



Gaia Giuliani,
*Monsters, Catastrophes and the
Anthropocene: A Postcolonial Critique*

(London, Routledge, 2021, 223 pp. ISBN 978-113-847-977-7)

by Nicoletta Vallorani

Gaia Giuliani, a Researcher at Centro de Estudos Sociais (University of Coimbra, Portugal), is not approaching the issues of monstrosity and catastrophes for the first time, but the volume she published with Routledge is definitely a step forward in terms of completeness, radicalism and political and theoretical engagement. *Monsters, Catastrophes and the Anthropocene* is an outstanding achievement that cannot be ignored by scholars dwelling in different fields. The author chooses to focus on a huge number of European and Western representations of disaster adopting a postcolonial and feminist point of view and deliberately discussing the notion and location of the 'we' normally assumed as Western, white and male. Moreover, the connection she points out between natural and human (i.e. mass migration and terrorism) disasters is intriguing, original and well supported by an enormous critical apparatus, resulting from her long-standing research. Gathering a number of mediatized narratives of misshapen creatures and apocalyptic environment, Giuliani succeeds in showing how the imaginaries developing around the twin notions of monster and catastrophe are built as to respond to familiar, though arguable and unfair, distinctions of race, gender, sex and class that—while well focused on from the origin of Cultural studies—are here tightly connected to beliefs and technologies that go on being colonial and capitalist.



The book is built in a circle that finds in the COVID-19 pandemic a beginning and an end.

The introduction—critically rich and conceptually convincing—mostly develops around the notion of a ‘we’ identified with a specific identity, which is white, male and Western. This identity is to be reframed and reshaped in the light of a totally new epistemological condition that is stubbornly, though inately, resisted by the Westerners. This resistance is now proving untenable. The ‘we’ Giuliani focuses on provides an effective, understandable and well-grounded synthesis of the core attitudes profiling the white hegemonic cultures. They are hierarchically built, marked as masculine and bourgeois, basically heteronormative and primarily Christian. According to the author, and with good critical reasons, they are fully responsible for the production of the monstrous bodies of the Other (both human and alien). Giuliani goes back to her familiar critical toolbox in biopolitics to study the process through which the so-called monstrified personification of Otherness is gradually produced, within the current Western context, by the conflation of enemy and monster in several figurations of the Other that are felt as threatening and therefore to be fought. The process is to be historically framed and related to the ontological and logical profile of Anthropocene. The notion of *dispositif* is called into play many times in this first part of the volume, in order to point at the ways in which the racialized constructions of monstrosity have been used to keep at bay those who are felt as enemies.

The discourse on race as a “textual thing” (Stuart Hall) and the reflections on ethnicity and whiteness as “powerful ideological apparatuses” (13) develop Giuliani’s engaged theorization in some previous essays she authored. What seems to be quite new here is the connection that is posited and developed between monstrosity and ecological catastrophes, that is analyzed on the backdrop of our current condition. In this respect, and quite recently, the process of monstrification has been made explicit by the frantic, though instrumental, attempt at “naming the enemy” (1) triggered by the COVID pandemic, since the moment it started in China in 2019. The hostility fed by the news media and instantly spreading all over the world was in fact the offspring of anxiety, suddenly evolving into panic. At the same time, the virus fueled an apocalyptic feeling that transformed the pandemic into an eschatological catastrophe, possibly the first one in a series that is bound to destroy the human race. As Giuliani points out, the disaster “is not as colour-blind and gender-neutral as the ‘we’ would like to think, overlooking the fact that not only race and gender but also poverty, sexuality and nationality are key factors in determining who gets to be saved and who is left behind” (2). Therefore there are obvious intersections between the Other as a monster and the catastrophe as a contingency requiring extreme survival strategies. The prevailing feeling orienting the Western reaction in the face of the possibility of an End is still the one effectively pointed out by Joseph Conrad in *Heart of Darkness*:

Since early modernity, ideas of monsters and catastrophes as external beings and events have been reinforced by the assumption that Europe and the West are isolated, under attack and faced with a threat coming from what is perceived to be an incommensurable and ontologically dangerous outside, a place of darkness (9)



Evolving towards a postmodern and postcolonial context, the feeling is slightly revised, and the economic factor plays a relevant role in this revision. The mechanisms through which the enemy is, so to speak, “monstrified” are tightly linked to the functioning of the global regimes of capitalism. These regimes are at the same time the cause of the environmental disaster and the device through which the current social hierarchy decides whose lives are to be rescued.

