informs the reader that it is not the Colonel who is deluded, but rather the barber, who was being perversely tested. One might even venture that delusion is tangentially tied to the imagery of acting in both cases—acting in the sense of playing or performing a role, as in theater. Even though I would never go so far as to directly associate barbering with acting or dissimulation, in both "Benito Cereno" and "The Doll" the imagery of concealment or trickery is present in a subtle way. This association is grounded in historical depictions of barbers. As Bristol observes, and Melville brings up in *The Confidence-Man* (1857), in the antebellum period barbers were stereotypically portrayed as hypocrites, who might be hiding avarice and duplicity. Furthermore, "in the slang of the period, *barber* meant a thief, who 'lathered up' or talked smoothly to his victim before 'shaving' or robbing him" (Bristol 2009, 56).

Melville and Chesnutt challenge this older stereotype, which by Chesnutt's time had progressed to the truer image of a polite and refined barber, especially when referring to black practitioners of the trade. To question this association, both authors ingeniously use the stereotype in order to subvert it. Both authors borrow the idea of duplicity or acting that to some extent accompanied the trade in the more positive sense noted above, and partly related to notions of etiquette. As we have seen, what is initially a professional attitude is later accentuated and complicated by the display of extreme racial tension, which, nonetheless, demands from the barbers a *pretended* indifference to spoken narratives in the course of shaving. While performative indifference is common to the barbers in both stories, Chesnutt gives a final twist to performance by conceding the actor-role to the Colonel. Specifically, the fictions borrow the stereotype of acting fake in the form of the aforementioned narrative delusion in order to accentuate a

hypocritical imperative in Babo's plan, and premeditated torture in the Colonel's narration, thereby mapping the internal violence of race relations. Arguably, the shaving scenes become the climax of the enacted plays.

Babo is indeed a stage director during Delano's visit on board since, as Benito Cereno details in his deposition, "in every particular he [Babo] informed the deponent what part he was expected to enact in every device, and what story he was to tell on every occasion" (Melville [1855] 1990, 111). Performing the slave barber, Babo forces Don Benito to play his master in order to keep the revolt hidden. Kermit Vanderbilt (1992) has rightly interpreted this exchange of roles as showing the permeable boundaries between master and slave, white and black, by playing someone else. In turn, this performance paradoxically befits the racial order of the times, since the temporary situation following the successful revolt had already reversed the order. Africans again play the slaves and European and US whites, the masters.

"The Doll" uses trickery in an almost inverse fashion. Although Taylor forces himself to play the loyal and deferential barber, the image of the doll hanging on the spike suggests a more perverse use of trickery. The doll is clearly meant to recall its function as a puppet. And yet, in Colonel Forsyth's view, the one moving the puppet's strings is not the barber in this case but the Colonel himself. Taylor is a puppet, which the Colonel pretends to have made act according to his own racist theories. In this sense, the doll would not only recall the sweet memory of his daughter Daisy, or the horrifying image of Taylor's eventual lynching and hanging, but also, and more so, the very image of his humiliating role in the puppet show that Colonel Forsyth is directing. While "Benito Cereno" broadens and intensifies the African Americans' power of dissimulation as a weapon of resistance through the shaving, "The Doll" downplays it, deflating the aspirations and advantages of double consciousness, and showing the naked critical reality of the early twentieth century.

Both stories use the shaving scenes to raise the question of rightness, and of the opportunities and constraints associated with interracial conduct. The ambivalence displayed in the counterposing of the two stories, told and untold, that give occasion to both Delano's and Taylor's misperceptions distills the debate on the strategies for the fight against racial exploitation and discrimination: against slavery in the transatlantic slave trade of the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries; and against racial discrimination in the critical years around 1900. This controversy was not alien to the labor history of barbering. On a recurring basis, especially during the 1850s with Frederick Douglass's attacks on manual work, and later in the opening decades of the twentieth century with William Edward B. Du Bois's critique of Booker T. Washington's defense of this kind of labor, barbering became an occupation tinged with both defiance and deference, which on the one hand signified clear (professional and social) success, while on the other, undeniably identified it as a form of manual work and personal service to white people.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>12</sup>For Chesnutt's concern with the ambivalences and difficulties involved in white patronage, see Sawaya (2011).



