

**“The Aesthetic and Ethics of Riskscapes:
Climate Change and the ‘Clash of Risk Cultures’ in the North American Novel”**

Abstract

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Current anthropogenic climate change must be understood as both a manifestation and a driving force of globalization. It is defined by ecological transformation that is inextricably linked to technological, economic, social, political, and cultural forces and that has already reshaped the planet in a multiplicity of ways. Human interference in the climate system – caused by the ever-increasing emission of industrial greenhouse gases and its complex effects on the planet’s atmosphere – has had concrete geographical effects. As a globalizing force that drives ongoing spatial differentiation, anthropogenic climate change has redefined the relations between and the very meanings of the local, the regional, the national, and the global.

As a human-made risk, anthropogenic climate change, moreover, has become one of the central global risks of our time, a defining feature of what sociologist Ulrich Beck called the “world risk society.” The global climate risk is a manifestation of the increased uncertainty and instability that marks our cultural moment and that asks, among other things, for a reconceptualization of environmental ethics. In the field of philosophy, climate ethics, a more recent development of environmental ethical discourse, has therefore begun to systematically address the ethical dimensions of climate change: the moral implications of its extensive spatial and temporal scales, its historical development, and its possible future consequences. Contributing to the discourse of climate ethics are, however, also other modes of ethical inquiry, including literary texts. They imaginatively explore the concreteness, complexity, diversity, and often contested nature of individual and collective responses to the climate change risk, thereby offering to their readers both cognitive and emotional orientation in moral space that non-fictional texts, including texts of moral philosophy, cannot provide.

My presentation approaches climate change as a global risk, and the climate change novel as a risk narrative. Focusing on a selection of U.S. American and Canadian climate change novels, it pays particular attention to the novels’ representations of the complex spatial dimensions of risk. It makes use of a concept of “riskscape” that draws on scholarship in literary and cultural studies, geography, and sociology and that fundamentally refers to spaces marked by the experience of uncertainty. Riskscapes can be regarded as spatial manifestations of one of the defining features of risk, which, according to Beck, can be defined as “the controversial reality of the possible” (15). Controversy occurs since different countries and cultures can assess the same risk differently. The world risk society, as a society that is marked by complex connectivity, by various forms of mobility and cultural encounters, is thus characterized by different “risk realities” and, more often than not, by a “clash of risk cultures.” “[T]he more the

world contracts as globalization progresses,” Beck argued, “ the more these clashing cultural perceptions stand out as mutually exclusive certainties” (12).

The presentation engages with two major questions. First, it addresses the question of how the novels develop a complex and contested spatiality of risk that reflects the diversity of sociocultural perceptions of the climate change risk. Secondly, it asks in how far the novels’ risksapes, shaped by environmental instability and diverse sociocultural responses, develop distinct, and more often than not conflicting, climate ethical positions. By doing so, it tries to outline the space-related features of an aesthetic and an ethics of literary climate change novels.

Beck, Ulrich. *World at Risk*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2009.