

## On Freedom

Downing, Lisa; Nelson, Maggie

*License:*

Other (please specify with Rights Statement)

*Document Version*

Peer reviewed version

*Citation for published version (Harvard):*

Downing, L & Nelson, M 2023, 'On Freedom: The Dialogue', *Paragraph*, vol. 46, no. 3.

[Link to publication on Research at Birmingham portal](#)

**Publisher Rights Statement:**

This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published by Edinburgh University Press in Paragraph. The Version of Record will be available online at: <http://www.eupublishing.com/journal/para>

**General rights**

Unless a licence is specified above, all rights (including copyright and moral rights) in this document are retained by the authors and/or the copyright holders. The express permission of the copyright holder must be obtained for any use of this material other than for purposes permitted by law.

- Users may freely distribute the URL that is used to identify this publication.
- Users may download and/or print one copy of the publication from the University of Birmingham research portal for the purpose of private study or non-commercial research.
- User may use extracts from the document in line with the concept of 'fair dealing' under the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988 (?)
- Users may not further distribute the material nor use it for the purposes of commercial gain.

Where a licence is displayed above, please note the terms and conditions of the licence govern your use of this document.

When citing, please reference the published version.

**Take down policy**

While the University of Birmingham exercises care and attention in making items available there are rare occasions when an item has been uploaded in error or has been deemed to be commercially or otherwise sensitive.

If you believe that this is the case for this document, please contact [UBIRA@lists.bham.ac.uk](mailto:UBIRA@lists.bham.ac.uk) providing details and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate.

## **On Freedom: The Dialogue**

### **LISA DOWNING IN CONVERSATION WITH MAGGIE NELSON**

Maggie Nelson's *On Freedom: Four Songs of Care and Constraint* was published by Jonathan Cape in August 2021. In what follows, the editor of this Special Issue discusses her reactions to the book and some of the questions it prompts with its author.

LD: I'm fascinated by how you describe your reservations about writing a book on freedom. You write on page 3 that freedom is now perceived to be 'a corrupt and emptied code word' or even 'a white word.' And later, on page 5, you discuss your 'long-standing frustration with [freedom's] capture by the right wing.' I'm also personally, ethically, and politically horrified by how 'freedom' seems to have become associated wholly with right-wing politics and values. Can you talk a bit more about how and why you think freedom has been corrupted and why you decided it was worthy of being redeemed? (Or is your meditation on freedom not about redemption for you?)

MN: There are a lot of smart people currently doing work on reclaiming (different than redeeming, I would say) the word 'freedom' for various non-right-wing causes – the word remains highly relevant and in circulation around reproductive justice, especially post the overturning of Roe in the US, and for various abolitionist/ civil rights issues, and in the resistance to the global rise of fascism and autocracy. (I was just in a situation the other day, with some youth in Europe, wherein I actually found myself fielding the question, 'why do

you think fascism is a threat to freedom?’ I had to get over my being dumbfounded by the question in order to answer it in a way that my message might be heard.) But in the end, I see my book as orthogonal to that reclamation – allied with certain efforts to vivify and utilize the word, but not squarely in the political fight. By which I mean: it’s not an activist book, it has no prescriptions, it isn’t a blueprint for movement building (though if anyone wants to make use of aspects of it for such causes, that’s fine with me). It’s also a book about our internal resistances to freedom, resistances than can impede – for good or for ill or for neither – the desire to (always) act as a ‘free agent,’ to bear responsibility for our decisions and fate. Those resistances are important to pay attention to – both to respect our full humanity, and also because understanding them can help us to understand when and why certain appeals to the work of self-governance fail.

LD: Related to the above: you ask (rhetorically, I think) whether, instead of freedom, you should be writing about ‘obligation, mutual aid, coexistence, resiliency, sustainability’ as, you imply, others would prefer. Is the (left-leaning) objection to freedom based solely on it being perceived as an individualist value, rather than an altruistic one, do you think?