As exemplified in the 1850s controversy, even if black barbers shared with leaders such as Douglass their commitment to a more respected African American community, "they disagreed over how to achieve that goal. The barbers ultimately dissented from the orthodoxy of racial uplift, advocating separatism and self-help instead. Drawing on their identity as knights of the razor, black barbers argued for a conception of respectability that focused on obtaining the means for achieving a middle-class lifestyle and on celebrating how they embodied the virtues of small businessmen" (Bristol 2009, 114). If there was ever a social group less prepared to surrender their personal and collective gains, achieved through legitimate acquiescence to the prevailing nature of race relations, by revolting against racial discrimination and hierarchies, it was the barbers. However, their argument, as we have seen, comprised fraternal striving to create a successful business that would contribute to the creation of a respectable and prosperous African American middle-class.<sup>13</sup>

The question raised in both stories through the shaving motif is, precisely, about the best strategy for ending racially discriminatory practices which were inflicted on both slaves and free blacks. Adding to the barbering controversy over the possibilities of manual work in gradually garnering of social respect and rights, the shaving scenes suggest an alternative strategy to immediate revolt. Babo and the slaves on the *San Dominick* decide to revolt since they stand to lose much less than Taylor. In Taylor's case, however, his function as a conduit to business proprietorship and social respectability for himself and his employees dissuades him from open rebellion, in line with the barbers' tradition, and instead decides him to take the route of steady growth and security with the collective future in mind. As Sundquist remarks, "The Doll" condenses the debate over strategies of resistance that Chesnutt had previously developed in *The Marrow of Tradition* (1993, 450-454). "The Doll" "seems to affirm, at least in part, Booker T. Washington's advocacy for the advancement of African Americans by gradual degrees, by embracing manual labor and vocational education as the means by which to gain access to the American economic system" (Duncan 2004, 200). Arguably, the stories support both response strategies, given that the *San Dominick* revolt is successful for the length of the narrative until the very end, and that Taylor's decision calls for the slow yet determined march of progress.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>13</sup>In the relations between capitalism and violent race relations, the barbershop business works inversely to the post-Reconstruction "spectacle lynching" and "cakewalk"—a dance originally performed by slaves in US plantations, later developed into a very popular part of minstrel shows, which greatly expanded racist culture against African American through the entertainment industry—in the sense that John Mac Kilgore (2012) has analyzed them in reference to *The Marrow of Tradition* (1901). Although both involved a profit, while the cakewalk and the spectacle lynching relied on open exposure to violence, the barbershop as a trade depended on the restraint of that violence, and the semblance of racial harmony.

<sup>14</sup>Chesnutt's complicated position on the strategies to end discrimination and violence against African Americans, which prompted Pickens to refer to him as a "progressive reformer," might feature in the ambivalence of the story (1994). Chesnutt's disagreements with Booker T. Washington were not always in perfect alignment with those of W. E. B. Du Bois, and the years just prior to and around 1910, in which Chesnutt was both a member of the Committee of Twelve and the Niagara Movement (on which the NAACP was based) seem to have been particularly difficult with respect to that point (see Pickens 1994, chapter one).



However, in “Benito Cereno” and “The Doll” misperception plays ambivalence. In “Benito Cereno” it is the white North American captain who is ridiculed for misunderstanding the whole situation, but the true story of the revolt, when it is officially exposed, only evokes its brutality and celebrates its final failure, for which the slaves receive due punishment. It is a grim ending for a story that had so intricately exposed the complexity of racial ideologies and race relations. It is grim in the future revolutionary paralysis it seems to portend in its configuration of the simultaneous, yet debilitating, possibility of success and failure condensed in the shaving scenes. Thus this “revolutionary paralysis” involves a “countersubversive threat of reversal, of a restoration of the old order” (Sundquist 1992, 162).

In “The Doll,” the story seems to approve of Taylor’s heroic refusal to succumb to vengeful impulses, withholding his version of the story and the possibility of his murderous revenge. Disturbingly, however, by the end of the story we learn that the Colonel had placed Taylor under this enormous strain on purpose, simply in order to provide a living example of his notion that blacks are predisposed by nature to submit to whites. In this vein, the Colonel ends the story claiming that Taylor’s restraint was natural, inherited behavior rather than a political act. The argument, made in 1912, if only by its making manifest the constraints on any kind of black political action, condemns Taylor’s decision to proceed cautiously by manipulating his action into one that nurtures the argument of natural, or voluntary, subjugation to the racial order. In this sense, “The Doll,” while providing a model for the right way to undertake the struggle for civil and human rights, also portrays and foreshadows the difficulties and obstacles that African Americans were facing, and would continue to face in their harsh career against Jim Crow.

In conclusion, by innovatively elaborating narrative frameworks, silenced and spoken double narratives, and misunderstanding and delusion, “Benito Cereno” and “The Doll” display the conflictive situation of the trade of African American barbering in the nineteenth century. The narrative ambivalence resulting from the combination of these narrative elements serves to enact how barbers were historically caught between the opportunity to escape slavery and fight social and economic discrimination, and being accused of conformity or of complicity in reproducing the racial order. The stories reveal shaving to be the location of racial ambivalence and complex race relations, producing ill-adjusted narratives whose specific narrative form grows from the historical racial and labor debates that the shaving scene encapsulated.

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