

Perilous Passages: The Birth of Risk in Nineteenth-Century American Culture

International Conference, October 23-24, 2015, organized by Jeanne Cortiel and Karin Hoepker

Risk, chance and uncertainty very much define contemporary societies as factors in decision-making and practices of assessing and managing the future. Although literary texts and popular culture have powerfully shaped the meaning of risk from the onset, so far, risk research has primarily been the province of the social sciences and economics; literary and cultural studies have paid scant attention to the ways in which notions of risk emerge from and transform narrative practices. This conference was part of more comprehensive efforts at the Universities of Bayreuth and Erlangen-Nürnberg to introduce a broad, systematic analysis of risk to literary and cultural studies.

The conference combined a historical perspective on economic, social, and philosophical change with a closer look at the shifting semantics and functions of literary narrative. The first day started with Workshop I titled “Bubbly Economics: Gambling, Speculation, Insurance,” which addressed narratives of risk and cultural strategies of categorizing the unexpected from Charles Brockden Brown to Henry Adams. The following keynote by Maurice Lee, then, focused on methodological and theoretical issues emerging from an interdisciplinary investigation that locates itself within the “digital humanities,” showing ways in which risk can become not only a thematic focus but part of new set of methods in literary studies and the humanities in general. Workshops on the second day continued the ensuing discussion. Workshop II, “Dangers of Land and Sea: Exploring, Seafaring, Buccaneering,” investigated discourses on exploration and travel, addressing expeditions, seafaring, and piracy as sites where questions of danger and profit, risk and gain intersect with questions of individual and collective agency and responsibility. Workshop III “Risks of Blackness: Slavery, Trade, and Human Property” picked up questions of human individuality in pro-slavery and abolitionist discourse. Papers discussed slave trade and the history of slave insurance, where “owning” a risk foregrounds questions of property versus self-ownership of the individual’s own future. Collectively, across all panels, the papers explored how a changing notion of risk informs all areas of nineteenth-century everyday life, from questions of legal insurability and economic risk-taking to the question of human property and the right to own one’s future. The final round table discussion brought this scholarship with a primarily on the nineteenth century in contact with the deeper history of risk and contemporary developments in the “world risk society.” Susanne Lachenicht, historian of the early modern period, Sylvia Mayer, and Jeanne Cortiel, both American studies scholars focusing on risk in contemporary literature, film and graphic narrative, in their responses triggered a discussion on the larger context of the history of risk in American culture.

The conference was a joint venture – not just between two different universities, but especially also between two research projects. In Bayreuth, Sylvia Mayer and Jeanne Cortiel are working on a project on global catastrophic risk in contemporary American fiction across media, with currently two dissertation projects (by Lukas Bütcher and Laura Oehme) supporting these efforts. Karin Höpker’s habilitation in progress, “The Edge of Reason: Fiction, Risk and Probability in American Antebellum Literary Narratives” enquires into how the nineteenth century witnessed a significant shift in the perception and representation of hazard, peril, and futurity. This period between two major financial panics enabled a fascinating literary production that resonates with the highly volatile bust and boom economy of the epoch. Both projects come together in an endeavor to explore the historicity of risk and its changing semantics in nineteenth-century American culture. The literature and culture of the long nineteenth century negotiates the emergent fictions of a new sense of probability; risk becomes a financial commodity and the gradual “incorporation of America” changes the fabric of the socioeconomic marketplace. Studying the literature of the time, we see a social system engaged in communicational loops of self-reflection which test cultural tools and strategies capable of dealing

with new sense of contingency and complex futurity. Narrative form, and the novel in particular becomes the imaginative mode which most clearly addresses a demand for re-negotiating and understanding of temporality; and novelistic writing provides imaginative spaces which serve as virtual models to explore connection between present events and future consequences, the probable and the improbable. Our joint project focusses on the moment – a moment of passage, if you will – when forms of narration, detached from literature's earlier prophetic function, becomes a privileged and particularly fascinating means of imagining and addressing individual and collective futures. We feel very fortunate that we were able to bring together a group of people, cultural historians and literary studies scholars, who are doing exciting work on this emerging field of nineteenth-century studies. Although we had to change the program due to a number of regrettable but unavoidable cancellations, we were able to maintain the original layout and direction of the conference and all involved enjoyed the quality of the research presented and the high level of interaction the compact format of the conference enabled.

We are grateful to the individuals and institutions who, through their generosity, made the conference possible: the Bavarian American Academy, the German American Studies Association DGfA, and the American Consulate. We'd like to thank the University of Bamberg and Prof. Christine Gerhardt for their support, Bayreuth University, who contributed resources from the Emerging Field Cultural Encounters, The Bayreuth Institute of American Studies, and University of Erlangen-Nürnberg, which supported us with funding from our partners ELINAS, the Erlangen Center for Literature and the Natural Sciences. We also received generous support from James Dorson's Fictions of Management-Project at the John F. Kennedy-Institute in Berlin.

Day 1 – Friday, 23rd Oct. 2015:

1:30 p.m. **Welcome & Introduction**

2:00–4:00 p.m. **Workshop I – Bubbly Economics: Gambling, Speculation, Insurance**

Chair: **Sylvia Mayer** (University of Bayreuth)

Johannes Voelz (University of Frankfurt): "Charles Brockden Brown's *Ars Conjectandi*"

Dennis Mischke (University of Stuttgart):
"Insurance, Risk, Slavery: The Financialized Atlantic and Negative Cosmopolitics"

Jason Puskar (UW Milwaukee): "Hazardous Individualism: Risk and Race in the Nineteenth Century"

5:00–6:30 p.m. **Keynote – Maurice Lee** (Boston University):
"Risking the Humanities"

Chair: **Antje Kley** (University of Erlangen-Nuremberg)

Day 2 – Saturday, 24th Oct. 2015:

10:00 a.m.–12:00 p.m. **Workshop II – Dangers of Land and Sea:
Exploring, Seafaring, Buccaneersing**

Chair: **Katrin Horn** (University of Würzburg)

Gesa Mackenthun (University of Rostock): "Perils and Paradigm Shifts: Scientific Expeditions in the Age of Darwinian Crisis."

Hester Blum (Pennsylvania State University): "The Perils and Prospects of Oceanic Studies"

Alexandra Ganser (University of Vienna): "Risk and Crisis in 19th-Century Popular Narratives of Piracy"

1:00–3:00 p.m. **Workshop III – Risks of Blackness: Slavery,
Trade, and Human Property**

Chair: **Laura Oehme** (University of Bayreuth)

Sharon Ann Murphy (Providence College): "Slavery and Finance in the Antebellum American South"

Catrin Gersdorf (University of Würzburg): "Risk and the Politics of Nature in the Work of Frederick Douglass"

Karin Hoepker (University of Erlangen-Nuremberg): "Perils of the Sea? The Creole-Mutiny and Frederick Douglass' *The Heroic Slave*"

3:15–5:00 p.m. **Panel Discussion & Concluding Remarks**