The Nature of Political Heroes: Some Aesthetic Considerations

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Discourse, Volume 39, Number 2, Sprint 2017, pp. 253-270 (Article)

Published by Wayne State University Press
DOI: https://doi.org/10.13110/discourse.39.2.0253

The Nature of Political Heroes: Some Aesthetic Considerations

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When our heroes are broken, it's up to us to remake them.

We are giving over our time and attention and our hard-won platforms to people too frightened and angry to build lives for themselves that don't involve tearing down others. And we need to stop. There are many ways to silence a woman, and not all of them involve getting her to stop speaking. Sometimes it's enough to simply ensure all she speaks about is you.

So when people tell me that including "so many" nonwhite characters in my fiction is "political" or that I'm trying to make some kind of "statement," I can't help countering with the fact that the "statement" made by every writer with a white monochrome world is also deeply political, even more so because it's based on a false sense of normal that's been carefully

Discourse, 39.2, Spring 2017, pp. 253–270.
 ISSN 1522-5321.

> and systematically constructed for hundreds of years in [the United States and elsewhere]. . . . As a creator, as a media-maker, I know I can choose to blindly perpetuate those myths, or help overturn them. But I couldn't make that choice until I stopped eating up the lie of what the world was really like.
>
> —Kameron Hurley

I once shared the widespread infatuation with superheroes. After all, superhero comic writers and screenwriters worked within real constraints so that their protagonists could only defy some but not all social and physical rules. The results were lovable and fascinating, because they combined being extraordinary with having real and profound limitations. They were also often carefully contextualized in historical and political moments, inviting readers and viewers to explore the relation of the actors' agency to what the circumstances would and could not permit. More recently, however, blockbuster superhero film narratives and characterizations have become flabby. Written as if we still live in the Cold War period with unchanged sovereign power and geopolitical fault lines, they are equally marked by a distinctly twenty-first-century brand of disenchantment with the possibility of transformative politics or governing institutions.

I can no longer pay money or spend time to watch these movies. Doing so contributes to an economy of antipolitical cynicism that needs no further support. In this same period, however, my appreciation for characters not cast as superheroes but who function as such has grown immeasurably. In what follows, out of exasperation with popular images of heroes that are in the widest circulation, I revisit three brief classic discussions of features of national or political heroes, using them to identify what is so special about Okwe, the Nigerian male protagonist in *Dirty Pretty Things,* the black British detective chief inspector John Luther in the crime drama *Luther,* and LeBron James, an African American small forward for the National Basketball Association's Cleveland Cavaliers. I close by considering why our aesthetic depictions of heroes are so politically salient.

Three Dimensions of Political Heroes

In his classic study *Moses and Monotheism,* Sigmund Freud, drawing on the work of Otto Rank, described the ubiquity of a particular set of tropes in the myths of national heroes evident in "almost all civilizations."[1] Stories about Moses, Romulus, Oedipus, and Perseus cast them as heroes who were the sons of parents of high rank. Their conception is first impeded by sterility or legal sexual prohibitions and then by fathers who are warned that their child would seriously endanger them. The father insists that the child be killed outright or exposed to extreme danger, but the child is instead found, saved, and nurtured by animals or poor people.[2] The hero only discovers his noble origin later in victoriously overcoming his father, which enables him rightfully to assume the leadership merited by the greatness of his deeds. Freud writes that "When the imagination of a people attaches this myth to a famous personage it is to indicate that he is recognized as a hero, that his life has conformed to the typical plan."[3] The core features of the hero's life include his being born against his father's will, being saved against his father's intentions, and combining high, royal, or esteemed status with low, humble, or degraded status, possessing the entitlements of the former but sharing the formative experiences of the latter.[4] Freud acknowledges that modern students of human history are allergic to hero worship or stories of extraordinarily effective singular men who could "create out of indifferent individuals and families *one* people, [stamping] this people with its definite character and [determining] its fate for millennia to come." Preferring hidden, general, and impersonal factors with which "individuals play no other part than that of exponents or representatives of mass tendencies," he concludes that our studies should accommodate both.[5]

