

Form As Function:  
Representing and Resisting Political Ideology  
Through Novelistic Structure

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**Abstract**

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“Form as Function: Representing and Resisting Political Ideology Through Novelistic Structure,” argues that the political dimensions of fiction extend beyond politically themed content into narrative form itself. Drawing on theorists such as Fredric Jameson and Matthew Salesses, I argue that formal structures, such as the conflict-driven Freytag’s Pyramid and the accumulative ‘carrier bag’ model articulated by Ursula Le Guin, encode distinct ideological commitments, particularly regarding individualism and collectivism. Through a comparative analysis of works by writers including Ocean Vuong, Octavia Butler, Kwame Adjei-Brenyah, and George Orwell, I demonstrate how narrative form can function as an active site of ideological engagement and resistance.

## Form As Function: Representing and Resisting Political Ideology Through Novelistic Structure

## I

For several years, I thought of myself as a writer of magical realism. Then I started writing realism. A short story writer. Then came the first novel. Now I see myself as something else, and once again, I feel certain that this must be the designation that will stick: a political writer. I suppose all of these attempts to silo myself into one category or another may simply be a reaction to the daunting open-endedness of the blank page. If I know what kind of writer I am, that provides a structure to step into, a set of walls upon which to paint my narratives. Always, though, the walls have eventually proved restrictive.

And yet, for the past seven or eight years, ‘political writing’ has felt more like a metal beam in the building’s foundation, something strong and solid to build out from, rather than a fixed structure that—like magical realism or a short story—might cease to fit the hexagonal furniture I’ve suddenly decided I want to fill the thing up with.

But what is ‘political writing’ anyway? It’s such a loosey goosey term that it can feel, at times, almost meaningless. After all, if life and art are inherently political, then I suppose I can still claim the title if and when my writing ever quits dealing with capital ‘P’ political themes. Still, I want to wrangle with the definition for a little while, since it’s been hotly debated amongst literary theorists for decades, and since, if I’m going to refer to myself as a political writer, I should probably pin down what it is that I’m talking about when I talk about ‘political writing.’

When I first started this project, I was interested in coming up with a kind of taxonomy of political novels. I thought of various different types: utopian and dystopian; satirical; historical; allegorical; war novels; proletarian novels; etc. And as I started to dig around, I did find a couple

of attempts by researchers and historians to taxonomize the political novel. Joseph L. Blotner's 1955 work, "The Political Novel," for example, finds and sorts one-hundred and thirty-eight 'political novels' into subcategories, such as "The Novel as Political Instrument," "The Novel as Mirror of National Character," and "The Novelist as Analyst of Group/Individual Political Behavior." Notably, however, neither Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle* nor John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* fit within Blotner's fairly narrow definition of the political novel. One need not read much of the text to thus ascertain that it isn't going to succeed, at least not in providing any suitable definition for a political novel by today's standards.

And this is because, from the 2026 vantage point, *The Jungle* and *The Grapes of Wrath* are highly prominent examples of twentieth century political novels, hedged under the 'political fiction' designation at every big-box bookstore, suggesting a consensus in the cultural categorization of them as such. This falls in line with Perica and Peyroles' claim that "the clear-cut framework of politics—centred on the state, nation or class—is increasingly giving way to a broader, more fluid and ambiguous understanding of 'the political'" ("Who's Afraid of the Political Novel?"). Within this more open-ended interpretation of the political, we find books that are both explicitly intended as political statements or ideological tools, as well as books that "achieve their political incisiveness through subcutaneous, micropolitical, even "opaque" work with omissions, tacit resonances and silences on topics traditionally perceived as political" (Perica and Peyroles).

This opening up of the realm of 'the political' feels related to contemporary preoccupations with identity and positionality. For example, nowadays a story may be considered political because it centers the lives and struggles of historically marginalized groups. Similarly, the decentering of real-world struggles in stories about marginalized groups has become

ubiquitous in mass media and is, too, often considered pointedly political (e.g., think “Schitt’s Creek,” which centers queer joy in homophobia-free small-town America or “Bridgerton,” which depicts a society in which racism is dead, yet the monarchy lives on). There is a looseness here that can start to get a bit dicey if you look too closely. If the depiction of queer subjugation, queer joy, or even mundane queer experiences are all considered political, then queerness in and of itself becomes political. And thus, stories depicting any identity other than white, male, middle-class, able-bodied, and cisgendered risk politicization. Yet, if the goal of the identity politics movement is to de-exceptionalize the experiences of historically marginalized groups, this feels like a bit of a trap.

