Elisabeth R. Anker, *Ugly Freedoms*

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The concept of freedom has, over the ages, been exhaustively discussed by different authors, thinkers, and philosophers. Today, we witness philosophical debates about individual and collective freedoms in a vast range of subjects. Groups advocating for and against could use many adjectives to characterize these freedoms, but “ugly” is, at least, original. In absolutist thinking, freedom has a high standard, and it is so yearned by humans (and animals, I bet) that it is challenging to wrap your mind around a situation where freedom can be classified as ugly. Nevertheless, Elisabeth R. Anker manages to throw in the reader’s face horrendous forms of freedom from the past and present day (forms of freedom discussed, written, and widely accepted) in her book *Ugly Freedoms*.

According to Anker, freedom can be ugly in two ways. One hideous freedom originates from an old form of exploitation (of humans and resources). Anker describes the “water cure,” a type of torture that American soldiers used on Filipinos resisting the American occupation, which consisted of putting a running water hose down the prisoner’s throat to simulate the feeling of drowning. What does this have to do with freedom? The lyrics of a song written by one of the soldiers can explain it: “Shove the nozzle deep and let him taste of liberty, Shouting the Battle Cry of Freedom” (2). How many times have the U.S. forces bombarded places, killed people, or established embargos in the name of freedom? “What if torture is a practice of American freedom?” (3), asks Anker.

She proposes to expose—or “attack”—this first type of ugly freedom, “one that is understood as unproblematic political ideals” (12), for example, the freedom not to wear masks during the pandemic which threatens with death immunosuppressed or elderly individuals, the freedom to kill by having the right to carry a gun, the freedom...
to evict tenants who cannot afford to pay the rent, the freedom to charge exorbitant prices in real estate in a deregulated housing market, among others.

The second type of ugly freedom are, as she explains, “those that are unfairly maligned as unfree, do not presume that resistance always motivates freedom or that participants only qualify for freedom if they are morally upstanding or non-complicit in unfreedom. Freedom, in this sense, is not necessarily a righteous act by an exemplary subject” (25). This approach to ugly freedoms comes very close to Michel Certeau’s concept called Tactics of the Weak. Certeau observed how those disenfranchised managed to work in the gaps or breaches of the system that privileged some groups to try to attain a better life or some fundamental rights. These are small forms of resistance, sometimes invisible, but present in our social fabric. Anker justifies it as follows: “The works I choose are thus typically interpreted as offering no vision for freedom, or offensive visions of unfreedom, or experiences that seem too crass to even qualify for freedom’s practice. Yet it is precisely their compromised and problematic status that keeps them productive and open for both readings of ugly freedom” (31). She goes over these two types of freedom in four chapters.

“White and Deadly: Sugar and the Sweet taste of Freedom” tells how Barbados became the center of the neoliberal production model, with landowners arriving in a land already emptied of indigenous peoples (they thought it had always been unpopulated) by the Spanish that had come first. These owners decided that by breaking away from the British crown, they could make their own laws, making them absolute masters of their land, giving themselves the horrendous (not just ugly) freedom to enslave black people and treat them like merchandise, to exploit black women through work and rape to “produce” more slaves, and to destroy the land with a monoculture of sugar cane, which rapidly devastates soil and environment.

In this chapter, Anker analyzes two art installations that could fit into the second type of Ugly Freedom, the type that could be called resistance. One installation, Sugar/Bittersweet (2010) by Maria Magdalena Campos-Pons, was a Caribbean Sugar field with African Spears, Chinese weights, and stacks of raw sugar confections, which symbolizes the sugar cane, enslaved Africans, and Asian laborers. The different sugar refinements represents the diversity of the people involved in this trade. The other installation was a 35-foot high and 75-foot-long Black female sphinx made of foam and sugar, surrounded by statues of children made of brown sugar. These kids are carrying baskets with “sugar candies” in the shape of body parts. This piece, called A Subtlety, Or the Marvelous Sugar Baby (2014), was made by Kara Walker and installed on the New York City waterfront, which there used to be one of the biggest sugar refineries, Domino Sugar. As Anker reflects, “Popular ideologies link sugar consumption to simple childhood pleasures, but rather than consuming sugar, these children are, instead, consumed by sugar, their bodies broken and melting in the sweltering refinery” (71).

The second chapter, “Tragedies of emancipation. Freedom, Sex and Theft after Slavery,” analyzes Manderlay, a 2005 film by Lars Von Trier, which tells the story of a white girl, the daughter of a gangster who arrives on a plantation that still kept slaves 70 years after their emancipation. The white girl decides to “emancipate” them, in an act that shows white people being the central agents of Black freedom. One of the slaves has sex with her, steals the money everybody saved from the last harvest, and runs away facing a fake (or ugly) freedom when he discovers that another emancipated black colleague who decided to leave the plantation dies after being lynched and
hanged by a group of white people. Anker states that “Emancipation was a tragic
reformulation of racialized unfreedom that continues to the present” (78).

8 In chapter three, “Thwarting neoliberalism, Boredom, Dysfunction, and other Visionless Challenges,” Anker interprets the series The Wire, which aired in 2002. The production promised to present a very realistic picture of the city of Baltimore and the effects of neoliberalism on the police fight against drugs, on the leadership of a union, on the way elites governed, on the public school system, and on the news media: “Throughout each season, The Wire details the uneven neo-liberalization of the drug economy, including the increasing consolidation of its money flows, the networks of distribution that shape its local form, and the failure of the War on Drugs to control the trade besides criminalizing poor users and low-level traders” (210).

9 The second type of ugly freedom is illustrated in a scene when a boy in the community breaks the just-installed surveillance camera by throwing a rock at it. Anker describes the scene of the camera falling from the poll and being held for its cable. The recording shows the wall where the camera was attached. Another example of the second type of ugly freedom in the series is the reaction of professors from a public school to a training session where they must repeat a motto: “I Am Lovable and Capable.” The teachers wanted better teaching conditions, more investment and structure, and not a school dependent on their self-esteem. As Anker analyses: “Their rejection of IALAC is not a celebratory revolt; it does not lead to a vast restructuring of the educational system that would overthrow biased standardized testing, prioritize community decision-making, bring well-funded wraparound support to students, fight for a more just distribution of city resources, and make the classroom a safe and joyful place to learn” (129).

10 In the fourth and last chapter, “Freedom as Climate Destruction, Guts, Dust, and Toxins in an Era of Consumptive Sovereignty,” Anker discusses the “hideous” freedom of wealthy residents not to curb the use of water in California when the most severe drought in history was experienced between 2015 and 2017. She also brings artist Dalia Baassiri’s The Dust Series (2017) to prove the connection that all living beings have with one another on Earth. The series of mixed media art show birds and other figures made of dust from the artist’s house. What the reader discovers in this chapter is that: “For dust is significantly composed of sloughed off human skin. However, not only that; dust includes dead microbiota from one’s own body and the bodies of others, living dust mites that feed off dead skin, animal hair, fecal matter, toxins and pollution from the environment, house particles, preplanetary minerals and—of course—dirt” (174)

11 Ugly Freedoms is dense and sometimes shocking, and can be a good eye-opener for those who think the freedom some voices express repeatedly can be very different from the freedom others may need, want, or feel.
BIBLIOGRAPHY
