

Abstract - International Conference

"Perilous Passages – The Birth of Risk in 19th-Century American Culture"

Risk is everywhere present in contemporary societies as a factor in decision-making and practices of risk assessment and management. Global corporate actors and individual human citizens alike engage in risk-taking and hedging strategies, and risk-analysis plays an important role in the “global risk society” (Beck) in areas of governance, health care, ecology, sports, and in discourses on science and technology. Risk seems omnipresent, even universal, but it clearly has a history. This history involves the emergence of a way of thinking about “bad risk” (Douglas) or danger, which has become a synonym of risk, but also a way of thinking about the future as open and hypothetically calculable or “probable.” A genealogy of risk provides crucial insight into nineteenth-century cultural history and thought, where risk was yet to acquire its present meaning, while helping to explain its present ubiquity.

This conference explores the “birth of risk,” or how the semantics of risk emerged in the nineteenth century in the transatlantic North American context. We seek to illuminate a period of change when, in economic, social, and literary discourse alike, notions of the future moved from a paradigm of providence and predestination towards one of openness and contingency.

At the onset of the nineteenth century, the everyday world of seafaring, farming, and trade was rife with promises but also posed a threat to individual lives and collective livelihoods. To a religious worldview “Fate’s fix’d mysterious book,” as a very young Nathaniel Hawthorne put it, contained an unforeseeable future, unknown to man but predestined by Providence, which might bring anything from individual good fortune to catastrophic acts of God. By the end of that same century, individual citizen-entrepreneurs were weighing chances of profit, hedging against risks, and speculating on the anticipation of possible future events. Within the span of one hundred years, the religiously informed paradigm of divine predestination gave way to a logic of probability. The future, once unforeseeable, became potentially predictable, and cultural techniques of making sense of what might happen, in economics and literature, changed with it.

The middle of the nineteenth century witnessed a rise in the rhetoric of likelihood, risk, and speculation: decision-making began to be rationalized as consciously anticipatory calculations of future outcome. Insurance companies, trading in future risks, became major economic players, and the stock market allowed speculators to wager on economic booms and busts. The first differentiated census generated data on a population which was considered quantifiable. And literature, responding to new challenges in a changing print market, witnessed the rise of the novel as the genre capable of modelling decision-making and alternatives lives.

The conference will bring an interdisciplinary approach to these important transformations. The aim is to combine a historical perspective on economic, social, and philosophical change with a closer look at the shifting semantics and functions of literary narrative. When the once certain but unknowable future becomes uncertain but calculable, how do members of a society begin to look at their lives and actions? How does the rise of narrative literary genres and specifically the novel address and respond to and navigate such deep social concerns?

The conference organizes its field of investigation into three topical areas: The segment of economic semantics of risk-taking and speculation, the segment of seafaring, and the segment of nineteenth-century slavery and abolitionist discourse. **Workshop I**, titled “**Bubbly Economics: Gambling, Speculation, Insurance**,” which will also be closely tied to Ann Fabian’s keynote on risk, play, and speculation, addresses narratives of risk and cultural

strategies of categorizing the unexpected from Charles Brockden Brown to Henry Adams. **Workshop II, “The Dangers of the Sea,”** investigates maritime discourses on whaling, piracy, and seafaring explorations as a site where questions of danger and profit, risk and gain intersect with questions of individual and collective agency and responsibility. The second keynote by Jonathan Arac connects the problem of maritime perils and human agency to issues of national identity and discusses the function of literary narrative in the context of their relation. **Workshop III “Risks of Blackness: Slavery, Trade, and Human Property”** picks up questions of human individuality in pro-slavery and abolitionist discourse. Papers discuss 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 the papers will explore how a changing concept 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.