

SYLVIA MAYER and ALEXA WEIK VON MOSSNER, eds., *The Anticipation of Catastrophe: Environmental Risk in North American Literature and Culture*. American Studies—A Monograph Series 247. (Heidelberg: Winter, 2014), 227 pp.

For years, scholars and activists, most prominently among them Bill McKibben and Robert Macfarlane, have expressed their astonishment at the global dearth of creative engagement with anthropogenic climate change. Now that the second decade of the twenty-first century has brought on a seemingly never-ending outpouring of cultural production imaging ‘life, the universe, and everything’ in times of advanced climate change, this surge of texts has also generated a plethora of productive concepts, theories, and approaches—from eco-materialism to multi-species studies—providing scholars with adequate tools to critically interrogate the dynamic interplays of politics, economics, ethics, affect, aesthetics, and materiality as well as the intricate entanglements of the human with the non-human—to name but a few of the research foci—in narratives of environmental crisis. While the majority of these academic conceptualizations have initially emerged in the institutional framework of the environmental humanities and related disciplines, American Studies has, slightly belatedly, begun to participate in this endeavor quite copiously. Sylvia Mayer and Alexa Weik von Mossner’s edited volume *The Anticipation of Catastrophe: Environmental Risk in North American Literature and Culture* is a convincing example of one such conceptual contribution to the study of environmental crisis.¹

Taking their cue from the work of risk scholars such as, e.g., historian Arwen Mohun, anthropologist Mary Douglas, political scientist Aaron Wildavsky, and, most prominently, sociologists Anthony Giddens and Ulrich Beck, *The Anticipation of Catastrophe* narrows down its conceptual and topical lens on the research of environmental crises in North America to the exploration of risk

narratives. Following Beck’s conceptualization as laid out in his *World at Risk* (2007; 2009), risk is understood by the contributors as the “perceptual and cognitive schema in accordance with which a society mobilizes itself when it is confronted with the openness, uncertainties and obstructions of a self-created future” (4). This conceptual grasp presumes that future crises cannot be foreseen, gauged, or controlled in twenty-first-century Western risk societies, in which the systemic effects of modernization continuously and quasi-autonomously (re)generate a wide array of unprecedented hazards. Yet, the prevalent risks within a particular culture are not axiomatic scenarios that exist *a priori* but are selected out of a wide array of possible future disaster situations and come into being through their imaginative staging in cultural narratives, which—other than risk statistics—manage to involve the audience emotionally.

The Anticipation of Catastrophe does not stop short at the mere application of previous risk scholarship to environmental risk in North American literature and culture but creates its own theoretical trajectories for the idiosyncracies of American (environmental) risk narratives and Americanist research questions, exposing the limitations of previous, mostly social science-based risk research for literary and cultural studies and expanding the conceptual lens on the representation and imagination of environmental risks in North American culture into previously little tapped fields of risk scholarship (such as the climate change novel, migration poetry, and video games, to name but a few) in American discourses of environmental crises and risk.

The employment of the volume’s distinctive theoretical trajectories to the Americanist research of environmental risk proves to be timely and productive for sundry reasons. On the one hand, the effective interlacing of a plethora of concepts and theories from sociology, the environmental humanities, philosophy, the neurosciences, and many more with literary and cultural studies approaches enables inquiries across multiple disciplinary boundaries about how past, present, and future real-and-imagined environmental risks have been staged in the American cultural production. This not only demonstrates, once again, that interdisciplinary research questions are one of the strong suits of American Studies, but it also underlines American Studies’s societal relevance and our discipline’s

¹ For another recent publication engaging risk, albeit in different contexts and conceptualizations, in American Studies, see Johannes Voelz, ed. *Chance, Risk Security: Approaches to Uncertainty in American Literature*. Spec. issue of *Amerikastudien/American Studies* 60.4 (2015).

potential to complement the work done in the natural and social sciences when addressing some of the most pressing contemporary challenges.

Among the most important insights that *The Anticipation of Catastrophe* imparts is its continual demonstration that socio-political and environmental concerns, which in the past have often been discussed and conceptualized independently, cannot be theorized, analyzed, and solved apart from each other. Equally relevant, the studies convincingly communicate that it is storytelling and the imaginative and affective experience of risk in narratives, rather than cognitive knowledge derived from statistics and scientific studies, that “explore the complexity and diversity of individual and collective risk experience worldwide in ways that work with and at the same time transcend factual, scientific representation” (Mayer 23) and hence decides whether a future scenario is perceived as a concrete risk (or ignored). The volume’s focus on risk rather than the moment of catastrophe moreover shifts attention away from the moment of spectacular cataclysm and abrupt changes in the cultural order to the often long period of time, in which a catastrophe is not yet definitely known, tangible, or concrete but amorphously anticipated. Similar to Rob Nixon’s call for increased research on “slow violence,” this approach renders visible the often unnoticed cultural dynamics in the forefront of disasters that increase vulnerabilities, in many cases far from the location of the actual catastrophe, exposing the global and (trans)national entanglements of environmental injustices. Similarly, the use of risk as a prism to assess American discourses of pending environmental crises implements the major tenets of transnational American Studies, not only since environmental hazards transcend cultural, political, and administrative borders, but also because they build on a processual understanding of risk and foreground the manifold regional, (trans)national, and global interconnections and contexts that come into play in the construction of risk narratives.