Almost two hundred years earlier in response to a prompt from the Academy of Corsica, Jean-Jacques Rousseau reflected that "If the virtues had to be distributed to those they suit best, I would assign prudence to the Statesman, justice to the Citizen, moderation to the Philosopher. As for strength of soul, I would give it to the Hero."[6] In his account, strength is the foundation of heroism. Without it, even people with considerable merit will not act heroically, whereas for a person otherwise lacking in attributes, strength of soul does much to compensate. This is because strength is a form of power exceeding other human powers—although only slightly, since the physical body is involved. The gods, for example, have no separation of body and reach, because their strength and power bridges distance. According to Rousseau, "The Hero does

not always perform great actions, but he is always ready to do so if needed and shows himself to be great in all the circumstances of his life."[7] However, strength of soul, the hero's primary virtue, is not a description of physical power. Instead, it is manifested in the ability to see through the distractions that define ordinary people who are weak rather than malicious and more prone to self-deception than to deceiving others. Rousseau comments that "We let ourselves . . . forget things that are more important and more remote. From that come all the pettinesses that characterize the ordinary person: inconstancy, thoughtlessness, capriciousness, imposture, fanaticism, cruelty." The strong soul, by contrast, "fastens on its object with that firmness that removes illusions and surmounts the greatest obstacles."[8] Rousseau concludes with Francis Bacon's argument that while other virtues require particular situations to become evident, strength of soul can face fortune directly, since the hero acts with glory, whether in or without power, when facing adversity or ease.[9] In sum, for Rousseau, while other virtues might be present in a hero, first among them are fortitude, resolve, and clarity, evinced in a readiness to act in the fullest variety of circumstances.

Finally, writing in a period when both fascism and communism were on the rise in Germany, Max Weber considered "who should dare to put his hands on the spokes of the wheel of history."[10] He hoped to convince hotheads to seek fulfillment in domains other than politics, since his preference was for political actors possessed of unusual maturity and sober-mindedness. (Weber, in other words, would not have wanted Samson, Thor, or Muhammad Ali in elected office.) For Weber, even the most modest of political roles gave their occupants an ability to exercise influence over others. In addition, the results of political actions often had, at best, refracted relations with their authors' intentions. At the same time, political actor hotheads regularly made use of power, violence, and death. If good politics were done with the head but nourished by passion, requiring that one have an ability to consider issues with inner calm, even an attitude of detachment, how could one combine hot passion with cool judgment?

Weber thought that two conceptions of the relation of politics to ethics tended to prevail: the first is an *ethic of intention,* which is the position exemplified by the Gospels. This is an orientation of all or nothing (if one is to turn the other cheek, it cannot matter who has struck you or why) and focuses on intentions (these are all one can consider or demand; the rest is up to God). Weber drew examples from the syndicalist movement of his day, which he characterized as insisting that a strike, even if it would entail fathers dying and children being orphaned, was necessary to raise

awareness and draw people to the effort. He took another example from arguments by those who believed that if World War I continued, revolution might be more likely to spread than under conditions of an unjust yet relatively stable peace. Those who exhibited this ethic of intention were often frustrated by the stubborn resistance to radical reenvisioning at the core of parliamentary politics. In some cases, however, their anger was undoubtedly justified; in other cases, these were people Weber described as being taken in by raving and who failed to stop and consider others.

The alternative conception, an *ethic of responsibility,* assumes that politics has its own rules that are either immoral or amoral. In the face of plural sets of rules, one learns to code switch as a necessity, not as an act of hypocrisy. This ethic extends to different groups or individuals who serve distinct, or even opposed, ethical requirements: subservience in one case and resoluteness in another, the different demands of a knight, say, or a monk. In the short term, such an orientation can appear and in fact be conservative, since it requires avoiding the negative outcomes that one can foresee and being fundamentally suspicious of the idea that good ends can result from dubious means. Some try to circumvent this tension through insisting that only good can come of good and only bad of bad, as Plato and Confucius argued. For Weber, to hold such beliefs is to be *a child* in politics. Still, having to choose between the two ethical conceptions, Weber is clear that he would opt for the latter and for the person who can and will say "Here I stand, I can do no other."[11] For Weber, this is an expression of authentic humanity and is always to be chosen over the tendency toward moral absolutism, which in all varieties is always a giant danger, as it is only a matter of time before its adherents come to despise you too. In the famous culmination of his argument, Weber writes:

> Politics is a matter of boring down strongly and slowly through hard boards with passion and judgment together. It is perfectly true, and confirmed by all historical experience, that the possible cannot be achieved without continually reaching out towards that which is impossible in this world. *But to do that a man must be a leader, and furthermore, in a very straightforward sense of the word, a hero.* Even those who are not both must arm themselves with the stoutness of heart which is able to confront even the shipwreck of all their hopes, and they must do this now—otherwise they will not be in a position even to accomplish what is possible today. Only someone who is confident that he will not be shattered if the world, seen from his point of view, is too stupid or too vulgar for what he wants to offer it; someone who can say, in spite of that, 'but still!'—only he has the "vocation" for politics.[12]

