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Book Review: Sheller, Mimi (2020) *Island Futures: Caribbean Survival in the Anthropocene*. Duke University Press

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What alternatives to disaster recovery can we think of? What are the dynamics behind the ‘just recoveries’ of disasters? In ‘Island Futures’, Mimi Sheller invites us to envisage alternatives to development, disaster recovery and disaster capitalism in the Caribbean region. Thinking the Caribbean mainly from the Haitian experience, Sheller reflects on the workings of uneven post-disaster recovery in an era where the human-made ecological crisis has become more evident. In sum, she invites us to reflect on the implications of an “ever-worsening climate change driven by neoliberal capitalism” that will only produce more disasters and perpetuate underdevelopment if nothing is done to reverse the current trajectory (p.6).

Haiti exemplifies what Sheller calls the ‘coloniality of climate change’. In her own words: “Climate change vulnerability (...) is a result both of coloniality in the past and neocolonial restructuring today” (p.10). Therefore, we should switch the responsibility regarding which actor should be accountable for leading the transformation in the Caribbean. We should not be asking ourselves how the Caribbean countries are going to adapt to the climate crisis and increasing number of hurricanes and earthquakes, but how historical contributors to the climate crises (e.g., countries in the Global North and multinational corporations) will then pay for this adaptation and rebuilding as a reparation for all the damage caused.

The coloniality of climate change is closely linked with the aim of a ‘just recovery’ for the Caribbean. A just recovery from imperial and racial capitalism entrapping Haiti in an unsustainable debt trap since independence, from fossil fuel dependence with renewable energy microgrids (see *Casa Pueblo* (Massol González, 2022), and *Resilient Power Puerto Rico* (2022) as alternatives from the Caribbean),

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and from international top-down aid management to local recovery.

In her book, Sheller combines fieldwork experience with a theoretical framework from critical sociology, political ecology, human geography, critical political science and development studies in the interdisciplinary fields of Caribbean and mobilities studies. She organised the book into six chapters, plus a preface, introduction, conclusion, and afterword. Sheller builds the book based on previous research in post-earthquake Haiti and the impact of climate change on two border lakes between Haiti and the Dominican Republic. The following three questions guide the research and reflections presented in the book:

1. How did the broader responses to unnatural disasters and climate change “reflect broader Caribbean processes of coloniality, differential mobilities, uneven infrastructuring and (...) the islanding effect”? By islanding, Sheller refers to the spatial process of (re)folded places into complex uneven infrastructures of mobility, often excluding locals from control.
2. Are there any alternative ontologies disrupting dominant mobility regimes and challenging ecocidal systems?
3. Is academic research reproducing or disrupting these processes?

In the moving and personal preface, Sheller introduces us to her family roots and how these have had a major influence on her objects of study throughout her research career. She pays special attention to the bond with her mother to let us know how important she has been in the academic deepening of the Caribbean (particularly with Haiti and Jamaica), critical studies on imperialism and racism, human rights in Latin America, gender, among others. Sheller also introduces her motivation for writing this book:

“This book arises first out of concern with contemporary political and social conditions in Haiti but also out of reflections on my relationship, and the U.S. relationship, with the wider Caribbean region, its politics and cultures, over many decades” (p. xii)

In my opinion, there is an important argument, which is highlighted in the preface. Sheller argues that what matter is not how we call the current condition of crisis (e.g., Anthropocene, Capitalocene) but “how do we imagine our way beyond it, beyond coloniality, beyond capitalism, beyond extractive and exploitative economies and ontologies” (p. xvii). And this is precisely what Sheller does in the

book. She invites us to imagine futures for the Caribbean that are worth living. She asks if we can at least attempt to “move towards a post-Anthropocene pluriverse that is not premised on crisis?” (p. xxiv).

In the Introduction, Sheller expands and clarifies with particular examples into what other island studies scholars have previously argued: there is no truly, strictly or exclusively natural disaster (Bonilla and LeBrón, 2019; Cruz-Martínez et al., 2018; Lloréns et al., 2018; López-Calva and Ortiz Juárez, 2008; Seda-Irrizari and Martínez-Otero, 2017). In the Caribbean region, we need to understand that colonialism and human-induced actions are behind factors which increase the region’s vulnerability to disaster. Disasters, such as the 2010 earthquake in Haiti or the COVID-19 pandemic, are not constrained by state boundaries. However, Sheller would point out that islands “are particularly shaped by particular constellations of mobilities and immobilities”. Sheller invites us to view this as a process of mobility in/justice in post-disaster situations. Who can travel in/out of an island amid the disaster? Who has the authority to accept/reject those mobilities? In the 2010 Haiti earthquake, “people [were] ‘stuck’ in place and ‘dis-placed’ because humanitarian and military mobilities dominate the infrastructures of mobility” (p.3). Therefore, how the struggle for mobility justice helps Haiti and the rest of the Caribbean islands survive in the Anthropocene?