Still, it is within this loosening of the definition of ‘the political’ that my own work most often falls. I write stories, for the most part, that aim to capture the nefarious ways in which late-stage capitalist systems work upon individuals, communities, and interpersonal relationships, the caveat being that I rarely take a direct line of criticism towards those systems. The project I am currently working on, for example, attempts to show the ways in which two desperate individuals (a woman whose husband is dying of cancer and a woman whose fertility challenges prevent her from conceiving a child naturally) interact with two decidedly broken American industries—healthcare and commercial surrogacy—within which the human body exists as a commodity. Where the body is too costly to repair or preserve, I aim to reflect, it becomes expendable. Where the price is right, it becomes rentable. It exists, like any other commodity, within the open market, and its fate is determined by its market value.

When I think about my novel, this is what I believe it is about. I think of it primarily as a critique of the commodification of human life under late-stage American capitalism. And yet, for the readers that have watched its slow progression, this would probably be quite an ideological

reading. My novel, I'm guessing they would say, is much more about the slow breakdown of a marriage under duress; about a lonely, high-strung woman whose desire for a baby perhaps best demonstrates her lack of capacity for self-reflection; about the way secrets and miscommunications chip away at the integrity of interpersonal relationships. It's much more about these things than it is about any of what I rambled on about in the previous paragraph.

It's true that I was sufficiently convinced by James Baldwin's eschewing of the protest novel, in which he takes a hard line against overtly ideological novels' attempts to flatten and neaten the complexities of the world, and of truth. He writes that, "in overlooking, denying, evading [the truth's] complexity—which is nothing more than the disquieting complexity of ourselves—we are diminished and we perish; only within this web of ambiguity, paradox, this hunger, danger, darkness, can we find at once ourselves and the power that will free us from ourselves" (151).

It seems easy enough to value complexity over flatness in depicting human experience, struggle, and political conflict, though it should be recognized that this, like any other craft imperative, is an aesthetic preference with cultural and historical roots. To give a contrasting example, overtly ideological 'thought experiment' novels, such as Edward Bellamy's 1888 work, *Looking Backward: 2000-1887*, were often highly influential in their times, with this work in particular selling over half a million copies in the United States and pushing many toward socialist ideas by contrasting a peaceful socialist utopia in the year 2000 with the capitalist conditions of late nineteenth century Boston. Maligned by (often fearmongering) parallels drawn to totalitarianism and by contemporary aesthetic preferences for writing that is far less didactic in nature, this kind of utopian novel has now fallen out of favor. I share the aesthetic preference for

a more nuanced approach to political writing. Still, I continue to consider this thing that I'm writing, first and foremost, a political novel.

Fredric Jameson's "Literature as a Socially Symbolic Act," begins with the imperative, "Always historicize!" When we interpret literature, he goes on to argue, we often run up against a couple of problems that stem from the feeling that many works are embedded in a history too deep or distant for us to access (think Ovid or even Shakespeare). Thus, we either do away with attempts to historicize our readings or make lofty claims that the texts achieve some loose quality of 'universality,' such that they transcend the historical moment in which they were created. Jameson uses Marxist theory, however, to argue that all works of art across time, from the canopic jars of ancient Egypt to the pulp fiction adventure stories of the Great Depression era to the grotesque realism and nihilistic bent of writings by contemporary pop literary phenomenon Ottessa Moshfegh, can't help but encode the 'key story.' And that key story is simple: it is the ongoing collective struggle for freedom and resources. All cultural objects, he claims, contain this story. This is true because culture does not exist in a vacuum. Instead, it is produced by the history of relations of production. Cultural objects thus become symptoms of the relations of production, and thus should be read as allegories for political struggle regardless of their content. Ultimately, then, what Jameson seems to be suggesting is that the political novel is less a genre in and of itself and more an interpretive framework. It is "a lens through which one engages with a text as a political object and makes it the subject of a debate (beyond purely literary analysis) that can raise awareness or simply provoke discussion" (Perica and Peyroles).

Converting to the conclusion that 'political' is a mode of reading rather than a specific genre of writing may be a cop-out for my own purposes, a way to continue to claim the title no

matter what I'm writing about in the far-off future. However, an interesting cross-pollination happened for me during my MFA program in which several months were spent thinking about and discussing various fictional forms (e.g., the traditionally plotted, conflict-driven story; hermit crab stories; braided, modular, and collage forms; etc.) at the same time as I was making a vague attempt at being a more 'political reader,' meaning reading through the lens of the political, as Jameson suggests.

