

The Counter-Image



How the Imagination Was Never Surrendered

There is a photograph that lives in the memory of this collection though no single camera ever took it. It was made too many times for that - in storefront studios and front parlors and dirt backyards, in numbers past counting, until it stopped being a picture and became a practice. A young person sits for a portrait. The light is whatever the room could offer. The backdrop is a bedsheet, a brick wall, a Sunday curtain pinned to the frame. The subject chose the clothes, the pose, the set of the jaw and the tilt of the chin. No trained gaze presides. This is a face made for the people who already knew its beauty and needed no standard to confirm it - the people who held the mirror that was always there.

This essay turns, as every closing essay in this Movement has turned, from the wound to the ground.

The three essays before it followed the lie into the imagination with the same patience that *The Measured Body* followed it into the flesh. The eye was schooled to rank a face. The story carried the rank through pleasure. The mirror returned a picture the self never chose. Each essay named a mechanism, held it against the counter-ground, and refused to let the wound pass as nature. But naming the wound was never the whole of the work, because the wound has a ground beneath it - and the ground was never empty.

Just as the body was never only a specimen, the imagination was never only a territory the lie occupied. The people the lie tried to picture went on making their own images the entire time. They painted, sang, danced, braided, dressed, and photographed themselves into a beauty the lie had ruled impossible. It happened in the portrait that insists on the dignity of the face called ugly, in the story that seats the discarded person at the center, in the aesthetic tradition that finds its own harmony and asks the dominant gaze for nothing. This work is not reaction. It is continuation - a practice of beauty and self-making older than the lie and certain to outlast it. The counter-image is not the lie's picture flipped. It is the deeper picture the lie drew a curtain across.

The Artist Who Refused the Frame

bell hooks, in *Art on My Mind: Visual Politics*, insists that art is not decoration and not aftermath but contest - a site of political struggle. Black artists, she argues, have always practiced a counter-aesthetics, making images that refuse the lie's frame and hold fast to the complexity it tried to erase. For hooks the question was never whether Black art existed. The question was whether the dominant culture would grant it the dignity of the word *art* - vision rather than instinct, intelligence rather than accident, work rather than artifact.

The history she traces runs long and mostly unsigned. The quilt-makers of Gee's Bend, Alabama, pieced geometric abstractions from work clothes and feed sacks that rival anything the European modernists claimed to discover - though no museum hung them until the century was nearly spent. The studio photographers of Harlem and Bronzeville made portraits of composure in rooms the dominant culture never once entered. The yard artists and grave decorators built assemblage from what the world threw away, turning refusal itself into the raw material of beauty. Each of these makers practiced what hooks calls visual politics - the insistence on seeing and being seen on one's own terms. None waited for permission. None petitioned a canon built to keep them out. They were making the picture that says: *this is what beauty looks like when the standard is lifted and the face is simply met*.

Here is the foundation the essay stands on. The counter-image did not arrive late, trailing behind the lie's pictures as their answer. It ran alongside them from the first, correcting them, replacing them in the rooms where the community held its own gaze. The lie trained the eye. The artists trained it otherwise - on the face the lie overlooked, the body it reduced, the life it refused to picture whole.

The Tradition That Crossed the Water

Robert Farris Thompson, in *Flash of the Spirit: African and Afro-American Art and Philosophy*, joins the African aesthetic traditions this Archive has been recovering since Movement Two to the diasporic self-making that carried them onward under conditions the ancestors never chose. His work follows how Kongo, Yoruba, and other visual and philosophical traditions survived the

crossing and kept producing beauty on their own terms - not memory thinning into approximation, but living practice bending to new soil.

Thompson's gift to this essay is the argument for continuity. The counter-image does not begin with the first Black painter admitted to a white gallery. It begins on the far shore, in traditions that understood beauty as balance, relation, and right order long before the European standard was assembled. When Thompson traces the Kongo cosmogram across the water - into the yard shows of New Orleans, the bottle trees and swept graves of the Sea Islands, the cross-and-circle patterning worked into quilts that map a cosmos in cloth - he is tracing an aesthetic that never once needed the dominant culture's blessing to be beautiful.

