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Douglas Walter Bristol Jr. *Knights of the Razor: Black Barbers in Slavery and Freedom.* Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009. x + 216 pp. $50.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8018-9283-7.

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Economic Independence through Painful Compromise

In *Knights of the Razor*, Douglas Walter Bristol Jr. documents the fascinating historical antecedent to one of the contemporary staples of black culture in America–the barbershop. Bristol traces the evolution of African American barbering from the colonial period, when slave and free black barbers relied on service to white customers to carve out a level of competency and independence for themselves, through the early twentieth century, when the example of self help and economic uplift set by black barbers helped lay the groundwork for an emerging black middle class.

Overall, Bristol's relatively short book is highly readable and provocative, with a simple thesis. He argues that "barbering allowed black men to transform themselves from slaves into businessmen and leaders" (p. 3). Yet this straightforward declaration belies an argument that is nuanced, multifaceted, and quite valuable. The history of barbering is a story of both challenge and accommodation that, as Bristol correctly points out, is often pushed aside by scholars who prefer to focus on uncompromising black leaders and a narrative of resistance to slavery and Jim Crow. The portrait of black barbers that emerges is one of extraordinary men, faced with limited means of independence and improvement, who became living embodiments of W. E. B. DuBois's foundational idea of double consciousness. They made deferential service to whites their surest path to success in a world with few open doors.

"With a flick of the wrist," begins the memorable first sentence of *Knights of the Razor*, "nineteenth-century black barbers could have slit the throats of the white men they shaved" (p. 1). But Bristol's barbers did not employ such violent means, finding an alternate path to personal and economic empowerment. From the beginning, black barbers relied on compromises with whites, demonstrating a keen ability to turn white preconceptions into opportunity. With that story of compromise and opportunity as his basic framework, Bristol traces more than a century of struggle for respectability and independence in the North, upper South, and lower South, ably noting the important geographic variations to his argument.

In the colonial period, some slaves and freed blacks turned the growing white aversion to personal service into a chance to develop a trade and even began to lay claim to the seemingly white-only ideal of respectability as barbers. In the antebellum period, black men came to dominate the trade both North and South, using their proximity to whites to cultivate middle-class respectability that, while conservative in orientation to issues of racial uplift, made them members of an exclusive fraternity that "demonstrated a leadership that balanced a sympathetic understanding of life's travails against a relentless drive for self-improvement" (p. 5). This close-knit group–the "Knights of the Razor" that gives the work its title–maintained its cohesion in the period following the Civil War, but took on a different form. During and after Reconstruction, black barbers struggled over the meaning of their service to whites in a nation increasingly divided by race. Southern black barbers at first tried to maintain their relationship to whites before segregation drove them apart, while Northern black barbers began to firmly reject such long-standing relationships.

One of the great strengths of *Knights of the Razor* is its focus on actors who did not, indeed could not, follow the uncompromising path demanded by leaders like DuBois and Ida B. Wells. Indeed, the overall story arc that results from Bristol's study is one typically underemphasized by historians–a story primarily of compromise. Black barbers, for most of their history, did not challenge the racial status quo. Though many contemporary scholars often prefer a tale of unbending resistance to slavery and segregation, such an aggressive stance could have proven the height of folly for black tradesmen of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century New Or-

leans, Richmond, St. Louis, or even Pittsburgh, a fact that Bristol's barbers learned all too well. They consequently learned to benefit from, if not completely accept, the color line.As slaves and free men before the Civil War, black barbers seemingly embraced the assumptions of black service and deference that undergirded their occupation. In exchange, they cultivated economic success and influence with white patrons. Serving whites could deliver a level of economic security and even entry into middle-class respectability that typically eluded people of color at the time. The limited economic and social independence earned through service to whites may not excite some modern historian's radical sensibilities but it is typical of how many black entrepreneurs–be they the well-studied Pullman porters or the slave and freed hunting and fishing guides of my own research–navigated the color line by somewhat paradoxically using dependence on whites in one area of life to create independence from whites in another.