In terms of structure, *The Anticipation of Catastrophe* is divided into three thematic blocks, which are preceded by Sylvia Mayer and Alexa Weik von Mossner’s skilled introduction. In their contribution, the editors concisely sketch out the historical trajectory of (mostly social science-based) risk research and briefly familiarize the readers with its

main concepts and premises, particularly Beck’s understanding of risk as the “*anticipation of the catastrophe*” and thus as a subjectively perceived and evaluated, historically contingent and fluid, as well as a culturally constructed category. They further introduce pioneering risk studies in literary and cultural studies (e.g., by Frederick Buell, Lawrence Buell, and Ursula Heise) and point to the idiosyncracies of the contemporary American risk society, e.g., the paradoxical inclination to ignore environmental and technological risks while simultaneously being obsessed with the idea of security and how to control potential risks through surveillance and technology. This thematic synopsis provides the broader conceptual framework for all following contributions, merging the distinct risk studies into a consistent discourse about environmental risk in North American culture and literature.

The first thematic section titled “Fictionalizing Global Climate Change” opens with Sylvia Mayer’s analysis “Explorations of the Controversially Real,” which develops the generic distinction of the climate change novel into “narratives of catastrophe,” generally employing the dystopian mode and a fear appeal when portraying disaster, and the “narratives of anticipation,” which resist the (full-fledged) depiction of disaster and instead focus on events leading up to it. In her reading of several contemporary novels set in the (near) present, Mayer lays bare how the “risk narrative of anticipation” adapts a wealth of aesthetic strategies such as self-irony, elements of the political thriller, and the picaresque, conveying the deep uncertainty of encountering the first signs of anthropogenic climate change (the “controversially real”) and raising awareness of the inadequacies of the current political and economic systems. In “Risk, Denial and Narrative Form in Climate Change Fiction,” Axel Goodbody scrutinizes two contemporary novels—Barbara Kingsolver’s *Flight Behavior* and Ilija Trojanow’s *Melting Ice [EisTau]*—in regard to their use of key genres, aesthetic patterns, and images in the representation of climate denial. Showing how, for instance, the apocalypse, the pastoral, and the elegy can provide insight into the patterns of denial mechanisms and how cultural narratives further manage to expose the affective and ethical implications of denial, Goodbody demonstrates the valuable contribution literary and cultural studies can

make to sociological and psychological studies of climate denial. Turning the lens to climate risk's global import, deterritorialization, and place attachment in her article "*Things We Didn't See Coming*," Antonia Mehnert closes the first thematic section with a reading of Steven Amsterdam's eponymous novel. Developing the concept of "riskscapes" as an addendum to Arjun Appadurai's five interconnected dimensions of the deterritorialized state, she shows how for the literary characters in *Things We Didn't See Coming*, the stability and reassurance of platonic belonging give way to constant disruption, displacement, and self-renegotiation in global climate riskscapes. In this manner, as Mehnert compellingly argues, the novel's innovative use of narrative fragmentation, genericness of places, and circular motifs foregrounds the imaginative experience and emotional impact of uprootedness and continual migration in climate riskscapes, which cannot be equally conveyed through disembodied scientific statistics or graphs.

The volume's second topical cluster with the title "Representations of Nuclear Risk" addresses the particularities of American risk discourses about radioactivity. Chronicling the media depiction of radium in early twentieth-century American newspapers in his study "'These Rays May Be Helpful or Harmful,'" Holger Kersten excavates the surprisingly positive assessments of radium as magical cure of various types of diseases, efficient energy source, and even beautifier. Refuting a 1935 federal court ruling that "there was no [contemporaneous] knowledge about the harmful effects brought about by close contact with radium" (89), Kersten is able to evidence that the enthusiastic radium optimism managed to fade out early warnings about the future harm and risks of the scientific novelty. Alexa Weik von Mossner's "The Stuff of Fear" approaches the staging of nuclear risks in the two Hollywood films *The China Syndrome* (1979) and *Silkwood* (1983) by drawing on a variety of neuropsychological and philosophical theories (e.g., by Karen Barad and Stacy Alaimo). Arguing that the embodied experience of the nuclear risk films decidedly influences both the viewers' affective involvement in the story world and their cognitive assessment of radioactivity, she skilfully demonstrates that affect plays a vital role in ethical discourses and moral reasoning about nuclear risks. In this section's last contribution, Anna Thiemann takes risk research into the hith-

