

The Stories That Carried the Rank



How Narrative Taught Hierarchy Through Pleasure

A story never announces itself as instruction. It arrives dressed as entertainment, as escape, as the quiet pleasure of a tale well told. We do not open the book or settle before the screen expecting to be schooled. We come to be moved, amused, carried somewhere else for an hour. And so, the lesson slips in through the back door of our attention while our guard stands watch at the front.

This is how the lie learned to travel.

In the first essay of this collection, we traced the training of beauty - the eye taught to rank a face, the standard installed as universal when it was only local preference wearing a borrowed crown. That training worked through omission and commission alike: the face allowed into the frame, the face left outside it; the features called *classic*, the features marked *exotic*. But an image alone was never enough. An image is static, arrested. It can be stopped, turned over, questioned. What the lie needed next was movement - the power to flow, to repeat, to gather weight with every retelling.

Stories gave the lie its legs. Myth, folktale, novel, film - these were the vehicles that carried hierarchy not by argument but by pleasure, not by proof but by repetition. A story does not ask you to believe. It asks only that you listen. And in the listening, you absorb how the world is supposed to be arranged, long before anyone asks whether it ought to be.

The Africanist Presence

Toni Morrison, in *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*, offers this essay its governing insight. She shows how white American literature leaned on an imagined Blackness to build its own reflection - the Africanist presence that haunts the canon without ever being named or thanked. This is the mechanism at the root: the ranked picture was never separable from the ranked self. The other was not a character in the story. The other was a function the story could not run without.

The pattern holds across centuries of American writing. From the captivity narrative to the plantation romance to the modernist experiment, a dark body is imagined into the tale so that the light may be measured against it. The savage makes the civilized legible. The servant makes the master intelligible. The threat makes the protector necessary. Consider the frontier of James Fenimore Cooper's *The Last of the Mohicans*, where the noble Chingachgook exists chiefly to hand his vanishing world over to a white inheritor, or the plantation fictions of the postbellum decades, where the loyal, contented slave was conjured to reassure a nation that the order it had just fought over was gentle after all. The protagonist emerged from these encounters as defined, superior, redeemed. The other emerged as scenery - obstacle, shadow, the darkness against which the hero's light was struck like a match.

The screen inherited the ledger whole. *The Birth of a Nation* in 1915 taught a generation to cheer the hooded rider and fear the freedman, and its grammar outlived its disgrace. The Western needed the Apache to fall so the homestead could rise. The war film needed a faceless enemy to sanctify the soldier. The modern blockbuster still bends toward a hero's journey that requires someone to be conquered, saved, or silenced - and when that someone reliably wears a dark, indigenous, or foreign face, the story teaches far more than plot. It teaches place. Who belongs at the center, who at the margin, who belongs outside the frame entirely.

This was never a conspiracy. It was a grammar - a way of arranging the human that felt less like a claim than like the plain way stories simply go.

The Machinery of Repetition

A single story can be questioned. A thousand tellings become common sense. Henry Louis Gates Jr., in *The Signifying Monkey*, gives us the vocabulary for how narrative carries meaning through a tradition - through repetition, variation, and signification, the archetype passed hand to hand until it feels less like invention than inheritance. The trickster, the talking animal, the clever underdog endure not because they are timeless but because they are taught, rehearsed, and handed down.

The lie's stories traveled the same road. Each retelling tightened the hierarchy; each performance polished the stereotype to a higher shine; each iteration made the pattern feel more like weather and less like a decision. The blackface minstrel of the nineteenth century became the shuffling

comic relief of the twentieth. The savage of colonial adventure became the urban predator of the evening thriller. The shape shifted; the function held.

Stuart Hall, in “The Whites of Their Eyes,” names the power in that repetition. Media does not merely mirror the world, he argues; it produces the world, naturalizing the stereotype through framing and sheer accumulation until invention hardens into fact. A narrative told once is a claim. A narrative told ten thousand times is nature. The sitcoms of the 1970s and 1980s rarely admitted a Black family unless race itself was the subject. The crime report chose *thug* for one defendant and *troubled young man* for another, the vocabulary shifting with the face. The advertisement cast the actor whose features matched the imagined default customer – and in that casting whispered who was pictured as the ordinary consumer, the ordinary citizen, the ordinary human.

These were not solitary failures of imagination. They were collective habits of composition. The writer who could not build a story without the savage. The director who could not picture a hero with dark skin. The publisher certain that readers would not follow a Black protagonist. Each ran the same silent calculation, most of them without ever noticing they were calculating, because the grammar had been learned long before the first page was drafted.

The Production of Criminality

Nowhere did this narrative machinery grow more lethal than in the story of crime. Khalil Gibran Muhammad, in *The Condemnation of Blackness*, traces how the idea of Black criminality was manufactured and then sewn into statistics, statutes, and the popular imagination - until the punishment of Black people could be made to resemble the impartial keeping of order.

The story ran in a closed circle. Crime was said to be higher in Black neighborhoods; therefore, Black people were held prone to crime; therefore, heavy policing of those neighborhoods was justified - and that policing produced the very arrest figures later offered as proof. The loop was seamless, but its engine was narrative. The newspaper convicted the accused before the trial opened. The mugshot ran while a white suspect received a yearbook portrait. The judge’s language assumed guilt where the law promised innocence.

Ida B. Wells refused to let that story stand. In *Southern Horrors* and *The Red Record*, she tore the mask from lynching and revealed it not as an answer to crime but as a tool of terror and economic control, raised against Black ambition and success. Her ledgers of the murdered turned private grief into public indictment. And she exposed the tale that always ran ahead of the rope - the accusation, the rumor, the whispered story of transgression that outran any investigation, because the story never required proof. It required only circulation.