MN: I don’t put the question about why not write about obligation, mutual aid, coexistence, resiliency, sustainability, only in the mouths of others – it’s also my own question, to myself (which is why I say, ‘Often I agreed [with them]’). Yes, I think there is a fear is that freedom is an individualistic value, at odds with collective benefit – and I don’t think this fear is unfounded, given how the concept tends to circulate. It is easier for a lot of people to understand an ‘I do what I want’ version of freedom than it is to reckon with a ‘my freedom depends upon the freedom of others’ version. Some might immediately apprehend and feel committed to the latter, but for others it might take a kind of education, a journey, a

reckoning – perhaps involuntary – with the difficult but unavoidable fact of our enmeshment with others. The drama of being a human, so far as I can tell, has a lot to do with grappling with the edges – Illusory as they may be – between self and other(s) – which is as true for the baby pinching its mother’s nipple and receiving harsh feedback as for co-habiting partners who prefer the house at different temperatures as for participants in a largescale political project. Part of my goal in NOT focusing on left/right political distinctions, and focusing instead on the art-making subject, the sexual subject, the on-drugs subject, and the already-dependent-on-fossil-fuels-by-virtue-of-being-born subject, was to see how tensions between various freedom drives are all ours to bear. If there is a political project here, it might have to do with not believing that any one person or people have all the ethical goodness on our side, and to treat us all as grappling with the same competing urges toward individual and collective well-being, all caught in the same web of fractious, sustaining connection.

LD: It strikes me that the critiques of freedom discussed above are radically gendered. What are the ethics, politics, and strategic feminist possibilities of continuing to argue that largely selfless virtues (the ones female people have been historically associated with and are still socialised into) are the properly progressive ones, while virtues traditionally related to the individual, such as freedom, are tainted? (This set of assumptions was the target of my last book, *Selfish Women*. I’d love to have your view on it.)

MN: I think it’s important to point out the gendered nature of the critiques of freedom and to give some backstory, which I try to do in the art chapter of *On Freedom*, re: the gendered (and racialized) nature of ‘care.’ So much thinking and writing has been done on this issue over the past fifty years especially. It’s important to have at least a skeletal understanding of various feminist stances on the issue so that we don’t come into the conversation blind, and

re-enact various essentialist fantasies which haven't really panned out. That said, I think it's important to push beyond a simple reversal or reactionary stance – the stance that would be: 'women can be as power-hungry and selfish and destructive and anti-collective and anti-relational and murderous as anyone else, so kudos to them, and also, how we're proceeding in the world together is inescapable and preordained and fine.' I think the hydraulics of all this are actually exceedingly complex – for example, some people, when aspiring to altruism or selflessness, may actually need to spend time learning how *not* to be a doormat first – how to be more assertive and speak up for themselves, before they figure out what they have to give to others. Others, who are more accustomed to putting themselves first and who have a stronger sense of self, may have to begin by examining and undoing that approach. And only you can know where you're at – appeals to general values that one can weaponize against oneself or that can be weaponized against you aren't likely to result in much liberation or growth.

LD: In this context, I want to ask whether you included care as one of your three terms – 'freedom, constraint, and care' – largely in response to the call you describe (for feminists? Women and people of colour? Those on the Left?) to prioritise altruistic, collective, relational virtues over those pertaining to the self, or whether the commitment to a value of care – albeit a nuanced version of care – is genuinely your own?

MN: I could be self-deluded here, as we all are to some extent, but I don't experience myself as making gestures in order to serve what other people might want me to say in my writing. I write in order to figure out what I think, and I say what I want to say. Others are free to opine otherwise, but to me, *On Freedom* contains no empty virtue signalling – and that includes the word 'care' in its title. I think a lot about care – as a teacher, a parent, a citizen, a keeper of

pets (as I write I'm taking breaks to test my home aquarium water, as I'm desperately trying to keep my kid's fancy goldfish alive), a partner, a maker, a being with a mind and body that need tending, and so on. In fact, the last line of my previous book, *The Argonauts*, is, 'I know we're still here, who knows for how long, ablaze with our care, its ongoing song. So, in a very different idiom and with a very different frame of concerns, *On Freedom* picks up where that book left off.

LD: This is fascinating. I enjoyed *The Argonauts* very much – and yes, found it a very different kind of book to *On Freedom*. I confess I had missed that there are some parallel themes and a kind of baton relay between the closing pages of the earlier book and the broad project of this one.

On a different point, I share your interest in Michel Foucault's reconceptualization of freedom. You write on page 6 of 'Foucault's distinction between liberation (conceived of as a momentary act) and practices of freedom (conceived of as ongoing).' You cite Foucault's claim that 'Liberation paves the way for new power relationships, which must be controlled by practices of freedom.' Is this a way of de-individualizing the value of freedom and making it about new negotiations of relationality?