It is generally the content of a piece that is considered to have the most direct political implications. But, I began to wonder, is there also a politics to narrative form? If we take Jameson's dictum, "always historicize," and apply it to novelistic forms, what, if any, are the political implications of choosing to write using one form versus another?

## II

The first person I ever fell head over heels in love with was an activist. This was the thing I admired most about him. Given the chance, there's no doubt in my mind that he would have martyred himself for the realization of a socialist future in Peru, his homeland and the country in which we fell in love. I've always wished I were this type of person, somebody who lives in deep acceptance of their own insignificance, and who uses this acceptance not to capitulate to despair or existential nihilism, but instead to live in fearless pursuit of a better world.

I didn't realize until I started writing this essay that the self-designation, 'political writer,' first emerged around the time we fell in love. I suppose that makes me sound capricious. Or like somebody grasping after a kind of seriousness that is not innately there. After all, what kind of conviction is built on the back of a failed romance? But if I'm being more generous with myself, I would argue that there was some part of me that chose that particular love in an effort to move,

in my early twenties, more towards the kind of person I wanted to be. Something in me was bristling against my own deep-wired, hardy American individualism. To be a writer is to close oneself away in a room, to separate oneself, quite literally, in body and in mind. To be an activist is to be in community, to put one's body amongst the masses, to collectivize in an effort to make the forsaken world the place one knows it ought to be. Thus, if I was to be given to the sequestered wielding of pens and punching of keyboards, I wanted, at the very least, to do it with a spirit adjacent to that of an activist.

In an interview about his meta-fictional novel, *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*, Ocean Vuong says, "I wanted to write about American violence, but I did not want to enact American violence, because this would only be a replication, and I would just be another cog in the wheel" (Strand Book Store, 26:40).

There is a tradition of queer stories, Vuong says, in which queerness itself is treated as tragedy. In this framing, a person may have lived a better life or not been befallen by violence if only they hadn't been queer. This framing obscures the fact that it is America, it is anti-queer ideology, it is hegemonic masculinity, that is the real tragedy. And in fact, in portraying queer stories as stories of individual tragedy, American violence is often inadvertently enacted as queer exceptionalism is reinforced.

So, how can we write stories about American violence—stories that deal with immigration, war, language, class, the opioid epidemic, queerness—much as Vuong's does, without enacting American violence? Vuong seems to find the answer in form.

In *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*, Vuong utilizes the four-part East Asian narrative structure Kishōtenketsu (introduction, development, twist, conclusion), which primarily differs

from a form like the Freytag's Pyramid in its de-centering of conflict. Though conflict may be present in narratives invoking Kishōtenketsu, it does not require movement from an inciting incident towards a central conflict, and the 'climactic' moment is not necessarily a confrontation, but instead a shift in perspective that reframes what the audience understands the story to be about.

As Vuong says, "the Western cannon is given to us from the Greco-Roman tradition—David and Goliath—the protagonist earns his right in the world by conquest" (Strand Book Store, 26:27). In contrast, in Kishōtenketsu, resolution comes not through conquest, but through understanding a new reality or through a deepening of one's understanding of a particular reality.

I should mention one caveat here before I continue. While Vuong is correct in his assessment of much of the Western cannon being centered around stories of conquest and subjugation, and though most American schools continue to teach the Freytag's Pyramid (that ubiquitous line drawing with its five main points—inciting incident, rising action, climax, falling action, resolution) as the primary mechanism for plotting creative narratives, there is a long tradition of Western writers, many considered central to the modern cannon—from Virginia Woolf and Toni Morrison to Zadie Smith, Jeffrey Eugenides, and many, many more—taking up a variety of other forms. In fact, it was Ursula Le Guin who wrote the 1986 essay, "The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction," which traces the history of the hero's journey story, poking fun at the phallic imagery inherent in Freytag's Pyramid and the notion of fashioning stories around sticks, spears, and conquest. "So long as culture was explained as originating from and elaborating upon the use of long, hard objects for sticking, bashing, and killing," she writes, "I never thought I had, or wanted, any particular share in it" (167). She argues then for an alternative story type based in

the true origin story of humanity: the carrier bag. The first cultural object, she cites, was not likely a spear, but a receptacle for carrying gathered foods, the primary sustenance of early humans. Thus, she argues, “I would go so far as to say that the natural, proper, fitting shape of the novel might be that of a sack, a bag. A book holds words. Words hold things. They bear meanings. A novel is a medicine bundle, holding things in a particular powerful relation to one another and to us” (169).

