

## Precautionary Readings

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Sylvia Mayer and Alexa Weik von Mossner, eds., *The Anticipation of Catastrophe: Environmental Risk in North American Literature and Culture* (Heidelberg: Winter, 2014), 227pp.

Molly Wallace, *Risk Criticism: Precautionary Reading in an Age of Environmental Uncertainty* (Ann Arbor: Michigan University Press), 264pp.



Ever since Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*, the anticipation of environmental harm has been a central preoccupation of environmental activism and politics. Starting with 1986's *Risk Society*, German sociologist Ulrich Beck has argued that the need for anticipatory decision-making under conditions of scientific uncertainty and the globalized (and globalizing) nature of many environmental hazards are defining features of a new, self-reflexive phase of modernity, the titular risk society. Among others, Lawrence Buell and Ursula Heise have transported Beck's ideas into the discourse of environmental criticism, in texts that quickly became seminal to the field (Buell 1998, Heise 2008). *The Anticipation of Catastrophe: Environmental Risk in North American Literature and Culture*, edited by Sylvia Mayer and Alexa Weik von Mossner, and *Risk Criticism: Precautionary Reading in an Age of Environmental Uncertainty* by Molly Wallace build on, and substantially enrich, this critical tradition. Expanding both the theoretical vocabulary and the archive of primary material, both books provide essential reading for anyone interested in the discourse of environmental risk.

Taking as their point of departure Beck's assertion that the anticipation and prevention of catastrophic hazard requires the cultural staging of risk, Mayer's and Weik von Mossner's collection brings together essays with diverse theoretical inputs and a broad range of primary sources—from early 20<sup>th</sup> century newspaper articles to contemporary gaming culture. The value of their collection thus lies in the analytical strength of the individual contributions, all of which succeed not only in insightful analysis, but also in opening productive avenues for further research. Mayer's and Weik von Mossner's introduction provides a concise and accessible primer for readers not familiar with the field; one that details the significance of the category of risk for current thinking about environmental crisis and traces the career of the concept.

A first section features articles by Meyer, Axel Goodbody and Antonia Mehnert on fictional approaches to climate change. Mayer's essay makes the useful distinction between narratives of catastrophe—speculative narratives that stage environmental hazards as *fait accomplis*—and narratives of anticipation that centre on the experience

of risk and uncertainty before harm becomes manifest. Mayer reads Barbara Kingsolver's *Flight Behavior* and Kim Stanley Robinson's *Science in the Capital* trilogy as such narratives of anticipation and works out how the exposure to environmental risk shapes subjectivities in a global risk society. Goodbody spins this thread further by looking at risk denial—a timely critical project now more than ever, with an avowed climate change denier in the White House. Goodbody frames climate change denial not as a problem of ignorance but as a complex process that draws on a “cultural toolkit” of tropes and narratives in order to turn away from the uncomfortable realities of climate change. He productively leverages this idea for a reading of Ilija Trojanow's *EisTau* and Kingsolver's *Flight Behavior*. Mehnert's essay on Steven Amsterdam's novel *Things We Didn't See Coming* focusses on the tension between attachment and detachment in the age of global environmental risk. Drawing on the terminology of Arjun Appadurai, Mehnert defines the spatiality of global risks as “riskscapes”, deterritorialized global flows that offset and undermine attachment to specific places and leave Amsterdam's protagonist-narrator adrift in a world characterized by runaway climate change.

The second section of the book is devoted to discourses on nuclear risk and opens with Holger Kersten's article on the depiction of radium in early 20<sup>th</sup> century American newspapers. Kersten assembles a substantial corpus of articles, reports, and advertisements, most of which are marked by unreserved and even reckless enthusiasm about the new-found element and the miraculous properties it was speculated to have. Kersten's material suggests a deep history of nuclear risk; but the carelessness with which radium was handled, even when some of its harmful properties were already known, suggests that the conceptual language of risk is historically situated and cannot be projected back into the past easily. Weik von Mossner's contribution focusses on the filmic depiction of nuclear accidents in *The China Syndrome* and *Silkwood*. Building on insights from material ecocriticism and cognitive film studies, Weik von Mossner underlines the importance of affects, specifically of fear, both to narrative trajectories of the films' protagonists and to the films' communication with their audience. By contrast, Anna Thiemann foregrounds the use of comedy for establishing an environmental ethics in a reading of Elizabeth Stuckey-French's *The Revenge of the Radioactive Lady*. The unstable link between cause and effect and the unpredictability of side effects characteristic to risk society lend themselves to black humour, Thiemann argues. The comic imagination, she concludes, thus provides new and hitherto under-theorized ways to respond to the ethical challenges of the risk society.

The third and final section of the collection is organized around a more loosely defined notion of environmental risk; what unites these essays, however, is their emphasis on the specific abilities and shortcomings of different medial forms in addressing risk discourse. Christine Gerhard offers a nuanced reading of late 20<sup>th</sup> century and contemporary North American poetry, tracing the connections between the experience of migration and the perception of environmental risk. While Gerhard identifies a number of broad narrative templates in her material, her close readings continually problematize any easy generalizations and show how each poem underlines the ambiguities and contradictions inherent in the experiences of environmental risk

and migration. Karin Höpker reads Margaret Atwood's novel *Oryx and Crake* as a cautionary tale about the manageability of risk. By juxtaposing the experiences of its protagonist before and after a global disaster resulting in the near-extinction of the human species, she argues, the novel questions illusions of control and predictability inherent to contemporary discourses about risk management and security. Nicole Maruo-Schröder analyses the ambivalent perspective on technological risks in Hollywood disaster films. Staging spectacularly destructive and spectacularly improbable catastrophes, these films denounce technological hubris, which leads to a catastrophic "revenge of nature". But since Hollywood conventions demand a happy ending, notions of unpredictability and loss of control are ultimately dispelled, technology is brought under human control, and the central disaster ultimately functions as a reassuring catharsis, not as an environmental wake-up call. In the collection's final article, Colin Milburn provides a clever interrogation of the notion of green gaming: can there be something like environmentally conscious gaming practices when the production and operation of personal computers and game consoles itself is environmentally problematic? In this context, Milburn dismisses games that task the player with finding and defeating a monstrous eco-criminal as well as games that simulate an ecological project like city-building. Instead of games that set up the player to preserve the in-game environment, Milburn shifts the attention to games that force the player to take a destructive role. These games, he argues, can invite players to reflect on their own position as players and to develop an affective attachment to their digital and real-world environment.