MN: I believe that the self-contained individual is a kind of illusion, a kind of temporal mirage brought about by the mysterious phenomenon of embodied consciousness, and I understand the idea of a sovereign individual without dependence on others to be a kind of protective defence or protest against the – sometimes frightening – fact of our enmeshment. At the same time, I believe our apprehension, our experience, of our individuality can't just be skipped over. People experience themselves as separate from one another, and to some extent, we are – you don't feel my pain, you don't know my thoughts, we don't share the

same history, we don't die together, we don't necessarily want or believe the same things – all of that means we're in for a world of curiosity and conflict. The apprehension of our separateness can cause us a lot of suffering – some would say it's the root of all suffering; at the same time, the feeling of *non*-individuation can cause us suffering too, as when we struggle to feel or be independent, as when we lose control of our bodily autonomy, as when we find ourselves 'de-selfing for others, and more. Negotiating this terrain, understanding how power (among other things) flows through it, seems to me something of what Foucault is talking about vis a vis practices of freedom.

I guess another way of saying this is – the ritual and rote opposition of obligation and autonomy can feel real, but I understand that conflict to be something of a surface symptom, with a much deeper ocean underneath.

LD: Do you think that many critiques of freedom are responses to inherently and specifically USian political realities and definitions of freedom? Does paying attention to theorizations of freedom from the European, continental tradition and to the philosophical and political status of freedom in non-USian countries, offer a different perspective?

MN: Surely so – though a lot of the (white) US obsession with freedom derives from Continental and Anglo thought. I am American born and raised, so for better or worse I find myself pretty buried in this country's freedom discourse, which is *a lot* to grapple with. On the one hand, the American obsession with the term really is unique; on the other hand, recent travels in other countries have alerted me to how folks around the world, especially right-wing forces, are activating the word in remarkably similar ways. Covid really accelerated a lot of this - it really poured fuel on this unfruitful binary of right-wing 'freedom' vs. left-wing 'obligation' (think of 'Libertad,' the slogan for anti-Covid-

regulations movement in Spain, for example). But to your point: a lot of the philosophizing about freedom really depends on the notion of the self at its base. Certainly, one gets a different perspective on the matter in pre-Enlightenment European thought – and of course there are other traditions, globally and within the US, which can helpfully reorient the conversation away from classic poles of the individual vs. the collective, right vs. left, such as decolonial thought, Negritude, Zapatistas, anarchist thought, and more.

LD: Relatedly, you describe on page 8 how ‘decades of privileging market freedoms over democratic ones may have led some to lose a longing for the freedom of self-governance, and to develop a taste for unfreedom—a desire for subjection.’ Does this prospect terrify you as it terrifies me? You go on to say that your book will not ‘diagnose a crisis of freedom and propose a means of fixing it.’ So, I’m asking you now: how might we persuade a population to re-value freedom outside of neoliberalism, rather than desire to be subject to a benign authoritarianism?

MN: This is a complicated question, which is partially why I don’t try to answer it! It isn’t something that can be addressed in only one arena – it’s something that needs addressing in multiple arenas, I think. I will say that I think it’s important not to shame people, but rather to understand how and why a population might come to desire, or be open to desiring, authoritarianism, however benign, over self-governance. Such an openness must mean that a lot of people doubt, or have entirely lost faith, that the forms of self-governance we currently have in neoliberal ‘democracies’ are working for them in meaningful ways. It must mean that people don’t feel empowered in them, or bettered by them – and really, it’s not hard to see why, given the growing inequities, and the failures of those in power to work on behalf of the people they supposedly represent. Clearly, I don’t think that the answer is giving away the



bulk of our autonomy to big daddies (or mommies) who promise to restore our greatness or superiority or financial standing or proper place in a bigoted, patriarchal, uber capitalist world order, via punishing an ever-widening circle of enemies (which will eventually include us), enriching themselves, grabbing as much power as possible and never letting it go. But just yelling, ‘but freedom!’ ‘but self-governance!’ in the face of all that isn’t going to cut it.