Jack Shaheen, in *Reel Bad Arabs*, found the same machine turned on another people. Across a century of film, Arab and Muslim characters appeared almost solely as terrorists, fanatics, and villains - the person reduced to a threat that made the hero’s violence righteous. The method was

identical to the anti-Black script, which tells us the mechanism was never built for a single target. It was built to reproduce itself, to fit any face the age needed to fear.

The Encoding and Decoding of Meaning

Audiences were never merely poured full of these stories. Stuart Hall's model of encoding and decoding gives us the truth of reception: meaning is encoded by those who make the message and decoded by those who receive it - sometimes faithfully, sometimes against the grain.

Encoding lives in the making. The writer choosing the plot, the director framing the shot, the editor cutting the scene - each decision carries a hidden assumption about who deserves our sympathy, who our suspicion, who deserves to be seen at all. Decoding lives in the watching. The viewer who swallows the frame whole, the viewer who bargains with it, the viewer who throws it out entirely.

Many people lived in that middle, negotiated space. They laughed at the comedy while knowing the joke was not funny to everyone in the room. They followed the drama while understanding it belonged to someone else's life. But some lived in the oppositional space - what bell hooks named the *oppositional gaze*, the refusal of the frame and the assertion of the right to see differently. They did not wait to be pictured truthfully. They wrote their own scripts, filmed their own faces, told the truth about their own lives without asking anyone's leave.

The Counter-Narrative Always Being Told

Edward Said, in *Orientalism*, offers a method that carries across borders. Adapted rather than transferred wholesale, his lesson is plain: read representation as a system of power, not as a scatter of unrelated images. Seen this way, one thing becomes luminous - the counter-narrative was always being told, even as the lie's stories filled the air.

The African American literary tradition is itself the proof. From the slave narrative to the Harlem Renaissance to the Black Arts Movement, that tradition signified upon the dominant story, riffed on it, parodied it, turned it inside out. The counter-story was not a late reaction to the lie. It was a continuation of something older - a tradition as rigorous and self-aware as any the canon claims for its own. The slave narrative did not wait for permission to tell the truth about bondage. The Harlem Renaissance did not ask white editors whether Black art had earned a stage. The Black Arts Movement did not haggle with critics who called the work too political.

And the work goes on. The filmmaker who centers Black lives without making race the whole of the plot. The novelist who writes love that does not require a dark body to be rescued or destroyed. The comedian who laughs *at* the hierarchy instead of performing it. The poet who names what was left unnamed. The counter-image was never invented in resistance. It was carried forward - the older story the lie tried to bury and could not.

Relational Personhood Against the Stereotype

Here the counter-ground must do its true work - not as ornament, not as a gentle coda, but as diagnosis.

No person is a type in a story. Every person carries a history the stereotype must erase to function. Kwame Gyekye, in *An Essay on African Philosophical Thought*, develops the Akan account of relational personhood - the person constituted within community rather than read off the surface of the skin. Where the lie saw a specimen, Gyekye names a relation. Where the lie sorted by feature, Gyekye asks the older question: what is owed?

Turned toward narrative, this reveals the story-that-reduces as more than inaccurate. It is a severing. It takes a person woven into a hundred others and presents them alone - as specimen, as category, as type. The lie's story could only work by cutting the web first. Mogobe Ramose's articulation of ubuntu adds the second stroke: *a person is a person through other persons*. The stories a people tells about itself - not the stories pressed upon it from outside - are the ones that hold truth. The lie's narratives were foreign objects lodged in a living tradition, never the tradition itself.

The elder who tells of Sundiata. The griot who sings the long genealogy of the Mande. The grandmother who names the ancestors around the kitchen table. These stories carry a wholly different grammar. They do not reduce; they enlarge. They do not isolate; they weave. They do not rank; they honor. This is what the lie interrupted - not erased. And what was interrupted can be resumed.

For the Organizer and the Advocate

None of this is abstract. It is the lived weather of the person who hears the joke and knows, in the same breath, that they are its punchline. The organization that presents its mission and is quietly measured against a picture of what a *worthy* nonprofit is supposed to look like. The advocate told their story is too angry the moment it names the truth. The community member who long ago learned to perform respectability as the price of being heard at all.

To recognize the story *as* story is the first step toward refusing it. To name the hierarchy sewn into the plot is the second. To tell the story that was never told - or was told and then suppressed - is the patient labor that follows. This collection will carry that labor onward, into the picture in the mirror, into the internalized image, into the counter-image that was always being made. But this essay lays its plank in the ground: the stories carried the rank. The teaching was deliberate. And what was taught can be untaught.

The Tale and the Truth

A story told once is a claim. A story told a thousand times becomes nature. Yet here is the tell that gives the whole game away: nature has never needed narration. The sun requires no press. The tide asks for no retelling. Only the lie must be repeated, because only the lie decays the moment the repetition stops. The endless need to tell the story again is the surest proof the story was never true.

The calipers measured what was not there. The chart sorted what did not exist. The law wrote fiction into statute. And the story told what was never so. Each was a costume worn by the same lie, and each made the lie a little harder to see and a little harder to unmake than the one before. But the person was never only a type, and the narrative was never only a tale. The truth lived in the web of relation the narrators had to sever before they could pretend to know the character at all. What they described was their own assumption, handed back to them in the shape of a plot. What they ranked was their own preference, dressed as fact and sent out to be believed.

And what was written - in bone, in law, in scripture, in image, in story - can be rewritten. That is the whole of our inheritance and the whole of our task: to hear the stories that were never meant to be heard, to lay down the ones handed to us at birth, and to take up the pen the lie insisted was never ours to hold. Begin wherever you are standing. The circle always returns. First we learn to listen. Then, at last, we learn to tell.

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