Le Guin and Vuong, it seems to me, are invoking slightly different vocabularies and metaphors to describe the same thing. The hero’s journey, the Freytag’s Pyramid, the traditionally plotted western story, are all inherently ideological, much as are the Carrier Bag and the Kishōtenketsu story. In fact, any and all types of narrative structure are inherently ideological. As Matthew Salesses posits in his writings on craft and the teaching of creative writing, “craft is support for a certain world view” (39).

It was at this point in my research that I began to feel concerned. Much of my own writing, including both of my novels-to-date, utilize Freytag’s Pyramid. My preliminary findings were beginning to suggest to me that this form is one way in which, inadvertently, many writers do the work of reproducing the hyper-individualist, winners-versus-losers bent of American capitalist ideology. The conclusion I might eventually have to come to, then, was that I’d need to turn away from this form in order to be true to what I believe and want to represent through my work. But first, I wanted to be sure—is this all a form like Freytag’s Pyramid can do?

Taking Salesses’ conclusion that “craft is support for a certain world view” as a jumping off point, what I’d like to attempt now is a brief deconstruction of the narrative forms of two contemporary novels, Ocean Vuong’s *On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous* and Octavia Butler’s

*Parable of the Sower*. Under Perica and Peyroles' definition, both of these books, by virtue of their content, would be categorized as political novels. However, where *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* uses the Kishōtenketsu/Carrier Bag form, *Parable of the Sower* maps directly onto Freytag's Pyramid. What I'm interested in, then, is investigating the implications of these distinct forms on the stories being told. Where is ideology located and embedded in these stories' forms? Can one form be used to represent a multiplicity of ideologies? And perhaps most importantly for my own purposes—need a writer turn away from a form like Freytag's Pyramid in order to avoid enacting or reproducing American violence?

### III

“Let me begin again.” The opening line of *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* tells us that this is not a story with a clear beginning. Instead, like any narrative that resembles life or truth, its beginning is hard to pin down. This is a multi-generational story. It spans across decades and continents, from the Vietnam War to the Bush administration, from the opioid epidemic to life as an Asian-American boy in Hartford, Connecticut in the early aughts. Thus, Vuong is clear from the outset—this is one way to begin, but there are a thousand others, too. And this line—“let me begin again”—will repeat throughout the book, showing us various other potential starting points and reminding us, again and again, that this is not a story with a single lineage.

The narrative is an epistolary letter to narrator Little Dog's mother, Rose, who is illiterate. It consists of a series of vignettes, memories of Little Dog's childhood and of stories passed down from his mother and grandmother, Lan. Though one memory often leads into another, the vignettes are semi-modular, with linkages and accumulation in meaning mostly created through rhyming action and direct repetition. In this way, the book feels a bit like a carrier bag full of

nuts, berries, and grains. Each vignette has texture and flavor that transforms through proximity, like a hearty melee of almonds, blueberries, and raspberries mixed into hot syruped oats.

Throughout the first chapter, for example, vignettes that drop us into childhood memories begin with variations of the phrase, “the time”: “the first time you hit me, I must have been four” (5); “the time, at forty-six, when you had a sudden desire to color” (6); “the time with a gallon of milk” (7); “the time, while pruning a basket of green beans over the sink, you said, out of nowhere, “I’m not a monster. I’m a mother.”” (13). Beginning the vignettes with this phrase feels like an attempt at mirroring memory through language. We are repeatedly dropped into fragments, rather than sentences. The repetition is not of the phrase, “I remember the time when,” and this is intentional. Memory is rarely as clean and contained as a complete sentence. Instead, it’s something we’re stuck into, generally episodic in form, often starting in media res, right in the center of the action. And it is associative. In this chapter, we return, again and again, to moments of violence. This feels like one of the clearest associations between many of these memories. There are Legos being thrown, a kitchen knife brandished, a gallon of milk bursting against Little Dog’s shoulder. But there are just as many moments of tenderness—mother and son riding the Superman roller coaster at Six Flags, a white dress purchased at Goodwill, trips to the mall at the end of the month to buy Godiva chocolates and proclaim that “this is how you enjoy your life” (7). We are being introduced to the fact that this is a story about American violence, but that violence does not sit at its center. We are not building, through a linear plot, toward a moment where Little Dog’s mother becomes a monster to be defeated. Instead, we are building through accumulation, seeing life as it is, with pain, love, and tenderness often sitting in painful proximity, often turning concentric circles around one another.