People have to feel their power in a non-illusory way – which means they have to have real power. Otherwise, they are going to be tempted to believe that letting some strongman have all their power and identifying with that strongman will be an improvement on what they’ve got. We’ve seen this movie before, and know how it ends: genocide, nihilism, radical forms of disempowerment that take years and years to dig out from, including the loss of sexual freedom, the freedom to assemble, the freedom to dissent, the freedom to vote out a corrupt or indecent government, the freedom to read what we want, learn and teach what we want, talk openly with one another in public and private, dress how we want – so many things.

We’re seeing that now in the US with the attacks on trans people, with the attacks on books with LGBTQ+ content. We see it with the rabid protection of the gun industry even when that protection is making daily life far less ‘free’ for all of us who live here – people are fearful of gathering in crowds, going to the movies, sending their kids to school, everything. It’s really hard to watch, in real time, people thinking that these forces will just stop at abortion rights or drag queen story hour or AP African American curricula. They won’t stop. So, we have to make a strong, meaningful, welcoming, growing movement that resists their incursion and also shows another way of being and living that we want to grow and keep.

LD: In the chapter on art, on page 25, you write: ‘At a time when bigots and thugs deploy “free speech” as a disingenuous, weaponized rallying cry, it makes sense that some would respond by criticizing, refusing, or vilifying the discourse of freedom.’ And: ‘beyond today’s

tinny stereotypes of bully and snowflake, target and troll, defender and supporter, perpetrator and victim, lie dimensions and archives of artistic freedom of critical importance.’ It strikes me that much of your analysis, especially in this chapter, involves trying to find a new language with which to describe phenomena that have been articulated mainly or solely in disparaging terms by the right. Does this sound accurate, and how possible do you think that is?

MN: Yes, I think that sounds accurate, at least in part (though I’m not entirely sure I understand the question!). I guess I would add, in addition to trying to find a language, I’m also trying to construct a kind of counter-canon, a roster of people – In this case artists and critics and viewers – who are deeply devoted to artistic freedom, but who don’t talk about it in reactionary terms. I’m not sure how possible the task I set myself here is – all I can say is I gave it my best shot. It might depend on how much the reader trusts me, as a guide. Some people who’ve read that chapter have seemed really ready to go with me on the adventure, open to examining some shibboleths and turning over some hard questions. Others have read the chapter in bad faith, or as itself an act of bad faith – as if I’m actually saying or doing something bad but I’m trying to pretend like I’m not by shellacking over it with equivocations or references or something. Also, timing matters: what’s going on in the world at the moment one reads something is going to play a role in what one hears, or can hear, in it. Since I wrote that chapter over five years, I had to deal with many of my own moods about the issues discussed, which shifted, and are shifting still. I’m not as bothered as others might be by that shifting because I see writing as more performative than declarative. And I understand the many ways of reading that chapter, perhaps because I bring to myself the same scrutiny and scepticism that others at times justifiably bring to me. My hope is that, if

you do take the ride, you find me a decent companion, even if not one you agree with all the time.

LD: Related to the question above, here in the UK, I've heard left-wing commentators deny that there is any such thing as a 'culture war,' since that is a term coined by and owned by the right and associated with certain members of the Conservative government. Refusing to use the language of 'the enemy' can collapse onto – and result in – denying the existence of the problematic phenomenon itself. Similarly, in resisting the government's recent imposition of a free speech bill on British universities, many left-wing academics deny that there is any real underlying problem with freedom of expression or respect for a diversity of political viewpoints on campus that we ought to be addressing ourselves, critically and respectfully. Do you find this kneejerk denial and baby-out-with-the-bathwater strategy as dangerous as I do?

MN: I'm with you in part – certainly I wouldn't have written a book like *On Freedom* if I didn't think certain trends on the so-called left weren't worth paying attention to, if I didn't think it was worthwhile to attend to certain shortcomings or missteps or habits of mind that I don't think work out well for us in the long run. But I do think one has to be very mindful, given the current political terrain, of making clear whether one is venting about the so-called left and mocking it out of pique or sport or opportunism, or whether one is staging a critique because one really cares about building and living something better. I am invested in the latter; I find the former obnoxious and dangerous. The problem with publishing any 'insider' criticism is that to publish is a public act, which means that you cannot control whose eyes will be on it and how they will use it. But you can control whom you accept as bedfellows,

and you can certainly try to make clear, in public settings, where your allegiances lie, no matter how critical you may be of them.

