

Book Review:

Ugly Freedoms, Elizabeth R. Anker

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Over the past year, there has perhaps been no word more loaded or contested than ‘freedom.’ From nationwide convoys against pandemic safety measures, to anti-vaxx discourses, challenges to reproductive rights, and a strengthening billionaire class, the term has been marshaled as a defense of individual choice, personal comfort, and non-responsibility. That ‘freedom’ has been rallied around by the Right, by white people, and by ardent nationalists should come as no surprise, at least not according to the account of freedom offered by American Studies and political scholar Elizabeth R. Anker in her new monograph, *Ugly Freedoms*. Anker argues that the freedom to exploit, harm, displace, and withhold are not incidental misapplications of freedom, but in fact undergird the ways in which it has always been practiced in the United States.

Anker begins the book with a chilling excerpt of a battle song from the U.S. war to annex the Philippines, in which the torture method known as the ‘water cure’ is characterised by the singing soldiers not as the antithesis of American values, “but as an expression of them,” as an act of freedom exerted on “resistant brown bodies.”¹ Likewise, Anker reminds us that “slavery, legalized by US juridical processes, was interpreted by enslavers not as the opposite of liberty but as a practice of liberty,” a ‘right’ that they defended in their bid to reject British oversight.² Drawing together exemplary moments in the history of colonization, slavery, and the nation’s founding, she argues that freedom in its dominant mode is inseparable from mastery — thus, not so much as freedom *from* violence, but freedom *as* violence. Drawing on Saidiya Hartman’s *Scenes of Subjection*, Anker’s goal is not to recuperate freedom but to focalise its ambivalent nature.

Central to her critique of freedom is its weddedness to (the myth of) individual autonomy — for instance, freedom as the ability of the rational, humanist subject to think and decide for themselves, to control their own destiny, and not be regulated by their social circumstances. These freedoms can be considered ‘ugly’ in that they give

¹ Elizabeth R. Anker, *Ugly Freedoms* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2022), 1-2.

² Anker, 3.

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license to celebrate violence and domination as performances of individual rights and to disavow one's own complicity in exerting harm; this mode of freedom includes freedom from guilt, responsibility, and interdependence, as well as the biopolitical freedom to designate who can live and who can die.³

But Anker also gives us another definition for her titular 'ugly freedoms,' that is, modes of living that defy dominant aesthetic judgment and desirability, that are marginal, minor, debased, and not always successful, practices that she argues are moored in "deep dependence [and] obstructed agency."⁴ Her linking-together of aesthetic theory with political theory is effective here in that it reminds us of how ways of living are made legible, categorised, shunned, and circulated, determining what we can imagine to be possible. Indeed, each of the chapters in the text's main body move from examining the brutality of freedom discourses, to those nonideal freedoms remaindered in sovereignty's mythical wake, often drawing on creative and aesthetic practices along the way. This doubling is a compelling move, but also not entirely clear; Anker's retrieval of ugly freedoms entail fascinating and attentive readings, but she does not always explain how they still fall under a rubric of 'freedom,' as opposed to simply being practices of mutuality or refusal that we may be inclined to support. As such, one of the book's most interesting promises is also a potential site of its shortcomings.

Anker's first (and best) chapter incisively investigates the white supremacy at the heart of U.S. democracy, told through the lens of sugar production as a practice embroiled in "indigenous dispossession, environmental destruction, and racial hierarchy."⁵ Sugar's sweetness conceals a gruesome archive in that "the popular craving for sugar is arguably an effect of the plantationocene" that began in the Caribbean and was later exported to the U.S.⁶ Anker convincingly demonstrates how the sensorial enjoyment of sweetness for some was the result of systematized brutality towards others, by linking sugar production to the establishment of slave codes, reification of private property, and imperial expansion. She also turns to Kara Walker's 2014 sculpture at the Domino Sugar Refining Plant, *A Subtlety, Or the Marvelous Sugar Baby*... as demonstrative of sugar's sickly-sweetness, writing that "if sugar's delight on the tongue overpowers other critical sensations to render its ugly freedoms palatable, the Marvelous Sugar Baby catalyzes different sensorial registers of smell and sight to interpret freedom differently."⁷ Though her reading

³ Anker, 10.

⁴ Anker, 11.

⁵ Anker, 37.

⁶ Anker, 47.

⁷ Anker, 43.

of the sculpture effectively draws out its *critique* of freedom, it is not clear how the sculpture itself then comes to *iterate* freedom, especially given Anker’s own quick acknowledgement that “using forty tons of uneaten sugar for art is something only a consumption-obsessed society, indifferent to wealth inequality, could both afford and find unproblematic.”⁸ This might imply that *all* potential freedom acts are mired in some form of greed, yet Anker chooses to drop this thread.