The meaning of all of these sections is complicated by the other image that's repeated throughout the chapter: monarch butterflies as metaphors of migration. Vuong describes the butterflies as beautiful, resilient, and terribly delicate: "It only takes a single night of frost to kill off a generation. To live, then, is a matter of time, of timing" (4). And the sections about the monarch butterflies bleed into the childhood memories—they are not separated with section breaks as the memories often are from one another, but instead exist as a continuation, thus broadening the scope of the story. This is not just a story about a mother and her son, it is a story about a mother and son as containers of history, about violence as inheritance, about the fact that "every history is more than one thread" (8). And it uses form to tell this story.

Meaning in *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* is created through a process of accumulation. Each time a particular phrase or image is repeated, the reader feels guided to view the story from a new angle. Or, perhaps, it feels like an image is being built in translucent paper, dozens of cutouts being laid upon one another, sheet after sheet, and affixed to a pane of glass. Every piece builds outwards, creating resonance and complexity through proximity, rather than linearity. In this way, the story feels more representative of the ideology of collectivism—all of these pieces stand together, and we understand what the story wants to tell us only through their complex relationality. Little Dog clearly wants us to notice this, too. Throughout the narrative, he makes direct appeals to the reader to see what he sees, to notice the Carrier Bag form as an attempt to more accurately mirror the way narrative exists in life: "Some people say history moves in a spiral, not the line we have come to expect. We travel through time in a circular trajectory, our distance increasing from an epicenter only to return again, one circle removed" (27).

The reading experience becomes, then, one in which there is not the expectation of a particular encounter or moment of conflict. Conflict is present, but we aren't rising towards it along a steep slope as with Freytag's Pyramid. Instead, the expectation the reader comes to hold is for the circling back. We know that there will be a return to language or to image, and this does the work of making us feel propelled forward.

Matthew Salesses writes that, "With each story we read, we draw on and contribute to our knowledge of what a story is or should be" (16). All four times that I've taught my introductory composition class, I've had my students read *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*. And each time, form is one of the first things the students remark on. They find the book challenging, precisely because, for most of them, it stands outside of their ideas of 'what a story should be.' They are used to the straight lines of much of the western cannon. They are used to having to wrangle primarily with the content of a text, rather than its form. For many of them, considering not just what a book is saying, but how it is saying it, structurally, can feel a little bit like asking a fish to describe water for the first time. Freytag's Pyramid is so normalized in the texts of the American high school cannon that it has become, in some ways, invisible. We have to take a step outside of it to begin to see it at all.

#### IV

For the most part, we've considered the Carrier Bag form as potentially a more true-to-life way of writing narrative. As Vuong argues, "we're not here because of a linear plot, we're here because of proximity. We decided to put our bodies amongst each other, alongside each other, and from that proximity, meaning is amplified and created" (Strand Book Store, 27:59). Though I am convinced by the argument for the Carrier Bag (which is also used in books

like Sandra Cisneros' *The House on Mango Street*, Virginia Woolf's *The Waves*, and Julie Otsuka's *The Buddha in the Attic*) as a more realistic form than the Freytag's Pyramid, I don't necessarily believe that fiction has an obligation to represent life as it is. What I'm more concerned with is that Vuong has convincingly demonstrated that employing a structure like the Carrier Bag is an effective method for avoiding reproducing or enacting ideological violence. But is it the only method?

Let's turn now to *Parable of the Sower*, the first in Octavia Butler's two-book series set in a dystopian future (2024) in which global climate change and economic crises have led to a complete breakdown of social order. Water is exorbitantly expensive, there's a new street drug called pyro that makes its users into belligerent pyromaniacs, and the world is full of roaming bands of poor, homeless people who steal and murder indiscriminately. Protagonist Lauren lives inside of a small gated community upon which the outside world is slowly encroaching. The daughter of a preacher, from the start of the narrative, she is positioned as uniquely active in the face of impending devastation. Where most members of her community seem to be practicing apathy and willful ignorance despite increases in shootings and robberies within the gated community, Lauren is clear-eyed and preparing for the future. "I'm trying to learn whatever I can that might help me survive out there...I think we should make emergency packs—grab and run packs—in case we have to get out of here in a hurry," she tells her neighbor and closest friend, Joanne. "Money, food, clothing, matches, a blanket...I think we should fix places outside where we can meet in case we get separated. Hell, I think a lot of things" (58). Lauren is later reprimanded for her fear-mongering. "It's better to teach people than to scare them" (65), her father admonishes.