There is an American activist named Maurice Mitchell – he’s the director of the Working Families Party – who is making the rounds right now with an article he wrote in 2022 called “Building Resilient Organizations” <https://forgeorganizing.org/article/building-resilient-organizations>. The article is getting attention because it tries to analyse certain problems in progressive movements with its own terms and frames, i.e. NOT the ones inherited from the right, and it does so with the clear intention of fighting for joy and justice. Now, I don’t work in his sphere – I’m a literary writer, not a professional organizer; there’s a big difference – so I don’t have all his goals or share all his prescriptions. But I think there’s a lot to learn from him about tone, about conviction, about risk-taking. I watch videos of James Baldwin to learn about these things as well.

LD: One of the reasons your book is so important and inspirational for me, is that it works to restate the importance of creative freedom and the value of art’s capacity for *moral ambivalence*. I absolutely love how you write, on page 59, that ‘problematic fave’ is a term you despise ‘because it presumes there are human beings who are or could ever be “nonproblematic”.’ In the cultural climate we operate in, I can see how you need careful strategies to argue this, while not alienating your readership. I think this is what you are doing when you describe the importance of José Muñoz’s strategy of ‘disidentification’ which allows for a way of ‘transforming’ so-called ‘problematic’ works of art for dissident and marginal ends and interpretations. Can you say something more about the possibilities and difficulties of such strategies, and also about what is lost when we impose standards of moral purity on authors and individuals?

MN: When we impose standards of moral purity on others, we enact a form of brutality on them and ourselves. We forget that the tasks of beholding or having curiosity about ‘bad’ behaviour isn’t the same as accepting or condoning it; we forget that anything we place outside the realm of the human weakens our ability to understand the vast, terrifying scope of human behaviour in all its beauty and horror. It also reduces the chances of the so-called monster ever finding or refinding a home. And it withholds compassion and second chances from people who often need such things the most – a group which may at times include ourselves.

That said, we’re not all always in the right place to offer compassion or second chances, nor need we be when we are going through a process. I really like that Mariame Kaba quote I have in my sex chapter, wherein she dramatizes, using herself, how she moved from rape victim who would have wanted to see her assailant dead to someone working hard for restorative justice:

So I’m a survivor of rape. And I was a reactionary survivor ... I wanted revenge. That was important. I had to process that. I had to go through that. [...] If you had put me right on a panel after that and said what should we do to rapists I would have said we should kill them ... [But you] have to think about the political commitment you develop from the experience you’ve had that’s a personal and harmful experience and then you have to think about how to apply that across the board to multiple people and major different contexts.

It’s really useful, I think, for her to use herself as an example, rather than just lecturing other people how they should think and feel and where they should get to and when.

Also, it can be easier to experience and enjoy moral complexity on the page or in art than in our lives. My art chapter gets into all that – how often we can tolerate – or we seek – extremity on the page that we’d run away from in real life. That seems normal to me. But also, our IRL lives are usually replete with loving people who have hurt us, or hurting those we love, so we have ample opportunity to practice tolerating this moral complexity every day.

Muñoz is complicated on this front; his notion of disidentification is complicated. He is specifically talking about minoritarian subjects (his word) deriving sustenance from a world that agitates against their survival. The direction of the identification matters – what, say, James Baldwin is doing with Joan Crawford isn’t the same as what white kids in the suburbs are doing with trap music. (Critic Margo Jefferson’s *Constructing a Nervous System* is good on this account – she gets into the costs as well as the pleasures of ‘imagin[ing] and interpret[ing] what had not imagined you.’) That said, I’m interested in identifications – cross-, dis-, you name it – that go all kinds of ways from all kinds of starting points – and my chapters tries to pay homage to all that.

DL: In your chapter on sex, on page 74, you critique a notion of ‘sexual freedom’ that is ‘nothing more than the cruel insistence that we “return to the work of fucking”.’ You note that this implied insistence can come from all points on the political and cultural spectra – from ‘incels to Beyoncé to radical queers.’ Resisting this, you point out that ‘our options are not a once-and-for-all happy and liberated sexuality vs. *The Handmaid’s Tale*’ (p. 77). It was Atwood’s Aunt Lydia who raised the possibility that ‘freedom from may be as valuable in the sphere of female sexuality as ‘freedom to,’ a knotty problem you go on to address via a discussion of Breanne Fahs’s work. What do we risk if we question the so-called sex-positive

consensus? How can we best acknowledge the truths in Lydia's words while resisting proximity to her position?