Along this line of reasoning, Giuliani combines the omen of planetary catastrophe and the issues of mass migration and terrorism, discussing the familiar default notion of humanity through the visual apocalyptic materials that represent our Western and white vision of the world to come. As the author herself writes, the book is built on the purpose of exploring “European and Western imaginaries of natural disaster, mass migration and terrorism through a postcolonial inquiry into modern conceptions of monstrosity and catastrophe” (4) and it aims at proposing a feminist, post-developmental and ecologist epistemology and a political project that embraces a new conception of the *political* (8).

After defining her reasons for focusing on Europe—in terms that are at the same time personal (her own location), collective (the Mediterranean crisis), geographical (the proximity to the most cogent areas of mass migration) and cultural—Giuliani gives reasons for choosing films and visual texts as intriguing discourses that are shaping illuminating allegories of the present. Exploiting a number of established icons made popular by sci-fi and horror films, TV series and other visual texts, the author tries to articulate a genealogy of the current notions of the Other as monstrous, connecting these notions to the ontological and logical frames of the Anthropocene. These latter are experiencing a great crisis, quite visible in the environmental collapse so often anticipated in this kind of representations and narratives. The ability to reshape the Western visual cultures as to orient them towards a more ecological perspective seem to emerge here and there, but apparently not enough. The three sections that follow the introduction are quite clear and assertive in this respect.

Section one—entitled “*The past devours the present: fears of invasion and the repressed memory of colonial violence*”—mostly considers the issues of monstrosity and catastrophe with reference to the period from 9/11 onwards. Rightly seen as a watershed, the terrorist attack against the US obviously marked an increased resistance of the West against the Other. This ‘new’ resistance, still marked by the persistence of figures of race, is not precisely new, but actually reawakens past experiences of invasion (or supposed invasions) and is projected towards a catastrophic future (for the West). Acutely, Giuliani reads the fears related to the mobility of the postcolonial Others as unavoidably related to repressed memories of violence, coupled with feelings of guilt towards the colonized people. At the same time, the unbearable horror of a reverse colonization is haunting the West since the end of the British Empire.

Section two—“*Alien-ing the migrant. On Anthropocenic geographies of monstrosity*”—reflects on border trespassing and its impact on the process of monstrification. Quite meaningfully, it opens on Georg Simmel’s distinction between “the stranger ‘who comes today and stays tomorrow’ and the extraterrestrial alien” (83)



and it goes on proposing a brief history of bordering (in various inflections) as a *dispositif*, in most cases to be intended also as semiotic. In this second analytic section, again Giuliani gathers many sci-fi and horror narratives, focused on the mechanisms of invasion and also including a film that is somehow unusual and that opens to some current, mostly African (as different from African American) utopian and dystopian narratives, and I'm thinking first of all of Nnedi Okorafor, Wole Talabi, Tade Thomson and Tlotlo Tsamaase. *The Arrival*, directed by Denis Villeneuve (2016), develops around some aliens landing on Earth with the purpose of avoiding a catastrophe looming on the humans and non-humans inhabiting the planet.

Section three—that bears the title “Lifting the veil on the monstrous Anthropocene. A postcolonial analysis”—shows how catastrophes may be interpreted as the revelation of the monstrosity of Anthropocene, that is given as directly connected to the environmental crisis and climate change. Theoretically articulated in itself, this section also develops a very interesting reflection on Saidiya Hartman and her notion of empathy as a feeling that in fact reinforces the power of the hegemonic subjects. Showing their new humanitarianism, they end by becoming *the* representatives of all humanity (and they are still marked as white, male and Western). Globally in this section, Giuliani challenges the recurring tropes of environmental discourse, showing how they proliferate in popular feelings as well as in political debates. The rigor of her investigative method and the high density of her critical references prove extremely effective in problematizing many taken-for-granted assumptions, stating the possibility to go beyond the endless repetition of the same historical paradigms.

Coherently, and also proposing an extremely original structure, the concluding section of the volume closes the circle going back to the coronavirus pandemic. The first of a series of short paragraphs is entitled “COVID-19: chronicles of the ‘we’ in the time of pandemic” and it is dated March 2020. Each short paragraph connects the contingencies of the pandemic to one fictional, generally filmic, text that somehow raised attention on something that could happen and that in fact happened.

In short, dwelling into highly diversified fields—Environmental Humanities, Geography, Political Philosophy, Postcolonial Studies, Gender Studies and Postcolonial Feminist Studies, Cultural Studies, Sociology, Film and Visual Studies—and proposing multiple entry points and polyvalent conversations with her critical tools, Giuliani radically contests “the patriarchal and heteronormative notion of ‘care’” (8), suggesting a different way to embrace the future.

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I raccomandati/Los recomendados/Les recommandés/Highly recommended

N. 27 – 05/2022

ISSN 2035-7680