As a reader, I found it somewhat baffling that Lauren's desire to prepare for the worst would be more fear-inducing to the members of her community than the rampant gun-fire, disappearances of community members, and home invasions. This seems, however, like a method Butler uses to position Lauren, early in the story, as uniquely wise and action-oriented. And this makes sense—*Parable of the Sower* is a story about survival in the wake of devastation, but it's also a quintessential hero's journey. As predicted, Lauren's community will face utter devastation when it's burned to the ground one night, leaving her and two other community members to form an alliance and travel north through the dangers of the world beyond the walls. And as the narrative progresses, Lauren will be depicted, again and again, as unique. She survives and helps others to survive because she's smart, thrifty, and cautious, often much more so than those around her. When she catches her companions fooling around instead of keeping watch one night and is asked if she wouldn't have done the same, she reports that, "I don't think I would have yielded to temptation out here with no prospects, no idea what's going to happen" (204). When she sees a community being ravaged by scavengers, she thinks to herself, "they should have had hiding places already prepared or at least been able to lose themselves among the hills where scavengers were ransacking their homes. But they had done none of that" (229). In this world, danger and tragedy are everywhere, but the individual that guards against them most vigilantly is likely to get out alive.

*Parable of the Sower* is interesting because, while it feels staunchly representative of the ideology of individualism in a classic man vs. society tale, it also utilizes narrative techniques typically disdained by proponents of the contemporary hero's journey precisely because they muddle with notions of individual agency. The most prominent example of this is the deus ex machina that Bankole, the love interest that arrives in the book's third act, represents. At this

point in the narrative, Lauren has become the leader of a small group travelling north in search of a place to stay with easy access to water. She has secret hopes of establishing a new religion, Earthseed, which a few members of her band are slowly beginning to endorse. Enter Bankole, a much older man who quickly falls in love with Lauren and just so happens to own three hundred acres of land that is not only plotted with wells but far enough off the highway to remain largely unknown. Coincidence saves the day. Suddenly, she has a place to settle that's fit not only for her and the small band she's gathered around her, but for the future expansion of Earthseed.

"In the West, fiction is inseparable from the project of the individual" (Saleses, 21). I remember, in an early writing class, discussing the role of coincidence in the novella I was working on. "Coincidence can be used to get a character into all kinds of trouble," my professor told me, "but it shouldn't ever be used to get them out of it." *Of course*, I thought. The deus ex machina, like that invoked in *Parable of the Sower*, is lazy and unoriginal. It takes away the character's agency. I took the advice as fact, edited my manuscript accordingly, and was careful not to let coincidence do any significant legwork from there on after.

It wasn't until I ran across a brief segment on coincidence in Saleses' book that I realized there was anything ideological about what I'd been told (a piece of advice which, by the way, I first repeated to my own students as soundly and surely as it was told to me). Saleses writes, "In America, coincidence and fate have long been the domain of storytellers of color, for whom the 'naked' force of the world is an everyday experience. In the tradition of African American fiction, for example, coincidence plots and reunion plots are normal. People of color often need coincidence in order to reunite with their kin" (35). The idea that coincidence is the lazy way out is thus predicated on the assumption that there is always another way out, a way out

most often dependent on character agency and action, by an infinite belief in the ideal of ‘pulling oneself up by one’s bootstraps.’ Aesthetic objections to coincidental plots in contemporary hero’s journeys, then, may function primarily as a means of forwarding an ideology centered around individual agency as the most powerful force at work in a story.

*Parable of the Sower* toggles an interesting ideological line. Protagonist Lauren is positioned as uniquely intelligent and ambitious, and much of her survival is predicated on these characteristics. However, her agency, it seems, may not be the most powerful force at work in the story. With *Bankhole*, we see the significant role of luck and coincidence in this world. Additionally, religion will play an interesting role in this story. The primary dictum that Lauren creates for Earthseed is, “All that you touch you change. All that you change, changes you. The only lasting truth is change. God is change” (3). Within her sense of religiosity, the ideology of individualism seems to merge, once again, with traditions of black storytelling. Religion as a guiding force, especially one that is characterized by the narrative as altruistic, is rarely seen in contemporary dystopian novels. The one caveat we tend to see is religion or religiosity that can be actively shaped by the individual. In *Star Wars*, for example, the force is mystical and godlike, but its defining characteristic is that it is shaped by the individual who wields it. Similarly, Earthseed is not a religion based on the idea of an omnipotent god, but instead a god that can be influenced by human action. This feels pertinent. It may be that religion rarely plays a central role in contemporary dystopian stories in part due to the impact of living in an increasingly secular society, but I’d also posit that it has to do with a reluctance, once again, to suggest that there is anything on the side of good that is more capable or powerful than the hero. Thus, where we see religion in *Parable of the Sower*, it is not only a creation of the protagonist (who grew up

Baptist and came to disavow Christianity), it is inherently a version of religion in which the individual has some swaying power over god.