The price paid by these men proved, at times, quite high. After emancipation, and particularly as Jim Crow segregation swept across the South, black barbers often faced the unfortunate choice of losing their white customers entirely or maintaining the color line and refusing to serve African American customers, with many choosing the latter option. "They made these sacrifices at work in order to achieve gains at home," Bristol argues in his introduction. "Forced to display a public identity for the white man to see while safeguarding a private identity for themselves, they adopted a model of separate spheres to rationalize their lives" (p. 7). Often earning reprobation from leading black figures for such compromise, many black barbers nonetheless found in their trade an avenue to economic security which propelled some from working-class tradesmen to businessmen, and a lucky few from middle-class comfort to wealth and political influence.

Even a brief perusal of the footnotes reveals Bristol's impressive research. Digging deeply into available primary sources, including probate records, newspaper and magazine articles, published and unpublished memoirs, city directories, and census returns, Bristol not only paints a clear and interesting portrait of the evolution of black barbering but also adds much insight to the still understudied tradition of African American entrepreneurship in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Bristol has extracted a detailed and riveting story that is simultaneously an evocative piece of social history, full of rich vignettes, and a comprehensive business history that makes clear the key role that barbering had in the economic life of the black community of the time. The book offers a fascinating cast of characters, such as former Haitian slave Pierre Toussaint, who became "the Vidal Sassoon of his day in New York City"; Nashville barber James Thomas, whose shop served as a gathering place for white economic and political elites before the Civil War; and Durham, North Carolina's John Merrick, who parlayed barbering into a legendary business career as founder of North Carolina Mutual Life Insurance Company, once the largest black-owned corporation in the world.

Civil War historians should not expect to find a wealth of information related to the war itself, but *Knights of the Razor* does provide some fascinating, albeit brief, discussion that sheds light on the role of black tradesmen in abolitionism; their unique position in both North and South to hear "the drumbeat for war" in the years leading up to the conflict; and, perhaps most interestingly, the different perspectives from which they viewed the struggle. In the North, black barbers, many who had long been involved in the antislavery crusade, threw themselves into Republican Party politics and, as Bristol puts it, "saw the Civil War with a moral clarity that was impossible" among their border state and Southern counterparts, for whom basic safety and continued reliance on white patrons tempered their open support for the Union (p. 126). The war divided black barbers' political and economic loyalties, as St. Louis barber James Thomas demonstrated. "I like the Southern people individually," Thomas noted in his autobiography, "but collectively and politically, Dam 'em" (p. 120). Bristol's brief treatment of the war years provides a fascinating window into both how some more affluent African Americans witnessed and sometimes involved themselves in the struggle and how their position as relatively privileged barbers before and during the war laid the groundwork for post-Emancipation struggles to define freedom and success on their own terms.

Readers may feel frustrated at times with the dearth of detailed examples of the transformative impact of the barbering trade. At just under 180 pages of text, *Knights of the Razor* sometimes leaves key topics underexplored. The antebellum period forms the strongest part of Bristol's narrative largely because he devotes the majority of his time and evidence to the gelling of the inchoate black barbering trade before the Civil War. As a result, the postwar period is given comparatively less attention in the final two chapters. More discussion of the evolving community of black barbers would have been welcome, particularly in the tantalizingly brief discussion of the twentieth century, which merely suggests, rather than clearly demonstrates, the connection between black bar-

bers, the emerging black middle class, and the leading debates over racial uplift occurring at the time. It is a bit unclear, for example, whether Bristol believes barbering was truly foundational to the emerging black middle class or if that occupation is merely an excellent window into one aspect of its formation. That successful barbers reflected a nascent black middle class is clear in Bristol's narrative; what is less clear is the extent to which barbers can claim credit for that or if their example later evolved into other challenges to white supremacy. Additionally, given the well-known importance of barbershops to contemporary African American communities, some more conspicuous attempts by Bristol to connect the present day with his historical narrative might have made his story even richer.

These minor criticisms aside, *Knights of the Razor* admirably explores over a century of barbering, in both the North and the South, while making an important argument told through many memorable stories. This is a valuable book that makes clear that African American barbers have long been due more attention from scholars. Bristol succeeds in returning them to their place in the history of both the black middle class and the struggle for racial equality, humanizing and giving voice to hard-working, dignified men whom many scholars had long unfairly dismissed as unavoidably compromised because of their chosen paths to success.

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