This is the essay's deepest claim. The braider who plaits a pattern her grandmother knew is not answering the magazine that called her hair unruly. She is continuing something older than the magazine, rooted in a tradition that read beauty as the artistry of relation - the hand shaping the hair of someone known and loved, the pattern holding meaning the way a language holds it, the act itself a grammar of belonging. The rupture was real. The crossing was real. The theft of names and the scattering of kin were real. But the aesthetic intelligence came through - altered, adapted, and unmistakable at the root. The counter-image has roots that run beneath the lie entirely.

The Contemporary Practice

Kobena Mercer, in *Travel & See: Black Art Now*, brings the argument into the present. His criticism shows the counter-image in its full modern range - not the lie's picture inverted but a contested, evolving practice that engages the dominant tradition without being ruled by it. Black art, Mercer insists, is not frozen in opposition. It is alive and self-aware, capable of irony, abstraction, and formal daring, and it owes no promise to be forever *about* race. Sometimes the counter-image says yes to something the lie never had the imagination to picture - a beauty that steps clear of the whole binary of inclusion and exclusion and no longer keeps the lie as its reference point.

Kellie Jones, in *South of Pico: African American Artists in Los Angeles in the 1960s and 1970s*, gives that argument names and addresses. She documents the makers the dominant canon too often left out: Betye Saar, dismantling the Aunt Jemima caricature and rearming it in *The Liberation of Aunt Jemima*; Noah Purifoy, building sculpture from the charred debris of the Watts uprising; David Hammons, pressing his own greased body against paper and dusting it into print; Charles White, drawing Black faces with the monumental gravity the academies reserved for saints and generals. They worked in community, not isolation - drawing from the streets, the yards, the found and discarded materials of neighborhoods the city had redlined and written off. They turned what was thrown away into what was seen, and insisted, on canvas and in assemblage and in performance, that the face the lie called ugly was beautiful, the body it reduced was complex, the life it refused to picture whole was a whole life. Jones supplies what

this collection has demanded throughout: named makers, named works, named communities - a tradition as rigorous and formally exacting as anything in the canon the lie held up as its measure.

The Vernacular Ground

The counter-image was never confined to the gallery. Houston A. Baker Jr., in *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature: A Vernacular Theory*, reads the blues as a vernacular aesthetic - a way of seeing and making that rises from inside the community rather than arriving from the dominant tradition. The blues never asked to be admitted to the conservatory. It raised its own architecture of sound, its own theory of meaning, its own standard of excellence, drawn from the community's own hands and ears.

The visual counter-image lives the same way. The barber who cuts a fresh pattern into the fade. The grandmother arranging the photographs across the mantel into a family's whole history. The dancer who makes a stage of the sidewalk. The writer taping her work to the wall of a Black Arts workshop. Each makes an image from within the community, for the community, in the community's own grammar of beauty. This is where the counter-image proves most durable. Galleries admit and expel. Museums curate and then quietly deaccession. But the picture made at the kitchen table, in the barbershop, on the front stoop, at the reunion under the pavilion goes unregulated. It needs no grant, no critic, no one's leave. It is the daily aesthetic labor of a people who never once stopped deciding for themselves what was beautiful.

Michele Wallace, in *Invisibility Blues: From Pop to Theory*, holds the reclamation honest by refusing to let it flatten into a single story. Black women, she shows, negotiated the image on two fronts at once - against the lie's racial hierarchy and the culture's gender hierarchy in the same breath. The woman who braids, who photographs, who paints, who writes, makes the counter-image from a place the dominant culture rendered invisible, and makes it visible anyway.

The Counter-Ground Gathered

Here, at the collection's close, all four grounds gather - as they did in the finale of Collection Two, as they did at the end of *Written Into Statute*.

