

Book Reviews

Elisabeth R. Anker: *Ugly Freedoms*. (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2022. Pp. ix, 231.)

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We live in an invisible cloud of each other's fecal remnants and shed skin, swallowing them as we breathe, absorbing them as we touch. One can claim to be a self-reliant individual but cannot wish away the fact that our microbiota exists in an interdependent relationship with the floating particles of other people and nonhuman species, the flora and fauna, the dirt, dust, and refuse of land, life, and death. This may seem gross, but as Elizabeth Anker puts it in the final chapter of her excellent book *Ugly Freedoms*, "eating each other's skin and shit is peaceable, ubiquitous, and even somewhat life supporting, as growing bodies would burst if they weren't constantly shedding old skin" (167). For Anker, better we consider the meaning of the fact that we eat each other in this way than destroy life on earth in the name of consumptive sovereignty, which "ties high consumption to the exercise of freedom, to sovereign control over oneself and one's property, and to domination over objects, people, and resources as an expression of agentic subjectivity" (157). This is an ugly freedom in the worst sense, because it is defined and enacted through the subjugation of people, land, life, reason, and the will. Through a vital, creative analysis, Anker reveals the ugliness of dominant and ennobled practices of liberal freedom and gestures toward alternative freedoms we can nourish by embracing that which is condemned or ignored as transgressive or degenerate. There are thus two versions of ugly freedom in play for Anker, one she wants us to move away from before it kills us as it has already damaged so many and so much, and another we need to make room for even if, and maybe because, it makes us a little uncomfortable.

The core elements of *bad* ugly freedoms are often celebrated as heroic, calling forth the prospect of liberty, self-possession, mastery, choice, and sovereign will for the individual subject, in particular the normatively white settler masculine subject. In our time, Donald Trump, the Proud Boys, and trucker convoys rallying for their "freedom" from vaccine mandates are examples of the violent and domineering articulation of this sort of ugly freedom. Anker names and explains what we see before our eyes, especially regarding those who seek to shore up white settler masculine power in the name of freedom. Of course, this relationship of whiteness to freedom has a very long history. In chapter 1, Anker posits that "sugar is one way to answer the question of what freedom *tastes* like" (65). Sugar was "the first

crop to render colonization profitable" (41), starting in Barbados, cultivated on stolen land with stolen enslaved labor, causing "greater loss of global biodiversity than any other single crop" (65). This is the context in which John Locke ennobled individual liberty as self-possession whereby property in oneself finds external expression in turning land into property, from Barbados to the Carolinas. Lockean liberty as individual self-possession is available to some and not others, specifically racialized and gendered others deemed incapable of self-possession and thus available to become the possession or dependent of others or have their lands seized and communities destroyed in the name of an emergent racialized property regime. To critique this ugly freedom, Anker walks us into the exhibit of Kara Walker's 2014 sculpture *A Subtlety, Or the Marvelous Sugar Baby*, a naked, prone, massive sphinx-like figure made of sugar that portrays the enslavement and oppression of Black women. There is resistance here, as visitors encounter a disorienting experience, from the stench of dense, sweating sugar to the naked figure's "labial freedom" (75) of exposed genitalia that mocks and diminishes especially white male fantasies of freedom as self-possession. Here we get a sense of *Ugly Freedom's* reach and ambition, as Anker balances theoretical, historical, and cultural texts in an enticing high-wire act that produces the disruption in our theorizing that she advocates for politically.

Chapter 2 reveals the ugliness of freedom for Black Americans ostensibly included in a post-Civil War America that was not radically reconstructed, where Blackness continued to represent the antithesis of liberal freedom. The cultural text in play here is Lars von Trier's 2005 film *Manderlay*, portraying a Black community who remain slaves by choice decades after the Civil War. To Anker, the film counters the self-serving US national narrative of emancipatory progress, positing a benevolent white woman who "frees" this community as a metonym for the white liberal need for exoneration from the guilt of the past without tangible changes in the present. The only freedom affirmed in such a process is white mastery. In response, the Black community enacts the "good" ugly freedom of burning everything to the ground. The destructive and thus creative urge expressed in the film is that we have seen in US cities, such as in the burning of the 3rd precinct in Minneapolis in 2020 after the police murder of George Floyd. To Anker, these acts of rebellion seek "to access new ways of being in place" and "destroy the relations of possession that organized it" up to that moment (106). This defiance rejects the norms of respectability, reform, and self-possession, which is what *good* ugly freedom looks like when freedom is taken, not given, for that white gift is a present stuck in the past.

In this regard, it may be chapter 3 on ugly neoliberal freedom (admittedly, a redundancy) where Anker's high-wire act teeters slightly. The chapter centers on a reading of the HBO show *The Wire* (2002–8) as a portrait of the damage wrought by neoliberal market rationality, from policing to the drug trade, on the shipping docks and in the public schools. Anker argues that the depiction of police manipulating data to meet quotas, the eye-rolling of teachers stuck in

a boring meeting, and a corrupt union boss's son burning a hundred-dollar bill are evidence of a "rejection without vision" (147) that "blithely reject[s] neoliberal rationality" (137). However, as Anker notes, *The Wire* exemplifies the paradoxes and trap of neoliberalism, as the show is at once a critique that also reaffirms the centrality of a key neoliberal institution, the police. The police are the one institution centered throughout the show's five seasons, and in this respect the example of police "juking" their stats to preserve this institution may represent more of a passive affirmation of neoliberal rationality than a rejection of it. The issue here may be the very messiness of neoliberalism itself. It is ubiquitous and nebulous, even nihilistic, in which the so-called "winners" it ennobles are perfectly fine with the "losers" living in their filth and boredom. If true, there may then be a need for some sort of vision after all, not just rejection. Indeed, this is what makes the final chapter with which I started this review such an inspired, brilliant way to conclude *Ugly Freedoms*, with its focus on climate destruction and consumptive sovereignty. Anker turns to, among others, Indigenous feminist scholars for a vision of freedom nurtured in the shared and inevitably messy experiences among humans and with nonhumans and all life and land. This requires letting go of our attachment to the boundaries—personal, collective, between human and nonhuman, life and land—of modern liberal freedom. There is a vision here, one that reveals the fertile ground for community and solidarity, which may be filthy and even shitty, but these are things that we humans and nonhumans have in common, and Anker makes a persuasive case that this is a good place to start.

—Kevin Bruyneel

Babson College, Babson Park, Massachusetts, USA



Michael J. Thompson: *Twilight of the Self: The Decline of the Individual in Late Capitalism*. (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2022. Pp. xii, 271.)

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In the tradition of the great diagnostic philosophers—from Marx and Nietzsche, Lukács and Foucault, to Wendy Brown, Nancy Fraser, and Rahel Jaeggi—Michael J. Thompson's *Twilight of the Self* probes the central problems of contemporary social and political life. Like a "doctor" for "sick cultures," this ambitious book seeks to identify the source of our ailment, theorize its origins, and prescribe a treatment.

The "decline of the self in late capitalism" is hardly a new topic in critical theory, but Thompson's work provides a richly theorized and insightful perspective (xi). The first three chapters focus on analyzing the present conditions of subjectivity and selfhood under the stage of capitalism that he