In short, we have identified several core dimensions of political heroes: they are not supposed to exist, given hostility toward their birth and life from those who should have been most committed to both. As an indirect result, they possess discrete potential sources of political legitimacy that few, if any, individuals combine. In Rank and Freud's discussion, this legitimacy consists in royal lineage and immediate and substantial ties to people of humble origins. We might expand this legitimacy to include people who have lived as insiders in communities typically isolated from or hostile to one another and therefore understand the perspectives and have the concrete skills and experiences of each. Their heroic actions require a symbolic or literal voyage of departure and return that makes them both local and foreign.[13] In addition, more than any other virtue, the political hero has the strength of purpose, the clarity of vision, and the resolve that enable him or her to act under both advantageous and adverse circumstances. Finally, such people combine impassioned investment and detached judgment, persevering in pursuit of what is beyond reach even as the situation is difficult and seemingly impossible.

Okwe

Okwe, the protagonist of Stephen Frear and Steven Knight's 2002 film *Dirty Pretty Things*, is someone who has lost everything for behaving with remarkable integrity.[14] Finding himself in the global city of London with nothing but character, intelligence, and a doctor's skills, Okwe (played by Chiwetel Ejiofor) works as a taxi driver by day and a hotel desk attendant by night, eager to avoid the nightmares that would accompany sleep.[15] Highly disciplined in thought, speech, manner, and self-presentation (he refuses, for instance, to accept a tip from the hotel manager, Juan, who retorts, "You think if you don't take the money, you are innocent?"), he is willing to break rules. Resting briefly each day on the couch of Senay (played by Audrey Tautou), a Turkish Muslim woman who is seeking asylum and cannot legally work or accept rent money, he secures Amoxycillin from Guo Yi (played by Benedict Wong), a Korean employee at a hospital mortuary, for his fellow cabdrivers who have all contracted the same venereal disease. Okwe's rule breaking is always aimed at alleviating difficulty or not adding to other people's burdens. Indeed, Guo Yi says to him later in the film that "There is nothing so dangerous as a virtuous man."

Most remarkable about Okwe is that he is completely uncynical in a deeply cynical world and maintains his orientating values and

self-expectations without any sanguine self-deception. This is due less to his specialized skills as a trained doctor than to the ethic of his role as healer. Information about his professional past, in his changed circumstances, proves dangerous: realizing that for Okwe there is more at stake than money, Juan makes inquiries into the circumstances that brought his employee to London illegally. Making it clear what he knows, Juan calls Okwe into a room where a woman has been operated on. Juan assures her that "This man is a doctor. . . . He qualified in Lagos. He worked for the Nigerian government. His name is Dr. Olusegun Olatokumbo Fadipe." He then says directly to Okwe, "In the end, I find out all about everyone in this place." If Okwe were "just some African," Juan tells him, he would offer to purchase his kidney in exchange for citizenship papers or a passport in a business based on happiness (since the kidney could then save a child's life). But given Okwe's skills, Juan is prepared to offer passports to both him and Senay as well as a payment of three thousand dollars per operation. Okwe is initially emphatic that he will not participate, but he later capitulates due to his concern over his own role in increasing Senay's vulnerability (she is forced to leave her unauthorized job at the hotel for work in a sweatshop, where the manager insists that she perform oral sex in exchange for not reporting her to immigration enforcement)[16] as well as his outrage at the mutilation wreaked by unskilled "surgeons" removing organs to be trafficked. At the end of the film, Okwe drugs and performs a kidney operation on the crooked Juan so that Senay can receive her passport without being physically endangered.[17]

Unlike many others who have suffered a fall in social status and professional class, Okwe is not a snob. Instead, he brings political insight to his circumstances, seeing the connections among seemingly discrete forms of insecurity and hardship. When delivering Juan's kidney to the organ dealer, Okwe stands beside Juliette (the prostitute played by Sophie Okonedo) and Senay. When the man asks who he is, since he has never seen Okwe before, Okwe retorts, "Because we are the people you do not see. We are the ones who drive your cabs. We clean your rooms, and suck your cocks."[18]

As Guo Yi reminds Okwe, in the context of London he is not supposed to exist; "he is nothing." He has had to flee his home, having been made an enemy of his own government for refusing to be complicit in its corruption. With the abilities and orientation of a doctor, Okwe now lives among the inhabitants of the densely populated and invisible underside of global London. He undertakes this literal and metaphorical voyage of leaving and returning to Nigeria with remarkably clear vision. As evident not only in his

regular chess victories against Guo Yi and his careful navigation of ethical dilemmas, Okwe maintains this strength, passion, and judgment in the face of absurdity and stupidity. Even at the end, when he might have escaped to New York City with the very appreciative and lovely Senay, he instead decides to undertake the impossible. Explaining to Senay that he did not kill his wife, Okwe says that he was nonetheless responsible for her death. When an official had been shot in Lagos, he was ordered, as a pathologist employed by the government, to destroy the evidence. When he refused, his house was firebombed with his wife inside. And now? He is returning to his seven-year-old daughter, Valerie, in Nigeria, where he remains vilified by the reigning regime and its henchmen.

