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Introduction to the Special Issue

Risk: Intercultural and Interdisciplinary Perspectives

Most etymological dictionaries explain that the English word risk comes from the Latin *resicum*, which was a nautical expression used to define a cliff or reef (Donald 1874: 439), which posed danger to sailors and maritime trades. The Latin word comes from the Greek navigation term *rhizikon*, which meant “root, stone, cut of the firm land” and was a metaphor for difficulty to avoid at sea. Possibly, the term *rhizikon* transferred to the Arabic world *rizk*, meaning fate or uncertain outcome. In this understanding, risk cannot be totally controlled by mankind. Risk in the Middle Ages meant danger, an act of God or force majeure, so it was understood as a natural event (Kelly 2018: 21). Nowadays, risks and catastrophes have taken on global proportions, and what distinguishes current risks is their artificiality; these are potential catastrophes we have brought upon ourselves.

Risk understood as threat and insecurity has always constituted human existence; in a certain sense this was even more the case in the past than it is today. Illness or premature death, famine and plagues were greater threats to individuals and their families in the Middle Ages than today (Beck 2009: 4). Although nowadays we are more than ever preoccupied with the prospect of catastrophe: nuclear war, environmental disaster, terrorist attack, accidents and terminal illnesses, economic collapse, risk is not an invention of modernity. However, as Beck claims (1992: 21), risks in the past were more personal; they had a note of bravery and adventure. They were not global dangers such as ecological disaster or atomic fallout, which ignore the borders of nations and pose a threat of self-destruction of all life on Earth.

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According to Hoydis, “[a]pproaching risk as an object of study, one faces the task of trying to differentiate between partially contrasting and overlapping risk discourses which are usually either driven by formal-normative or cultural-sociological concerns, pursue either action- or system-oriented perspectives, and can be probabilistic-technical, economic, anthropological-political, psychological-cognitive or sociological-philosophical in orientation” (Hoydis 2017: 3). Each scientific community or branch of research has its own understanding of risk, as there is no universal set of characteristics for describing risk (Slovic 1997: 284). According to Bob Heyman (2012: 605), the “ubiquity of risk thinking in modern cultures challenges definitional efforts.” Different concepts are used interchangeably or in opposition to define risk, and among them are: uncertainty, contingency, chance, hazard, and danger. In the 1980s Ulrich Beck first formulated his thesis of the ‘risk society’. It provoked a debate in contemporary culture, and the use of the term has increased rapidly since then.

A study of fictional literature also provides different insights into the pervasiveness of risk in its various manifestations. Risk comes in many forms, and today it is conceived principally as danger, as “the tension between the vision of stability and predictability and a precarious and uncertain world” (Knights & Vurdubakis 1993: 730).

Through the selection of six articles and a book review in this volume we wish to demonstrate the diversity of approaches to risk as an object of study. **Maria Antonietta Struzziero** explores physical, psychological and emotional risk in Maggie O’Farrell’s novel *Hamnet* (2020), which presents a portrait of a marriage after the death of a beloved child, whose loss is attributed to the bubonic plague, and resonates with present fears and risks caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Adelheid Rundholz analyzes two dystopian novels: Christina Dalcher’s *Vox* (2018) and John Lanchester’s *The Wall* (2019), in which risk pervades the world portrayed. The constant threat of rising waters, rising fear, rising political division, and totalitarianism have contributed to society’s ills depicted in the aforementioned novels.

Present-day risks derive from general concerns with modernization and globalization, and have been especially identified with environmentalism. **Corinne Fournier Kiss** reflects on ecocatastrophy connected with the Brazillian backlands (*sertão*). Her considerations are in tune with Kate Rigby’s concept of “natural disaster”.

Aleksandra Niemirycz analyzes M. Shelley’s, J. Keats’ and C. K. Norwid’s interpretations of the Promethean myth. She discusses their understanding of the actions of the mythological hero who wanted to protect humans from risk and gave them safety by means of fire.

Hernando Blandón Gómez looks at the risk during the social mobilization of Colombians in the city of Medellín in the middle of the COVID-19 pandemic. He analyses street art, which is interpreted as political action that grew as a result of social unrest.

Literature has always recorded a history of patriarchy, sexual violence and resistance. **Silvia Martínez-Falquina** explores the important problems facing Canada's and the USA's Indigenous women. Her article examines the role of literature within the Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women (MMIM) movement, and illustrates the most significant features of its poetry and fiction.

Jacek Partyka reviews *#MeToo and Literary Studies* (2021), which is a collection of essays on literature that addresses rape culture and sexual violence, and takes the floor in a debate about literature that can promote justice. For years academics have been exposing and critiquing gender-based violence and male domination, but the continued power of #MeToo after its 2017 explosion adds new urgency and wider awareness about the risk women face every day all over the globe.

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