

A research project sponsored by

Transcriptions and ACGCC:

Globalizing Risk

That risk is now found everywhere is the obscene of the present. We respond everyday to risk, be it in the microscalar quotidian popping of pills or in following travel advisories that are a part of macrosclar preventive measures. The escalation of risk discourses motivates world pictures of the self-reflexive modernity Ulrich Beck names “risk society” (*Risk Society*, 1986). In those snapshots, uncertainties spiral as the transformations of late capitalism bind us ever closer to all an unhomely “world,” “planet,” even the “galaxy,” fueling daily anxiety, global panics, and endemic paranoia. Relief comes in the many guises of risk that bring uncertainty into the calculus of forecasts, predictions, and estimates. But the costs of that relief accrue elsewhere. For if risk materializes a present to secure “our” future, it does so by systematically parceling out actual risks to those less enfranchised for a better tomorrow. The connections materialized in risk (risk perception, risk assessment, and risk management) produce a “globality”—the spatialized image of a social totality—that obscures those who die in drug trials so that we may have the comforts of surplus life.

As the financial crash of 2008 demonstrated once more, it is at moments of crises that we become suddenly aware of what risk strives to contain—uncertainty, its pathologized other. Theorized as twin logics in Frank H. Knight’s 1917 thesis (*Risk, Uncertainty, and Profit*) written in the midst of the first major global crisis of the twentieth century, “true uncertainty” captures the effects of a dynamic system, generative in its potentialities too quickly instrumentalized in risk. While the latter has gained prominence amid spectacular financial crashes, environmental crises, biological insecurity, and terror attacks, Knight’s thoughts on uncertainty have fallen by the wayside, surfacing only as obscure residues of theoretical fantasy—the products of idle fantasy. Since we live in constant terror of uncertainty, the condition begs a more comprehensive description than current articulations of the risk-uncertainty analytic allow. If we focus on uncertainty as a theoretical/historical concept, we open to fractal globalities quite apposite to those materialized in the discourses, practices, and institutions of risk.

Even as we are habituated to risk through various media forms—from our local or cable access news to health insurance ads—there is curiously little attention to risk society media and its information networks and infrastructures. The two centers in the English Department, the ACGCC (American Cultures and Global Contexts) and Transcriptions are well situated to generate conversations on risk society media, motivated by new confrontations between the humanities and social sciences. Working synergistically with the Literature and Environment (toxic waste, biohazards,

environmental disasters, post-human/animal mutations) and the Literature and the Mind (risk perception, precarity, cultures of fear) specializations, the **Risk Society Series** will host a series of talks, lectures, colloquia, and screenings organized around a central rubric every year. The series commences with the inaugural rubric, “globalizing risk.”

Globalizing Risk 2010-11: This year starts the conversation with a close look at the two forms of risk discourse central to Ulrich Beck, scientificized and commercial risk. Our focus will primarily involve the media forms, technologies, infrastructures, and institutions that globalize risk. A tentative plan is to invite UC-faculty already working in these areas for talks (and to read their work); resuscitate the “Working Papers” graduate colloquia; and organize one collective reading meet every quarter. The main event, a conference bringing scholars from other institutions to UCSB, is planned for March 2011.

Calendar of Events:

Fall 2010

- UCSB Faculty Series: Lecture by Barbara Harthorn, Center for Nanotechnology in Society. Title TBA (October 22, 12:00-2:00, SH 2635)
- Public Event: Lecture by Joyce Goggin, University of Amsterdam. “My Future's so Bright, I'm already Dead” (October 25, 3:30, SH 2625)
- Reading Meet: Ulrich Beck, *Risk Society* (1986) with excerpt from Joseph Stiglitz’ *Free Fall* (2008) (November 5, 12:00-2:00, SH2635)
- Screening Meet: Excerpt from Allan Sekula, *Lottery of the Sea* (2006) with Allan Sekula, “Freeway to China (Version 2, Liverpool) and Yasmine Kabir *The Last Rites* (2008; 17 minutes), followed by discussion (November 19, 12:00-2:00, SH 2635)

Winter 2011 forthcoming

- Graduate Colloquium: Working Papers in the Risk Society Series (full drafts of papers to be submitted by invitation for planned web project, “Speculative Globalities”)
- Public Event: “Speculative Globalities” conference, March 3-5, 2011 (Centennial House): capstone event on accident media

Spring 2011 (planning stages)

- Graduate Colloquium with capstone lecture

We thank the UCHRI research cluster, “Speculative Globalities,” for the intellectual frameworks for this series.

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