Communal selfhood names the mirror that was always there - the reflection kin and community held up, the face seen and loved before the lie's glass was ever installed. Ramose's ubuntu, *umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*, insists that the maker of the counter-image is no solitary genius but a node in a web, drawing from the community and giving back to it. The counter-image is communal before it is personal. It is the family photograph before it is the museum piece.

Ma'at names beauty as balance - the rightness of a thing in true relation, not its standing on a ladder above another. An aesthetic built on exclusion was never order; it was disorder taught to please the eye. The counter-image does not swap one ranking for another. It dissolves ranking

altogether and says: beauty is not a ladder but a circle, the harmony of a face seen within the web that holds it.

Relational personhood carries the same truth into the act of making. Gyekye's Akan account - the person constituted within community, never read off the surface of the skin - means the counter-image is always woven. The artist draws from the ancestors, the braider from the grandmother, the photographer from the block. No image is made alone, because no self is made alone.

Moral reciprocity names the debt. Not the charity of including what was excluded. Not the discovery of a beauty always plainly there. The debt is the reckoning with a deliberate refusal to see - a refusal that cost both sides, as Morrison knew, leaving the world stranded with questions about personhood and community that the counter-image had already answered.

The Lie Reached the Dream

This essay closes not only Collection Three but Movement Four - the long anatomy of how the West manufactured rank and how the ancestors answer it. Three collections traced the lie through its fullest reach. *The Architecture of the Lie* followed it into structure - the instruments of fabrication, the bureaucracy of sorting, the statute that gave fiction the force of law, the scripture that blessed what the law enforced. *The Measured Body* followed it into the flesh - the calipers measuring what was never there, the medicine that learned to read difference as deficit, the reflex that outlived the science that bore it. *The Inherited Image* followed it into the imagination - the eye trained to rank, the story that carried the rank through pleasure, the mirror that returned a face the self never chose.

Three chambers. One house. The lie reached the structure, the body, and the dream - and in each chamber it entered, the ancestors were already holding the answer.

For the Working Reader

Here the Movement's labor reaches your hands.

The lie was engineered - by named hands, in named rooms, for interests that can be named. It was built into the architecture you move through, inscribed on the body you inhabit, pictured in the imagination you were handed at birth. It came by design, not by accident, and it persists by design still: structures outlast their builders, habits outlast their teachers, images outlast the hands that drew them. But nothing built by human hands is beyond the reach of human hands.

For the organizer who opens a meeting with the names of the dead - you are practicing the counter-ground. You refuse the lie's isolation and seat the ancestors at the table. For the advocate carrying a movement's history into a present fight - you refuse the lie's amnesia and insist the map of the present was drawn by decisions, and can be drawn again. For the artist making the picture the lie declined to make - you are not reacting; you are continuing a practice of beauty older than the thing you resist. For the person learning to meet the mirror and love what the lie

taught them to overlook - the face was never the problem. The mirror was. And the older mirror, the one the community always held, was waiting the whole time.

The Picture and the Ground

The calipers measured what was not there. The chart sorted what did not exist. The law wrote fiction into statute. The scripture blessed what was never spoken. The eye was trained to rank. The story carried the rank through pleasure. The mirror returned a picture the self never chose.

And beneath every chamber the lie entered, in every room it furnished with its counterfeit order, the older picture went on being kept. The women of Gee's Bend pieced the quilt. The studio photographer caught the dignity. Charles White gave the Black face the weight of a monument. Betye Saar turned a caricature into a weapon. The musician built a sound no conservatory could hold. The dancer made a stage of the street. The poet named what had gone unnamed.

The lie was fabricated, imposed, installed. The counter-image was never made in that way. It was kept. Carried. Practiced. Handed on. It is the beauty the community never surrendered, the face the community never stopped seeing whole.

The lie wrote itself into the world. The ancestors wrote back - not in argument but in image: in the portrait, the song, the braid, the name spoken before the work begins.

Begin wherever you are standing. The circle always returns, and when you stand, you do not stand alone. You stand inside a picture your ancestors made and the keepers refused to let fall.

The lie was made. The beauty was kept. And what was kept is yours.

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