John Luther

"You do know the man is nitroglycerin," a colleague says of Detective Chief Inspector John Luther, played by the international heartthrob Idris Elba.[19] Our introduction to him and to the show has Luther chasing Henry Madson, a serial murderer of children, who in fighting Luther at the top of a rusty steel ladder ends up slipping and hanging over a 120-foot drop.[20] We watch Luther consider Madson's pleas to lift him up, as regular procedures would require. Instead, Luther taunts Madson with his misdeeds and lets him fall, though not to his death. We get an immediate sense of what Luther's estranged wife, Zoe (played by Indira Varma) means when she later says to him, "You're the opposite of boring."

Luther is world-weary, with a salt-and-pepper beard, tired eyes, and a capacity to be loving and generous in circumstances that should have made such a capacity impossible. Cross describes the character as being "like a wounded god."[21] Working as a detective investigating stomach-turning homicides on a daily basis, first for the Serious Crime Unit and then the new Serious and Serial Crime Unit, Luther is neither cynical nor corrupt in an institution in which most are seeking small personal career or economic advances. As with Okwe, Luther will break rules but always in pursuit of the outcomes that should motivate detectives and police. While most would describe him as too willing to stretch the law to solve a case or save a life (as when he states "Forget the rule book; change the state of play" or tells Rose Teller [played by Saskia Reeves] that anything in the evidence safe is sacrosanct "only if we get found out"), his tactics regularly put him under the special scrutiny of his supervisors. In other words, he has his own independent ethical compass that is often opaque to those around him and suspect for those who hope

to use the system in self-serving ways. Luther's ambiguous ethic is particularly evident in his unlikely relationship to the "malignant narcissist" and brilliant sociopath and murderer Alice Morgan (played by Ruth Wilson), whom he is unable to arrest for lack of evidence. She is the only character who matches his brilliance, and he draws on her insight into the criminals he contends with, turning to her in some instances to save or take lives. When he tells her that he is thinking of retiring from police work, she responds, without hesitation, "*Good,* since the people around you are vampires."

Some of his colleagues admit that Luther regularly sees what they cannot. His genius often takes the appearance of massive reasoning and evidentiary leaps that coworkers are either likely to trust on the basis of his stellar record ("And he's back!," declares Rose Teller) or to treat as unprofessional violations of sacred procedures. When first initiating his partner, Detective Sergeant Justin Ripley (played by Warren Brown), into what will be their shared approach, Luther asks repeatedly what isn't right in a given crime scene. His is not a technical savvy, for which he regularly relies on highly skilled others, but instead a more profound understanding of human character, often manifested as a dedicated obsession with what motivates people and how that motivation is left as traces by their actions. He cannot abide human cruelty and is almost always faced with too little time.

Luther also regularly loses what is most dear to him (both his estranged wife and his beloved partner), is often injured, and faces repeated false accusations. While he struggles in his personal life, he is not the asocial Sherlock Holmes and thereby contends regularly with the tragedy borne of actual connections with other human beings. With a plasticity absent in many others, he can see the relations among the conditions and situations of people that more common ways of organizing the social world would hide. When asked if the part of Luther was written for Elba, Cross admits that he never dreamed he would be able to convince the actor to take the role. Once in it, Luther's blackness seems essential to the part. He manifests, throughout the series, the point made by James Baldwin about what it is to be someone who can actually love and relatedly experience both the heights of human greatness and the depths of human depravity as intertwined and often simultaneous. It is no accident that Nina Simone's rendition of "Please Don't Let Me Be Misunderstood" serves as one of the show's refrains: "Baby, you understand me now / If sometimes you see that I am mad / Don't you know no one alive can always be an angel? / When everything goes wrong you see some bad / I am just a fool whose intentions are good / Oh Lord don't let me be misunderstood."[22] But

