

[Figures of Freedom in Anthropocene Fiction](#)

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Call for Papers

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Call for Chapter Proposals:

Figures of Freedom in Anthropocene Fiction

We are soliciting chapters for a forthcoming book, *Figures of Freedom in Anthropocene Fiction*, a collection of essays examining how American literary, filmic, and televisual narratives have represented and reimagined themes of personal and political agency within the context of 21st-century aspirations and anxieties.

In various ways, films as diverse as *Wall-E*, *The Hate U Give*, *John Wick*, and *Nomadland*, television series such as *Lost*, *Mad Men*, and *Cobra Kai*, and novels such as DeLillo's *Zero K*, Whitehead's *Underground Railroad*, and Franzen's *Freedom* all represent characters who grapple with classical questions of freedom against a recognizably contemporary backdrop of terror, apocalypse, tyranny, technology, and social fragmentation. To be sure, hundreds of other titles could be included in such a catalog; indeed, since the theme of freedom is so essential to fictional storytelling, it is likely that any contemporary text can be profitably interpreted from within this perspective. The goal of this book will be to unpack what 21st-century American narratives can teach us about how the idea of freedom has been expanded, distorted, extinguished, and/or reconstituted in contemporary fiction.

Please send 300-word chapter proposals to Randy Laist at

rlaist@bridgeport.edu by September 1, 2022.

Theoretical background of the project:

The United States of America - its politics, its culture, and its existential identity - is often framed as an evolving conversation about the nature of freedom. The word "freedom" is ubiquitous in political rhetoric, patriotic songs and narratives, advertising, and activism, and conflicts in American life typically revolve around questions of what it means to be free, who gets to be free, the limitations of freedom, and the problems and paradoxes associated with freedom. Throughout the history of the United States, the concept of freedom has mutated and diverged in ways that have allowed it to become a watchword for the Founding Fathers, abolitionists, secessionists, frontiersmen, civil rights advocates, white supremacists, hippies, yuppies, existentialists, postmodernists, conservatives, progressives, and techno-utopians. In their different ways, these groups have all used the rhetoric of freedom to appeal to an ideal of personal agency removed from any external threat of force or coercion. The discrepancy among the various causes that have invoked the rhetoric of freedom, however, reveals the extent to which freedom is "an essentially contested concept" (Foner, xiv).

At the dawn of the 21st century, the 9/11 attacks provoked a wave of "freedom" rhetoric - "freedom isn't free," freedom fries, the freedom tower - that, for all its vacuity, reflected an urgent need on behalf of certain Americans to understand who they were and why they had been attacked. This vein of bumper-sticker "freedom" rhetoric has since been a mainstay of popular North American conservatism, as expressed in the US House's "Freedom Caucus," the "Freedom Convoys" of truckers protesting Covid restrictions, Trump's "Freedom Rallies," Laura Ingraham merch sporting the slogan, "Freedom Matters," and many other instances. These invocations of freedom are inseparable from a violent American history throughout which "freedom" has operated as the original "white privilege"

of a certain class of people to dominate the land, murder indigenous people, and enslave people of color. In our time of social media, digital surveillance, climate change, pandemic management, the growing influence of autocratic politicians at home and abroad, and evolving attitudes about race, sexuality, gender, and ethnicity, the old questions of what freedom looks like – what and who it’s for, why and to what extent it’s desirable – certainly call for new answers, new ways of thinking, and even new ways of being free. As Franco Berardi has recently written, “The concept of ‘freedom,’ a ubiquitous and common topic of public discourse, must be reconsidered from the point of view of today’s complex situation, and the platitudes of political talk must be subjected to critical investigation.” Likewise, Byung-Chul Han, discussing neoliberal technologies of power, insists that “the question now is whether we need to redefine freedom – to reinvent it – in order to escape from the fatal dialectic that is changing freedom into coercion” (3).

The contested nature of “freedom” has become the subject of continued scrutiny in recent cultural criticism and scholarship. In addition to the provocative challenges to “conventional” definitions of freedom articulated by Han and Berardi, the problematic nature of contemporary freedom rhetoric has also been examined by Wendy Hui Kyong Chun (*Control and Freedom*), Linda Zerilli (*Feminism and the Abyss of Freedom*), Mimi Nguyen (*The Gift of Freedom*), Anthony Bogues (*Practices of Freedom*), and Tyler Stovall (*White Freedom*). Russia’s invasion of Ukraine seems to have exacerbated a global division between countries affiliated with autocratic governance and countries espousing the tenets of liberal democracy, a coalition of nations that has dusted off its Cold War identity as “the free world.” In this context, it is uniquely pressing that democratic populations engage in earnest and open-ended discourse about what freedom means, how it is defined, and what it looks like.

Narrative art has always been a medium through which human beings have explored the nature of freedom, concocting imaginational spaces in which hypothetical humans experiment with the possibilities, perils, and

paradoxes of freedom. In her 2022 book, *Ugly Freedom*, Elisabeth R. Anker argues that “How we tell stories of freedom matters” (29). While critiquing definitions of freedom that serve to justify white supremacy, corporate exploitation, and environmental destruction, Anker examines “different stories of freedom” (30) that emphasize collective identity, marginalized perspectives, and anti-heroic behaviors. Anker’s ability to recognize stories of freedom in “discarded spaces and disparaged practices” (14) illustrates Slavoj Žižek’s challenge that “True freedom means looking into and questioning the presuppositions of everything that is given to us by our hegemonic ideology.” While Anker’s *Ugly Freedoms* conducts close readings of the television series *The Wire* and the Lars Von Trier film *Manderlay* to discover stories of “undervalued freedoms” (30), no publication has specifically investigated representations of freedom in contemporary narratives. *Figures of Freedom in Anthropocene Fiction* will enable a variety of scholars to approach this complicated question by looking at a diverse spectrum of texts from a range of theoretical perspectives. Our goal is to promote a robust and polyvocal discussion about how artists and audiences envision practices of freedom in both normative and non-normative modes.

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