The second chapter deals with how concepts of ‘tragedy’ are recouped by American history as steps in the nation’s continuous ‘self-improvement’ and argues that philosophies of emancipation have enforced an onus to be self-directed and self-responsible as a front for withholding collectivity and racial justice. Anker reads Lars Von Trier’s controversial film *Manderlay* as critically evoking the “violent racialized imaginaries of freedom” or “a fantasy of Black emancipation as white exoneration.”⁹ Though Anker curiously lays the director’s fraught history to one side, she reads the film itself closely and does not shy from its complexities, particularly in terms of gender and the limits of white empathy. By compellingly locating acts of freedom in a film marked by ugliness and discomfort, she also offers reading against the grain as itself a possible gesture of freedom.

Chapter 3 reads contemporary freedom discourses as extensions of neoliberal capitalism, or the demand for unrestrained markets, profit-seeking, and consumption as they are positioned against the perceived ‘coerciveness’ of collective living/policy-making (think Michel Foucault’s *homo economicus*). As Anker rightly points out, the unconstrained growth of the economy also entails the unconstrained surveillance and policing of society’s most economically marginalized. She engages HBO’s *The Wire* as exemplary of local, daily negotiations with neoliberal power that undo a belief in “individual self-reliance or police securitization.”¹⁰ Her guiding query — asking how political agency and freedom are lived without a vision of a better world to galvanize them — is a sophisticated way of thinking freedom amid constraint, rather than as transcendence. She locates her answer in performances of affect such as boredom and sarcasm that refuse to “rebrand their psychic lives” in alignment with ineffectual neoliberal reforms; this argument is reminiscent of Sara Ahmed’s *The Promise of Happiness* or Lauren Berlant’s *Cruel Optimism*.¹¹ It is clear from Anker’s thorough analysis that *The Wire* is taking aim against neoliberal rationality, but

⁸ Anker, 75.

⁹ Anker, 82. Anker, 99.

¹⁰ Anker, 117.

¹¹ Anker, 127.

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again, it is also easy for *freedom* to slip out of view, or to become a catch-all term for any ideological moves in which the show and its characters partake.

The final chapter considers climate destruction as a gesture of individualist freedom that denies the collectivity and interdependence of life. Drawing on those who defend their right to pollute or use excessive resources, Anker notes how their acts of destruction are claimed as legitimate through the rhetoric of private property — i.e. that one has the right to act as they please within the bounds of what they ‘own.’ This reifies the individual as sovereign and unattached to the community or ecosystem and attempts to naturalize property as an exercise of man’s freedom over nature. It is also a construction of the human subject that it is divorced from other non-human organisms; to this end, Anker reads the hypermobility of bacteria as a (positive) form of ugly freedom for how it removes autonomy and agency from our vision of the subject. This ugly freedom is not something that we consciously enact but that it is inevitable, complicating what we conventionally consider praxis. Anker’s reading of bacteria conceives of the world vis-a-vis a posthumanist interdependence, and while I agree with the ethics and capaciousness of this stance, Anker again does not make evident how this represents freedom itself, though it would be a better starting point from which to enable it.

Evidently, this problem is threaded throughout the book, in that instances of freedom as brutality or domination tend to be far more developed than the alternatives Anker offers to them. This is in part because of the (genuinely important) intellectual experiment that Anker has pursued by following freedoms that are considered minor or non-agential; I am not suggesting that their shortcomings are a matter of scale, however, but rather lie in the fact that their relationship to *freedom specifically* remains muddy and under-theorised. In a related vein, while Anker takes aim at conceptions of freedom in Western philosophical discourse, she more or less shelves the ways in which freedom has been taken up by minoritized intellectual communities. One thinks of Angela Davis’ famous first lecture at UCLA, delivered when she was only 25 years-old, in which she argued that Black literature had been more insightful on the subject of freedom than the entire corpus of Western philosophy.¹² The limitation of Anker’s study to either a) acts of freedom that maim and oppress, or b) practices of freedom that are obscure and without political vision, means that other legitimate movements that have stretched, complicated, and enacted their own modes of freedom are sidelined, left out of the question of ‘freedom’ altogether. One could argue that such

¹² Robin D.G. Kelley, “‘Western Civilization is Neither’: Black Studies’ Epistemic Revolution,” *The Black Scholar* 50:3, 2020, pp. 4.

movements have already been the subject of scholarly attention, but Anker constructs *Ugly Freedoms* in such a way that it seems her two valences of freedom may not hold room for others; for instance, she acknowledges theories of marronage inspired by Neil Roberts and Orlando Patterson, but does not explain why such practices of fugitivity, refusal, or alternative world-making should not also be considered in the scope of her text.¹³

Despite this possible impasse, Anker’s book is a provocative, well-researched, and capacious exploration of a loaded term. It will appeal to those across interdisciplinary fields of American studies, Black studies, postcolonial theory, feminist and queer theory, ethics and aesthetics, posthumanism, history, political theory, ecocriticism, and media studies. It takes intellectual risks and asks complex questions that enrich the ways in which we might conceive of ethical social practices and ways of being, and that encourage a deep reckoning with concepts normatively taken as given. In particular, it is an important rejoinder to work *with* ambivalence, as opposed to allowing for ideological calcification when we notice only the positive or negative, rather than their simultaneity.

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¹³ Anker, 66-67.