Luther is no fool (unless trying to act with virtue is foolish), and the question of intentions will not suffice for him. Regularly pictured in a chair surrounded by a circle of pictures of people, *each of whom has only one life,* he wants to go in and fix things that he knows others can't or won't. Described by Elba as an "ordinary superhero," after nearly breaking time and time again, Luther walks back into the bullpen.[23]

While Elba's offscreen persona certainly adds to the appeal of the character, I do not agree with his account of *Luther* as offering pure escapism.[24] However over the top the plot can be, Luther's character exhibits precisely what we are considering here: Luther the "copper" should not exist, since he feels what he encounters each day far too deeply. At the same time, for that very reason, he combines what few do: an anger and readiness to fight criminals in combination with an astute understanding of human frailty, a burning sense of justice, and zero moral absolutism. Like Okwe, Luther is highly self-disciplined but by rules that are the outcome of his reflection and commitments, not a professional rule book designed for ordinary stupidity.

The Whore of Akron

It may seem unwarranted for an essay focused on aesthetic portrayals of heroes to include a discussion of a professional basketball player. The reasons are, I hope, quite straightforward: sportsmen and sportswomen are also entertainers whose work we witness live and on the screen. Furthermore, in a way that is always true with excellent writing and lamentably more absent in many recent superhero movies, athletes play their game and exhibit their craft by negotiating standard rules, even if the rules in question are evolving and subject to contested interpretations. What is more, in the case of LeBron James these rules apply not only on the court but also beyond it.

LeBron possesses many features of the classic hero.[25] To this day, despite his historic success, he, and we, do not know who his biological father is. Raised in considerable financial hardship and insecurity in the postindustrial town of Akron, he benefited from the help, intervention, and committed child raising of others when his mother allowed him to move in with the more stable family of a local football coach, who would introduce him to the game of basketball. LeBron shone on the basketball court, a domain where he came alive. It was there that he found community, camaraderie, and relative order. He became inseparable from his three

main other teammates in the course of local and national wins. To stay together, they attended the predominantly white, private, and Catholic St. Vincent–St. Mary High School. In a way that was almost childlike for its complete absence of cynicism, just as classic superheroes are devoted to Gotham City or Hell's Kitchen, LeBron wanted to win a championship for his home state of Ohio and for its major city, Cleveland, which is mocked for identifying itself thus: "at least we are not Detroit."[26]

This elusive victory and vindication seemed destined when LeBron was drafted as the Cavaliers' first 2003 pick straight out of high school. He initially did extraordinarily well. Named Rookie of the Year, he became the first Cavalier and third player in the game's history to average at least twenty points, five rebounds, and five assists per game. While he was regularly recognized as the Most Valued Player and for taking the Cavaliers to the playoffs, his inability to win a championship was frequently used to compare him negatively to previous game greats. After seven years, he concluded that winning a championship would require a fuller roster of strong players. In a game where time is short since the strain on the body takes a very quick toll, LeBron opted to leave Cleveland for the Miami Heat, which was trying to build a star-studded cast of players to secure the championship that everyone said LeBron still needed. He announced his move on an ESPN live special, *The Decision*. While the broadcast raised $2.5 million and an additional $3.5 million from advertisement revenue, all of which was donated to charities, an intense and steady stream of hatred and criticism ensued, with Cleveland fans burning LeBron's jerseys as well as images of his face.[27] Angry fans declared that if he were that stellar, he could win regardless of the abilities of his fellow teammates. How could he leave his home state for such a privileged team? Where was his loyalty? Was he really for sale? Was he, as Scott Raab titled his 2011 book, the *whore* of Akron?

In fact, LeBron sought to act on his own terms. He was leveraging his talent, reminding the city and team to which he was devoted that while he shared their aims, he in fact had a better understanding of how to break a decades-long losing streak. In three out of the four years prior to his return, the Cavaliers performed so atrociously that the team was allotted the first draft pick. Still, it was not until LeBron rejoined them that they went to the finals. Meanwhile, LeBron had made it that far each year prior.

No one denies LeBron's utterly amazing talent. He has, in play, leapt over a nearly six-foot man. And, it seems, he can fly. In addition, if he cannot exactly move at lightning speed, he has the insight to set up plays that have the same effect: on one occasion,

directing a teammate to block the other team's player in order to force him into making a lay-up rather than a dunk, LeBron outran him from half court in time to block the shot. More atypically for an NBA great, he combines a giant build and ferocious strength with grace and speed and an uncanny ability to read the direction and rhythm of the game with an at times self-defeating commitment to enabling others. Indeed, for all of the talk about his willing prostitution, he is unselfish to a fault, remaining an exceptional mentor to fellow players, encouraging otherwise okay players with a single strength to become multidimensional and indispensable contributors. He understands that nurturing a team's collective strength is about not only a narrow set of physical abilities but also the fellowship that enables unique and unspoken forms of communication on the court.