MN: I don't really ask *whether* sexual freedom 'has become nothing more than the cruel insistence that we 'return to the work of fucking'' – I say that, if that's how one conceptualizes sexual freedom, then of course one is not going to feel very enthused about it!

I'm not actually sure we have a sex-positive consensus right now. I get that a lot of folks think that sex positivity won the sex wars, and I see what one could point to in order to bolster that argument. But daily I see and feel a lot of puritanism, a lot of sex negativity, a lot of disgust and revulsion, a lot of trepidation, a lot of judgment, a lot of moral grandstanding – which does not scream to me 'sex positivity!' Also, in addition to the totally bleak and predictable consequences of overturning *Roe v. Wade*, the US is in the middle of a deliberately manufactured sex panic about LGBTQ+ people, a blatant attempt to eviscerate rights and acceptance by deploying the whole 'they're dangerous sexual beings who pose a threat to our precious children and Western civilization just by existing' trope. Again – not feeling super sex positive.

One of my main points in the sex chapter was that we must not lose sight of 'freedom to's, especially as we really do have more of them than we've had at nearly any other moment in history – and because when we lay claim on living differently, when we talk about and experience sex in paradigms beyond those of sin and violation and trauma, we alter the terms of what's possible for ourselves and for others, and we grow freedom. This is what my elders did for me, and I am grateful every day for their experiments and bravery.

LD: In considering drugs, and in particular the literary genre of drug writing, you draw attention to a paradox in perceptions of male authors who write about drug-use, from Charles

Baudelaire, through Charles Bukowski, to Irvine Welsh: these writers and their subject matter are celebrated as ‘vessels of macho liberation’ (page 132), despite their descriptions of drug-use often appealing to abject and traditionally feminine-coded experiences of abandon or abasement. You show that, by contrast, female drug-taking and associated risky behaviours like BDSM, in works such as Ellen Miller’s extreme pornographic novel *Like Being Killed*, are read as self-indulgent, narcissistic, or otherwise aberrant. To me, this says a lot about the degree to which male subjects are presumed to *own* their selves and their lives to the degree that risking them, destroying them, or casually throwing them away are not deemed unnatural or improper in the way that female acts of self-destruction are. Can you say more about the role played by expectations of female responsibility and being-for-the-other in our perceptions of women who seek freedom or redemption or escape through risky behaviours?

MN: I think your formulation about ‘male subjects [being] presumed to *own* their selves and their lives to the degree that risking them, destroying them, or casually throwing them away are not deemed unnatural or improper in the way that female acts of self-destruction are’ is exactly right, and borne out by the literature. I often thought what I was trying to get at in that chapter was like the bottom below the bottom, or self-dissolution for the self that was never all that assured or consolidated in the first place – a journey two trap doors down.

There is an extra load of shame and condemnation levelled at the female subject for seeking freedom or escape through risky behaviours, as you put it, especially if there are others – children, most notably, but partners, other family members, etc. – left in the wake. I’m not immune to this shaming, or self-shaming, either. I watch myself judge other mothers, for example, and marvel at the machine in motion. I focus on such subjects in the drug chapter not because I think there is anything heroic in losing oneself to addiction per se – my own experience with drinking keeps me from indulging in such hagiography – but because



such a focus can reveal so many of our prejudices, can tell us so much about our own limits of the tolerable. I'm also interested in how people put their lives back together post-addiction without relying on the reconstruction of certain egoic structures that got them into so much trouble in the first place. I want women to feel emboldened to understand their particular experiences of abasement or abandon with all the spiritual and philosophical depth they deserve, rather than feel forced to file them under some dusty rubric of female masochism that they need repent of. The books and characters I talk here about offer different, troubling, challenging models.