In Jonathan Scott's 2010 article, "Octavia Butler and the base for American socialism," he describes the basis of socialism as "a dialectical unity of opposites," much as all class societies that have existed. However, "whereas under capitalist hegemony the social relation of production is wageworker and capitalist, under socialist hegemony it will be the individual and the collective" (Scott). *Parable of the Sower*, he goes on to suggest, is not a champion of the project of the individual. Instead, it is a transitional story (which may be why it toggles the line between individualism and collectivism with its depictions of coincidence and religion). If, as American historian Theodore Allen suggested, "the basis of the necessary socialist relationship of production must be defined and developed within the womb of the capitalist order before the gravediggers of capitalism can become the builders of socialist society," then this is Lauren Olamina's mission. In a post-capitalist, post-apocalyptic America, hero's journeys—stories of individuals who overcome—must necessarily form the basis for the new kinds of stories to be written, those of the collective. And, as Scott suggests, Lauren's intention to crystallize the dialectical unity of the individual and the collective is clearly represented in the primary maxim of *Earthseed*, "God is change." God, he posits, is for Lauren the collective, while change is the individual.

Thus, *Parable of the Sower* sits in an interesting middle ground. It plots onto Freytag's Pyramid, centering the agency of one thrifty individual, but ultimately, instead of furthering the hero's journey agenda, it acts as a sort of final iteration of the hero's journey. Lauren's mission is the last mission of the individual—to establish the post-capitalist and thus post-individualist

society in which dialectical unity of the individual and the collective will be achieved. This is thus a story of socialism rising out of the dregs of capitalism, the end of self-interest as a primary guiding force, and the beginning of a reorientation toward the collective.

## V

*Parable of the Sower* makes a convincing case that the Freytag's Pyramid may be invoked to more complex ends than formally replicating the ideology of individualism. Still, I needed to turn elsewhere to unpack one of my lingering concerns about the way this form lends itself to a particular kind of interpretation of the stories it holds.

"Conflict presents a worldview, along a spectrum from complete agency to a life dictated completely by circumstances" (Salesses, 62). The problem I thought might be implicit in the contemporary hero's journey and Freytag's Pyramid forms is that, when the hero loses, this might easily be misinterpreted as a failure of the individual, rather than a demonstration of the limits of individualism. If only they had been thriftier, harder, had seen that loophole they missed, etc., maybe the outcomes would have been different.

The hero loses in both of my novels. In my first book, *Niches in the Desert*, Jayanca is a tiny town in the Peruvian desert that is, through a series of magical events, discovered to boast the highest life expectancy on earth. As such, it becomes a site of international intrigue, with foreign investors pouring in, buying up all of the 'longevity resources,' and ultimately causing a plague amongst the Jayancan elderly. The three teenage protagonists of the story thus enter the political arena in an effort to save their town and their beloved elders. Ultimately, though, they fail to affect change in the political landscape, and their most beloved elder dies, the Jayancan

community is torn apart by gentrification and resource extractivism, and the friendship of the three protagonists is cannon fodder to all of it.

Similarly, in my current book, *A Life for a Life*, protagonists Sadie and Angela are two sides of the same coin. Sadie needs a half-million dollars to give her partner one last shot at surviving cancer through an experimental treatment, Angela needs a surrogate for the child she can't carry on her own, and thus Sadie's body becomes the trade they make to get what they each want. Though Sadie may succeed in saving her husband's life, thrifting her way into getting him the exorbitantly priced treatment he needs by renting out her own body, their family unit will not survive the emotional devastation that this process incurs. It is not a story, then, of an individual who overcomes or destroys an exploitative system, but of one who finds a way to operate inside of it, ultimately at the cost of her dearest relationship.

In both of these stories, the hero doesn't win. Capitalism wins. My concern, though, was that within the framework of Freytag's Pyramid, some might interpret these stories as demonstrations of individual, rather than systemic, failure. However, reviewing the critical reception of other novels utilizing the Freytag's Pyramid or the hero's journey form and ending in tragedy made clear to me the rich history of the pessimistic ending as a mechanism for critiquing systemic injustice and suggesting the limitations of individual agency. We see this, for example, in George Orwell's *1984*, which ends with Winston Smith's complete emotional, psychological, and intellectual destruction by the totalitarian state. Similarly, Nana Kwame Adjei-Brenyah's 2023 novel, *Chain Gang All Stars*, which depicts a dystopian future in which American convicts fight to the death in televised, gladiator-style matches to win their freedom, also ends in tragedy. Protagonists and lovers Loretta Thurwar and Hurricane Staxxx must fight to the death, and though Staxxx intentionally throws the fight in order to allow her beloved to win

and be liberated, she herself does not survive. Both of these works are, thankfully, critically understood as political novels engaged in systemic critique, *1984* of the dangers of totalitarianism, and *Chain Gang All Stars* of systemic racism, the prison-industrial complex, and capitalistic media exploitation.