Undergoing vicious name-calling and recrimination for seeing with clarity what the pettiness of Cleveland fans blurred—how actually to deliver the ultimate win—LeBron went from one of the world's most disliked athletes to what many consider to be the most positive face of the NBA. Jokes now abound about LeBron being the best feature of the city of Cleveland and the state of Ohio (his most recent effort is an unscripted CNBC series called *Cleveland Hustles* in which entrepreneurs will be financed on the condition that they revitalize a Cleveland neighborhood); his endorsement of Democrat presidential candidate Hillary Clinton may have been more significant than that of any other state resident or government official.[28] He has used his visibility to draw attention to controversial issues, including the handling of the Trayvon Martin case, NBA Clippers owner Donald Sterling's widely publicized racist comments about black basketball fans in 2014, the decision not to indict the officer who killed Michael Brown, and the death of Eric Garner. In November 2016, LeBron donated $2.5 million to the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture to support an exhibit about Muhammad Ali.

Cheering on LeBron's victories involves so much more than hoping that one group of men will outscore another. In a massively corporate game with little meaningful loyalty of any kind and where players are bought, sold, and traded in a language far too reminiscent of the slave auction, LeBron engages the game as a *black male self-determining adult.* He has negotiated shorter-term contracts than are the league norm in order to increase both his earning potential and his professional flexibility. When signing with the Miami Heat, he accepted less money than he could have commanded so the team would be able to afford Chris Bosh, Dwyane Wade, and a broader roster. Although it was regularly assumed that LeBron

was doing what would ensure his own greatest income, it was not until 2016 that he became the highest-paid player in the league. As he begins to approach retirement age, he has announced that it is not enough for him to encourage and fund college educations for urban teens; he wanted to attend as well. He subsequently enrolled to pursue his bachelor's degree. At which school? The University of Akron, of course.

Rooting for LeBron can be a massive gamble. Even at his best, he never leads play that resembles the seamless predictability of a team such as the San Antonio Spurs. But in exchange, there is the unpredictability of the potentially impossible wrought before one's eyes through creativity, grit, and brilliance.

And the Sheroes?

Feminist science fiction novelist, essayist, and advertising copywriter Kameron Hurley asks the following:

> **HERO.**
>
> Okay, I want you to stop right there.
>
> Think about what image popped into your mind when you read "hero." The first one.
>
> NO CHEATING.
>
> What's the *first* image your mind conjured on reading that word?
>
> *Hero.*
>
> Who is it?
>
> Who is . . . *he*?
>
> These days, when I read "hero" the image that pops up is some superhero, because I'm inundated with Marvel movie images all day. Thor comes to mind. Maybe, if I haven't been eating movies for a while, it's Conan.
>
> Hero: a dude. Muscles. White. Butch.
>
> Hero. First image. Every time.[29]

Indeed, Hurley argues, these expectations are so ingrained that many readers *become angry* when encountering a differently embodied hero.

This does not mean that there are no alternatives. After all, we have all been bombarded with the steady stream of "strong female protagonists."[30] Wondering why they have no appeal to her, Hurley realized that they had not been created for her. Mockingly, she writes that "If the leather pants weren't a clue, the sexy poses should have tipped you off. . . . It's tough women as fetish, not as real

people. . . . Women aren't allowed to be scary. Not *really* scary." This is a celebration of "girl power" at the expense of "women power."[31]

While recognizing that "society may respect the stick, but it is the one who controls the person with the stick, not the person with the stick, who has the most power in our culture,"[32] Hurley wants images of *women* who actually incite terror, chopping up monsters and bedding who they want in an invitation to imagine the world of which they would be part:

> Are we just as afraid to write about her as we are to imagine her in that dark alley waiting, gun drawn, without pity or sympathy for man or beast or vampire or child, to blow off our head and hit the bar on the way home before slipping into blissful, dreamless sleep—the sleep of the unfettered, the conscienceless, the powerful? Her power, the real power, threatens our established order. Women with real power can use it against men. Women with real power are not there to be looked at. They are there to act. She is not the Strong Female Protagonist. She is the Scary Female Protagonist, and we don't see enough of her.[33]

Whether or not one shares Hurley's desire, why should or does it matter? Hurley argues that limiting the expression of humanity in our heroes does us all a disservice, since a failure to empathize with unlikable women in fiction inevitably leads to such failures beyond the text as well.[34] And by contrast, loving aesthetic representations of well-wrought heroic women and men makes us more likely to applaud or even seek to be such people beyond the screen.

