

You Next: Reflections in Black Barber Shops
Jeffrey Henson Scales on Antonio M. Johnson

Antonio M. Johnson's book *You Next: Reflections in Black Barber Shops* is a comprehensive survey of barber shops in America's Black communities, from his hometown of Philadelphia to barbers, and their customers across the United States. The result is a powerful celebration of these communal landmarks. African identities, status, and hierarchies have been defined by unique hair traditions that go back as far as recorded history. These traditions survived in spite of the horrors and legacies of slavery in the Americas.

For Black American men, the barber shop is a cathedral of masculine identity. From braiding traditions brought here by enslaved Africans to Frederick Douglass's glorious swept-back natural hairstyle; from the early twentieth-century conk to the magnificent, proud, and gender-neutral afros of the 1960s, hair has been a defining element for each era of African American style. The highly designed fade and flat-top new jack styles closed out the twentieth century and brought us to the current, popular cross-gender "natural" hairstyles that encompass everything from dreadlocks, braids, twists, afros, and complex fades, to bleached blond or bald styles, accepted for people of all genders.

Photographing the places and people that create contemporary hair statements, Johnson embraces these houses of hair worship in a documentary tradition. The work is inspired by the crisp objective style of Walker Evans's social landscapes fused with the intimacy of Gordon Parks's loving approach to the human experience. Johnson has compiled a series of images that takes us from the barbershop exteriors to the interior spaces where the community's oral histories and masculinist philosophies are passed down from the elders to the young.

These places of business are central to the communities they serve. Johnson shows us portraits of all school characters—from Kenneth Hogan, of the fantastic Cuts & Bends barber shop in Oakland, California; to Maximilian A.J. Wells of Maximilian's Gentlemen's Quarters Barber Parlor in Philadelphia, and many more. His portraits show us shop owners, young and old, who have withstood the ups and downs of their

neighborhoods and their businesses, while maintaining safe spaces for boys and men of all ages.

The community is always a part of a barber shop. Johnson's images describe this sense in intricate detail from the anxious young children getting their earliest cuts, to the young men knowing they are in the process of becoming their best selves, and elder statesmen waiting knowingly for their barber to make them who they see themselves to be. In the introduction to his book, Johnson writes, that while growing up getting a haircut was the weekly event “he looked forward to more than anything.” My own experience as a young teen was quite different.

I struggled with my father over my desire to support a huge afro and was mildly traumatized when in 1967, my parents sent me to Minnesota to stay with my paternal relatives, wanting to get me away from San Francisco’s Summer of Love. Not long after my arrival, my domineering uncle forcefully cut off my beloved afro. That might have influenced my attitude toward barbering for the rest of my life. A dozen years later, an Eastern European barber told me my hair was “too straight” to get the flattop I desired to fit in with the Los Angeles punk-rock scene of the late 1970s. After having my sense of napestry again challenged, it wasn't until I moved to Harlem in the 1980s that I ventured into a barber shop again. That barber shop welcomed this nap-deprived Black man with a camera. I photographed at that shop for over six years.

The cultural dynamic of the barber shop’s role in the Black community is also explored in Johnson's book through a dozen or so short pieces by a variety of writers, including ruminations, storytelling, poetry, and interviews. In one of the essays, Julian Campbell writes about the things you hear from barbers and customers: “Barber shop talk is unfiltered And alas off if you're bad barber shop logic.”

You Next is a remarkable achievement; and as readers, we get to ride with Johnson on his journey across the United States, coming to a shared understanding that these barber shops are “more than places to get to shape up shave or trim. They are where Black men can speak freely, and receive feedback on who we are, who we want to be, and what we believe to be true about the world around us.” Accompanying Johnson on his journey is truly a delightful ride.

Jeffrey Henson Scales is a photo editor at the *New York Times*, adjunct professor at New York University's Tisch School of the Arts, and author of the book of photographs *House* (SPQR Editions, 2016), which documents a legendary barber shop in Harlem over the course of six years.