The first chapter deals with the ‘kinopolitical struggle’ of Haiti’s post-earthquake recovery. By kinopolitical, Sheller refers to the linkage of mobility systems with understandings of devastation in post-disaster recovery. She highlights the importance of considering how both local and international actors have the power to decide/facilitate who, what and where can move and how reconstruction and recovery depend very much on the place of each individual within the ‘transnational kinopolitical power relations’. The following questions provide an idea of the critical reflections made in the chapter: “why were young white college students wearing shorts and flip-flops flying to Haiti on missionary trips when there were Haitians who needed well-paid jobs such as construction?”, “how had my regimen of vaccinations (...) made my body seemingly less vulnerable than those around me?” (p.36). The chapter ends by exploring some of the several decolonial projects examined by the author in the book on food sovereignty: Platform for Alternative Development in Haiti, *La Vía Campesina*, *Parteneriat pour le Développement Local*.

The second chapter analyses power over water control, access, and distribution in the only country in the world that recently saw a decrease in the share of improved sanitation. Sheller pays particular attention to two conflicts over water in post-

earthquake Haiti: access to a water filtration system provided by international aid and the repurposing of a solar-power water kiosk also built by a foreign aid organisation. Interestingly, the author explores alternative ontologies generated by African-Caribbean religions in the face of disasters (see also Arce-Nazario's (2018) accounts for the case of Puerto Rico after Hurricane Maria in 2017).

The third chapter deals with logistics and what Sheller calls aerial power. Air travel is still the main way of moving through the Caribbean. The author suggests that international humanitarian travellers adopt a colonialist aerial perspective of Haiti. That image, very common for aid travellers, is one that most Haitians resist. Sheller argues that this creates both an islanding effect and affect, as Haitians feel isolated or cut off from what is daily mean of transport for many people abroad. This isolation prevents Haitians from a *de facto* capability of mobility, which according to the capabilities approach, is the essence of being in poverty (see Clark, 2005).

In the fourth chapter, Sheller examines the digital power of the response to the 2010 earthquake and how important technology was for local and international organisations. The author draws on theories of 'infrastructuring' and materialist approaches to the power of communication infrastructure. Sheller also highlights the critical interlink between military and humanitarian operations for the emergency digital communication infrastructure. The operation to build this infrastructure creates an islanding effect on local aid recipients, civil society and even government, which were largely disconnected from the web of digital power.

The fifth chapter is titled bordering power and considers the border between the Dominican Republic and Haiti as a "material and performative site of mobility" (p.104). The author adopts an auto-ethnographical methodology of the border crossing to "extend relational and decolonial approaches to mobility justice and climate justice" (p.104). In the section 'Climates of coloniality', the author brilliantly narrates the deforestation problem in Haiti, how it was caused and how most of us have let ourselves believe it happened. She criticises Jared Diamond for not considering the authoritarian nature of the Dominican Republic's environmental protection and how elites benefit from charcoal smuggling while simultaneously driving the precarity experienced by Haitian migrants in the sugar cane industry. "It is this unstable political and social climate that drives (un)natural disasters and pushes climate change to become what Haitians call *krizè konjonkti*, or conjunctural crises" (p.109). The chapter, my favourite in the book, shows how, rather than a border, we

have a mix of legal and illegal networks controlling the passage of commodities and people. I think Sheller does a terrific job describing “how the process of border crossing is caught up in the production of Haitian and Dominican territoriality” (p.125).

The sixth chapter deals with sexual power, where the author reflects on how humanitarian aid workers and volunteers take part in racialised sexual exploitation in Haiti. The Oxfam worker scandal is mentioned, but the rich part of the chapter is the descriptions presented by the author from two fieldworks, which put issues that are generally silenced or circumvented not to disturb power structures in the forefront. The ‘islanding effect’ of not having network capital limits women’s mobility, and to survive in the Anthropocene, Sheller argues, mobility and sexual justice are necessary.

In the conclusion, the author dialogues with several “disaster studies” scholars: Bonilla (2020) and the ‘swarms of disaster’ or the need to rethink the temporality of disasters as compounding catastrophes, Maldonado-Torres (2019) on the need for decolonial thinkers to conduct “counter-catastrophic explorations of time and the formation of space” (p. 145), among other. The author concludes the book with seven points/requests: (1) the Caribbean needs to receive now slavery and climate reparations; (2) climate refugees should be guaranteed the right to mobility and to have flourishing lives; (3) we must demand debt cancellation and reject homicidal austerity; (4) we must imagine alternative, post-development and post capitalistic futures for the region (5) indigenous knowledge should inform the agroecological projects to secure food sovereignty; (6) we need to develop mobile commons; (7) we must learn from Caribbean experiences with grassroots democracy, cooperatives and peoples’ assembly as solutions to Haiti’s and other Caribbean countries flawed democracies.

Island Futures is a work with a rich content, reflections and imaginaries on just recoveries from disaster colonialism and climate colonialism, and alternatives to development in the Anthropocene. The case of Haiti helps us to think about the convergences that the island states and archipelagos of the Caribbean face in the climate disaster we are experiencing. This book will be of great interest to Caribbean studies and disaster studies scholars, and to anyone interested in broadening their notions of what development is and what it should look like. Individual chapter could be useful as main or complementary readings in modules at the graduate or late bachelor levels.

We should accept Sheller invitation to read Caribbean radical philosophy,

understand “there is no temporality of progress”, and that therefore we should think of solutions outside the paradigms of modernisation and development. Sheller ends each chapter with a song in honour of her mother and to remind us, the readers, “there are indeed other ways of affectively registering the ongoing disaster of human existence” (p.146).

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