After all, portraying futures aims at shaping the imaginations of those who will create the world around us, including "not just the technology but also the social policies, attitudes toward natural resources, the realities of climate change, even our ever-evolving sense of morality."[35] Increasingly, Hurley writes, she is able to create heroes of either or no gender and of a variety of races and ethnicities, strengths, limitations, and circumstances. This is in large part because the actual world, in all of its diverse interestingness, is harder and harder to cloak, given the emergence and spread of social media and instant communication platforms.[36] In such a world, we cannot merely witness and love Okwe and John Luther and LeBron James but must also consider them as models of the kinds of men and women who can build lives in a way that doesn't require tearing others down.

When teaching "Historical Women Political Thinkers" at both the graduate and undergraduate levels, I always make a point—in a course with only thirteen weeks—of teaching the work of Mary Wollstonecraft and her daughter, Mary Shelley. In part, it is so

rare to be able to teach a mother and a daughter in an intellectual scene dominated by discussions of seminal fathers. Furthermore, it brings entirely new light to the reading of *Frankenstein* to see it as also an engagement with Wollstonecraft's intellectual and personal legacy. Considering the two writers together also led me to realize the intimacy between what we might call feminist social and political theory and feminist science fiction, a genre of which Mary Shelley should be considered a founding figure. After all, in considering whether we might fundamentally rethink how we reproduce ourselves as a species or whether we could completely rearrange the family as the basis of the social organization of life, much women's political writing, to its critics, seemed like creative fiction at best, or fantasy, when less effective with its readers.[37] Many such women political thinkers invited their readers to envision worlds that might be created out of the grammatical and institutional scaffolding, or skeletons, of worlds that did exist.[38] In so doing, political thinkers such as He-Yin Zhen, Emma Goldman, Lucy Parsons, Jane Addams, Anna Julia Cooper, Simone de Beauvoir, Hannah Arendt, Shulamith Firestone, and Gloria Anzaldúa identified heroes who were in fact or should be broken, urging us to construct new ones through building a world in which we can together be more fully ourselves.

If the beauty of the aesthetic domain is the way it frames explorations of efforts to live and act with purpose in messy and complex worlds, Okwe, John Luther, and LeBron James share much with genuinely heroic lives beyond the screen. Indeed, when I consider the African American escaped slaves and abolitionist writers Harriet Jacobs and Frederick Douglass, or revolutionaries Rosa Luxemburg and Frantz Fanon, they combine the attributes we have witnessed. Combining intellectual gifts with remarkable courage in a thirst to live with integrity even when this means bending or breaking existing rules, they engaged in the dogged pursuit of the seemingly impossible in historical real time.

Notes

The epigraph is from Kameron Hurley, *The Geek Feminist Revolution* (New York: Tom Doherty, 2016), 97, 193, and 227.

1. Sigmund Freud, *Moses and Monotheism* (1939; reprint, New York: Vintage Books, 1967), 7.

2. A similar structure pervades stories with female protagonists. Consider both Snow White and Sleeping Beauty, for instance.

3. Freud, *Moses and Monotheism,* 9.

4. Freud includes these reflections when exploring the likely Egyptian origins of Moses and suggests that there is evidence for this in the reversal of the myth story featuring Moses. In particular, while Moses is born to a family of priests, they are Israelites. He is then raised as an Egyptian prince, only to return to vindicate the Israelites. Freud notes that Moses is not an Egyptian hero, while the Jews revere him and required that he have the royal lineage to make him a hero, even if this lineage was alien (Freud, *Moses and Monotheism,* 13).

5. Freud, *Moses and Monotheism,* 136–37.

6. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, "Discourse on the Virtue Most Necessary to a Hero," in *The Collected Writings of Rousseau,* Vol. 4, edited by Roger D. Masters and Christopher Kelly, translated by Judith R. Bush, Roger D. Masters, and Christopher Kelly (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1994), 10.

7. Ibid.

8. Ibid.

9. Ibid.

10. Max Weber, "Politics as a Vocation," in *Max Weber: Selections in Translation,* edited by W. G. Runciman, translated by Eric Matthews, 212–25 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), 212.

11. Ibid., 224.

12. Ibid., 225 (my emphasis).

13. For an excellent book-length treatment of the problems of liberal democracy that foreignness solves, see Bonnie Honig, *Democracy and the Foreigner* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003).

14. *Dirty Pretty Things,* directed by Stephen Frear and Steven Knight (BBC Films/Celador Films, 2002).