erto unexplored fields of humor. Substantiated by an exemplary reading of Elizabeth Stuckey-French's 2011 novel *The Revenge of the Radioactive Lady*, her study "Nuclear Risk, Domestic Responsibility, and the Uses of Comedy" highlights the absurd comedy's subversive and transformative potential to expose what Beck called the "organized irresponsibility" inbuilt in late modernity as well as its successful depiction of both the often invisible victims of radioactive contamination and the scientists' moral scruples. According to Thiemann, the black humor tradition thus manages to laugh at the absurdity of the inevitability of unintended and unforeseen consequences in rationally assessed risk scenarios while withholding harsh critical judgments or overly didactic approaches for improvement.

The volume concludes with a third thematic segment of studies labeled "Environmental Risks Across Media." It commences with Christine Gerhardt's "Beyond Climate Refugees," in which the author elucidates how American poetry negotiates the complex experience of the numerous risks involved in environmental migration. Referencing an extensive body of poems, among others, about early European settler-colonialism or the migratory patterns of animals and plants, she reveals poetry's specific capabilities to function as a "particularly multilayered and evocative mode of expression that strains against notions of representation, linearity, and rationality" (157), transcending formulaic representations while involving the readers imaginatively in the dynamics of risk, migration, and environmental crises. In an exemplary analysis of Margaret Atwood's novel *Oryx and Crake* (2003), Karin Höpker explicates posthuman fiction's transformative potential to serve as differentiated criticism of currently prolific assessments of environmental risks and to provide a fictional space for the reader to engage in current discourses about the interrelation of the human with the non-human in environmental crises. Combining Niklas Luhmann's notion of the '*Katastrophenschwelle*'/'disaster threshold' with Giorgio Agamben's concept of 'intimate caesura' in her study "Sense of an Ending," Höpker thus shows how the depiction of the catastrophic release of a deadly virus in *Oryx and Crake* renders visible the problematic nature of contemporaneous practices of risk assessments that are both too naively based on the technosciences' supposedly full calculability

and at the same time driven by an unreflected avarice for economic profit.

Nicole Maruo-Schröder's essay "It's theoretically possible" examines the conventional functionalization of risk in contemporary Hollywood disaster films, concluding that the paradigmatic dissolution of future threats and the rather conservative restoration of the social order toward the end renders these cultural texts modern-day versions of the American jeremiad. In this context, Maruo-Schröder points out how the movies rely on less likely high-impact risk scenarios that are often staged according to the trope of an 'angry nature' and how they tend to frame the solution to the impending catastrophe as the heroic overcoming of the risks inherent in the rescue mission by the calculated employment of technology and human ingenuity. Pursuing the question whether video games can increase the players' awareness of environmental risks, Colin Milburn's "Green Gaming," the final contribution to the volume, also approaches a largely neglected field of risk research. While several game types, such as the ones in which the players need to prevent crimes against nature (environmental discipline games) or those in which they have to successfully and sustainably monitor resource systems in the game world (environmental control games), promote environmental awareness of isolated issues, Milburn concludes, only very few games, such as "Tasty Earth," manage to comprehensively instigate self-reflection and

the acceptance of responsibility through the realization that rampant consumerism, both inside and outside of the game world, is at the very heart of environmental degradation.

With six out of the overall ten contributions treating literary texts and two more analyzing films, one might have wished for the closer engagement of other cultural text formats, yet this does not take anything away from the value of the volume. Through their clear focus on the cultural staging of risks and the consistent interrogation of what literary and cultural studies-based research of risks can contribute to scientific discourses and public debates about current impending environmental crises, the contributions amount to more than a loose collection of topically related studies. Rather, the edited volume emerges as a coherent manifesto arguing for the deeper scrutiny of cultural narratives of risks (as well as their denial) in regard to historical and cultural contingencies, techno-scientific framings, and idiosyncratic aesthetic conventions. Demonstrating the crucial impact of the imaginative experience and the transformative potential of storytelling on the cognitive as well as emotional perception and ethical evaluation of risk scenarios, *The Anticipation of Catastrophe* has thus furthered an effective conceptual tool case enabling differentiated analyses of the plethora of American cultural texts engaging with the local and global repercussions of environmental crises.

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