LD. I confess that of all the chapters of your book, the one on climate change speaks to me least compellingly, perhaps because I slightly lose sight of the nature of your commitment to freedom here, unless freedom is found in the type of fatalism you imply in the closing pages of the chapter, where you speak of a resolution to 'love all the misery and freedom of living and, as best we can, not mind dying' (page 211). I wonder what you make of works such as Patricia MacCormack's *The Ahuman Manifesto: Activism for the End of the Anthropocene*, where she argues for welcoming the prospect of human extinction and an ahuman, animal future, and whether this speaks to a similar acceptance of our end that you gesture towards? I do very much like your statement: 'I'm skeptical about turning more and more arenas of life [...] into caretaking and therapy' (page 205), implying that the burden of the work of managing environmental challenges needs to be shared and fairly distributed, but you appear here nevertheless committed to some idea of human responsibility in the face of the apocalypse. I wonder also how your vision of our navigation of climate change links to your guiding notion throughout the book of positive and proactive practices of freedom, *pace* Foucault? Is this the point at which they are rendered obsolete?

MN: I could be wrong, but it seems like you feel attracted to my work when it chafes against expectations of care or responsibility, but feel some concern or distaste when it exhibits care or a commitment of sorts, here to ‘some idea of human responsibility in the face of the apocalypse’? I don’t believe in the apocalypse, for what it’s worth – but I do feel committed, myself, to at least a reckoning with what we owe ourselves, the planet we live on, and each other, even as I wage a somewhat fierce campaign against an uncritical deployment of ‘care’ or ‘relationality.’ I’m with Judith Butler, as when Butler writes: ‘relationality is not by itself a good thing, a sign of connectedness, an ethical norm to be posited over and against destruction; rather, relationality is a vexed and ambivalent field in which the question of ethical obligation has to be worked out in light of a persistent and constitutive destructiveness.’ It’s the working out that I’m interested in, not an argument about which is better, self-interest or altruism, etc. I hope this makes sense.

You are right that the forms of freedom I’m interested in in this chapter grow diffuse – I’m interested in the freedom to imagine (and live) new forms of energy production and consumption; I’m interested in the transition from a notion of freedom conditioned by fossil fuels to new, perhaps yet unimagined and un-lived forms of freedom decoupled from the burning of carbon; I’m interested in the freedom that comes from lessening one’s grip on the Big Deal of human survival, while simultaneously enacting care for our survival; I’m interested in the forms of freedom that come from facing down something scary rather than feeling symptomatically oppressed by it all the time but unable to deal because the scale feels too large; and more.

I don’t personally see any point at which practices of human freedom would be rendered obsolete, so long as there are humans around, though I certainly see the value in decentring human freedom, human existence, and humans themselves.

LD: In your conclusion, continuing to reflect upon the notion of futurity, you include a particularly a sobering reflection:

Even if one has little to no investment in one's name or ideas 'carrying on,' or in the fantasy of one's writing as a consolation for, or bulwark against, the pain of individual or collective mortality, there remains a problem, one Denise Riley discovered when she couldn't write for two years after the death of her son: 'You can't, it seems, take the slightest bit of interest in the activity of writing unless you possess some feeling of futurity'. (Page 213)

Is a commitment to freedom, like a commitment to the creative process, predicated upon a 'feeling of futurity'? And, if so, does the anti-social turn in queer theory – I'm thinking particularly of Lee Edelman's work – represent a denial of, or rejection of, freedom, as well as of futurity?

MN: Hmm, interesting. This we'd have to talk about over a long coffee! The feeling of futurity is slippery – I don't know if this makes sense, but I think one can have it without knowing one has it, or even while denying it (as with Beckett). I don't write these words, or any words, with some active fantasia of a future audience – but that is kind of baked into the process, right? That our words might have a future, beyond this chair at dusk upon which I'm perched, in Los Angeles at 6:15 pm on January 30, 2023? And if freedom means indeterminacy – then the indeterminate nature of the future matters a lot. Of course, there are some who don't believe the future is indeterminate... I'll leave that for a more meandering, metaphysical occasion.

LD: Finally, I'd like to ask: have your views on freedom changed in any way as a result of the critical response to your book? I've read lots of reviews, and listened to a number of fascinating podcasts and recordings of conversations between you and other authors, including Jack Halberstam and Grace Lavery, about the book, and I wondered if you would argue anything differently with the passing of time and in light of those conversations?

MN: Not really. I suppose I feel somewhat embarrassed, as I typically feel, to have perseverated on a concept which I now feel somewhat finished with (freedom) – but this is a familiar feeling to me, one I've had before with books on murder, the colour blue, sodomitical maternity, etc. – basically, writing burns out my burning interest in a problem, and then all I want is to move on. But everything I learned and articulated has become a part of me, which informs the next thing. So, onto the future!