15. When Okwe is trying to make sense of why a healthy human heart was found in one of the hotel toilets, Guo Yi replies, "These sound to me like questions. I don't ask questions after eleven years here, and I'm a certified refugee. You're an illegal, Okwe. You don't have a position here. You have nothing. You are nothing."

16. When Senay teases him for feeling bad that she will work at a sweatshop instead of as a cleaning woman at the hotel, Okwe replies, "I do not wish to cause harm to anyone." He promises that he will go to Juan to collect the pay she hasn't received and is owed from the hotel. When Okwe returns with her pay, he says to her "You should keep away from me. You lost your job. Because of me, you are in a sweatshop."

17. When Senay insists that Juan has assured her that the kidney operation is like removing a tooth, Okwe replies, "He's lying! Because you are poor, you will be gutted like an animal. They will cut you here, or they will cut you here! They will leave you to rot."

18. Earlier in the film when Okwe wants to report that a human heart has been found in a hotel toilet, Juan calls the police and hands the phone to Okwe, who does not want to say who he is and where he is from. Juan says, "You will learn, Okwe. The hotel business is about strangers. And strangers will always surprise you. . . . They come to hotels in the night to do dirty things. And in the morning, it's our job to make things look pretty again."

19. This is no overstatement. The *New Yorker* featured a comic with Mrs. Claus asking her husband if Elba could be Santa for the year, since Mr. Claus had done it so many other times. Joe Dator, "Daily Cartoon," illustration, *New Yorker,* December 24, 2015, http://www.newyorker.com/cartoons/daily-cartoon/daily-cartoon-wednesday-december-24th.

20. *Luther,* directed by Sam Miller et al., created and written by Neil Cross (BBC, 2010–2013).

21. "Luther—Ep1 Extended Inside Look," YouTube, November 18, 2010, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qyxIcBasiJM.

22. Nina Simone, performer, "Please Don't Let Me Be Misunderstood," written by Bennie Benjamin, Gloria Caldwell, and Sol Marcus (Warner/Chappell Music, Chris-n-jen Music, 2002).

23. See "Idris Elba on Bringing Luther Back—Luther: Series 4—BBC One," YouTube, December 11, 2015, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ilGa5E96dSg&t=1s.

24. Ibid. Consider Elba's statement in the interview that although he has become a beloved British star, he, like so many other black British actors, had to leave the country to begin his career; in other words, as the typical hero, he had to leave and return. Elba misleadingly suggests that the United States lacked the racism of Britain in giving him such an opportunity. Instead, what was at stake was the phenomenon of both countries preferring other black people to "their own."

25. My love of and appreciation for LeBron James are fundamentally informed by the experience of watching and discussing him with my son, Elijah Solomon Gordon.

26. See "Hastily Made Cleveland Tourism Video: 2nd Attempt," YouTube, April 30, 2009, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oZzgAjjuqZM.

27. "LeBron James's 'Decision' Generated $6 Million in Ad Revenue," *Plain Dealer,* July 12, 2010, http://www.cleveland.com/ohio-sports-blog/index.ssf/2010/07/lebron_james_decision_generate.html.

28. In 2008, he contributed financially to a committee to elect Barack Obama and gathered twenty thousand people for a viewing of Democratic presidential nominee Barack Obama's thirty-minute "American Stories, American Solutions" television advertisement. It was shown on a large screen above the stage, where Jay-Z later held a free concert.

29. Hurley, *The Geek Feminist Revolution,* 92.

30. Hurley comments that we too often build heroes on the basis of terrible things done to women: "Male heroes are heroic because of what's been done to women in their lives, often—the dead child, the dead wife. Women heroes are also heroic for what's been done to women . . . to them." She would prefer heroes "who persevere in the face of overwhelming odds because it's the right thing to do" (Hurley, *The Geek Feminist Revolution,* 94).

31. Ibid., 106–7.

32. Ibid., 106.

33. Ibid., 108.

34. Ibid., 113.

35. Ibid., 135.

36. Ibid., 220.

37. Although I am usually unforgiving when my students refer to a treatise, essay, or transcribed speech as a "novel," the mistake seems more understandable in some of these cases.

38. Shulamith Firestone considered most economic theory before that of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels as narrow, reactionary moralism that simply identified economic injustice and a desire for a better future with no account of how to move from one to the other. She was explicit that feminist writers should emulate the method of Marx and Engels while addressing their shared failure to understand sex inequality's roots in the biological family. See Shulamith Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution* (New York: William Morrow, 1970).