Additionally, if we look back to the very earliest hero's journey stories—stories such as Homer's *The Odyssey* and *The Illiad*—we see them acting in some ways as a kind of warning against the limits of proto-individualism. Much as in many of the naturalist stories of the late nineteenth century, the fates of individuals in these early stories end up being determined by powers beyond their control, whether they be natural, political, or economic in nature. Thus, it may in fact be argued that the hero's journey in particular has been largely co-opted in much twentieth and twenty-first century writing, but that the form itself has been used for thousands of years to many different means, some in direct opposition to the way it is used, for example, in stories in which individual agency wins out, such as *Lord of the Rings*, *Harry Potter*, or *The Hunger Games*.

Perhaps, then, there is an argument to be made that conflict-centric narrative forms, including the hero's journey and Freytag's Pyramid, can be invoked in the contemporary landscape not only as a means of representing the ideology of American individualism, but also, and once again, as a critique of it. Much as the content of *Parable of the Sower* suggests it as a hero's journey to end all hero's journeys, perhaps those stories that invoke Freytag's Triangle but end in tragedy or ambiguity can, and often are, primarily understood not through the lens of individual failure, but as demonstrations of the fact that individual action cannot be enough to overcome systemic injustice. There is no pull yourself up by your bootstraps. Thus, if fiction is meant to be an attempt to represent truth, perhaps the hero's journey form is truthful when it

ends—not by portraying those exceptional instances in which individuals overcome, not by taking the shape of a spear that pierces—but by shining a light on the much more common reality of individual tragedy and loss, showing us the spear that moves but falls, missing its target, because the reality is that it was always fixed in Jello, never moving freely at all. In this way, it seems to me to be a form that ultimately continues to be useful as a site of complex ideological engagement, one that need not necessarily be turned away from in order to avoid enacting ‘American violence.’

I started dating again recently. Sometimes I read those articles about the kinds of questions asked in various cultures to get to know a new person. It’s true that when I lived in Peru, it was rare to ask somebody about their work. Work isn’t seen as a central part of a person’s identity in the way that it is in the United States. Instead, questions mostly revolve around family and community. *How’s your mother doing? Is your sister still living in Cuzco?* I think there’s a couple of reasons for this: one of them is the difference, again, between the orientation to the individual vs. the collective. But the other is that, in countries with much greater economic opportunity, what one does with one’s time is often seen as a closer reflection of who one is. What’s that old John Quincy Adams quote? “I’m a warrior, so that my son may be a merchant, so that his son may be a poet.” In Peru, most people, it’s understood, are still living as warriors. In the United States, many people, perhaps most, are still living as warriors and merchants as well, but we live under the illusion that we can all be poets if only we have a good head on our shoulders and do a few years of hard work.

I have the luck and privilege to live, essentially, the life of the poet. I do the thing that I love, which is writing fiction. What is my responsibility, then, to the warriors and the merchants that continue to live by my side in today's America?

Sometimes I wish there was a third type of question for a first date. One that could also be asked when introduced to a friend of a friend at a summer afternoon barbeque. Or at the biannual family reunion. Instead of "what do you do," or "how's your mother doing," I wish we could ask, "how do you try to do good in the world?" Sure, this might prompt for a moment of hubris, or perhaps one of guilt. But if there's one situation in which either of these feelings may be of use, I think it would be in sparking more conversations about how we intend to go about making the broken world better. I can't help but think if we all knew we were being sized up, having our successes measured, not in terms of flash and pomp, but in the degree of our orientation to the human collective (whatever shape that might take), that a few more good things might get done around here.

I very often feel like I don't do enough good in the world. But if I am to follow the path of the poet, I hope that I can find the way that my work does good to the very best of its ability. Maybe that's in expressing something political through its content, or through its form. Maybe it's in doing away with siloing myself into one category of writer or another altogether, in embracing art as a way to create joy and fulfillment both for its makers and its consumers, in a world where joy and fulfillment often feel hard to come by. Maybe it's by going to marches and packaging whistles and putting my body amongst other bodies, orienting myself toward the proximity that Vuong is so certain is what makes for a meaningful life. And then coming home to write about it.

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