Like *The Anticipation of Catastrophe*, Molly Wallace's *Risk Criticism* draws on the work of Ulrich Beck, but the book's innovative approach is also grounded in the recourse to nuclear risk, not just as a theme, but as a conceptual and methodological paradigm. Wallace commences her book by going back to nuclear criticism, a body of deconstructive theoretical work clustered around Derrida's 1984 essay "No Apocalypse, Not Now" and the seminal issue of *Diacritics* in which it appeared. Derrida famously casts nuclear war as "fabulously textual" (Derrida 1984: 23), referencing the speculative and anticipatory narratives of mutually assured destruction. After the end of the Cold War, public attention shifted from the threat of a sudden global nuclear cataclysm to more gradual and obscure hazards like toxic contamination, genetic engineering, or climate change. It is this constellation of risks that characterizes what Ulrich Beck calls risk society and what Wallace, taking her cue from the Bulletin of Concerned Scientists, which now factors environmental risks into its iconic "Doomsday Clock", calls "the second nuclear age".

In this "new" age, nuclear criticism fell out of intellectual fashion, with at least some of its critical energy being absorbed, Wallace suggests, by the emergence of ecocriticism on a broad scale. Looking back from the second nuclear age, the oversights and elisions of nuclear criticism become apparent: Derrida could only insist on the textuality of nuclear war because its material correlates—fallout from weapon tests, contamination and environmental despoliation from Uranium mining, nuclear waste leakages etc.—were hidden and disavowed. As we grapple with environmental risks,

especially with climate change and its global, non-localized impacts and origins, we do well to return to nuclear criticism: “Replacing the nuclear with climate as the paradigm for criticism risks perpetuating the silences in those earlier Cold War fables”, Wallace argues later in the book (158). Tracking the continuities between the first and the second nuclear age can thus add a sense of historical depth and perspective to the debate and caution against the fetishization of one type of risk as a singular critical paradigm.

The body of Wallace’s book then applies what she calls “risk criticism”, a discourse analytical approach that focuses on the cultural staging of different types of mega-risks. The book’s readings are structured around what Wallace calls, with Hayden White, “rhetorical wagers”, tropes that organize public discourse about environmental risks. The first chapter tracks the role of irony in the public (self-)construction of nuclear scientists, following chapters focus on the use (and abuse) of the Bhopal disaster as a metaphor of global risk, on the role of analogy in the discourse around genetically modified food, and on the use of anthromorphism in artistic responses to plastic pollution. The final chapter and an afterword return to nuclear risk; reversing the impetus of the first chapter, which looked at figures of the first nuclear age through the lens of the second, these chapters argue for bringing a historical perspective enriched by the theoretical and historical import of nuclear criticism to contemporary debates about environmental risk, especially to the recent tendency of the nuclear power industry to greenwash its product as “clean” energy.

While Wallace draws on political, academic, and journalistic discourse surrounding these “rhetorical wagers”, the centrepieces of her chapters are aesthetic artifacts—ranging from canonical novels like Don DeLillo’s *White Noise* or Kurt Vonnegut’s *Cat’s Cradle* to poetry, visual art, experimental theatre and documentary film making—which she places in conversation with larger public debates about environmental risks, working out how these texts take up, reconfigure, or subvert the rhetorical wagers of staging risk. Wallace’s readings are insightful and clearly argued, and she displays a similarly confident command of complex theoretical material—from nuclear criticism and risk theory to the new materialism in contemporary ecocriticism. *Risk Criticism* is especially remarkable for its willingness to take the theoretical and ethical ambivalences of its material seriously: For instance, is it justifiable to mobilize the Bhopal disaster as a metaphor for a global condition of environmental endangerment from which Western readers are not exempt? Or does doing so efface the connection between political disenfranchisement, economic deprivation, and environmental risk that made the disaster possible, in the first place? Rather than departing from preconceived conclusions, Wallace’s method of “precautionary reading” means parsing such contradictions carefully and, when necessary, suspending final judgement, conceding that in risk society, some questions will only be answerable in hindsight. It is in these moments of suspended judgement that *Risk Criticism* most successfully captures the irreducible uncertainties and the ethical quandaries of living with global risk.

If there is one thing wanting in *Risk Criticism* and *The Anticipation of Catastrophe*, it is closer attention to non-Western perspectives. Both books share with Buell's and Heise's earlier work a focus on North American literature and culture. Such restrictions are of course always pragmatically necessary. But at the moment, the most serious critical limitation of the concept of environmental risk seems to be the way in which American experiences figure *pars pro toto* for issues of global concern. Wallace productively addresses this tension in her chapter on Bhopal as a global signifier and again touches on it in her final chapter, which complicates the history of the atomic bomb by foregrounding the plight of an indigenous Canadian community that mined the Uranium used by the Manhattan project. More such conversations could further extend the conceptual framework of an emerging risk criticism and provide an interface where the perspectives of risk theory, environmental justice, and postcolonial ecocriticism meet.

### Works Cited

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