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Emily Johansen. *Beyond Safety: Risk, Cosmopolitanism, and Contemporary Neoliberal Life*. Bloomsbury, 2021.

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Emily Johansen. *Beyond Safety: Risk, Cosmopolitanism, and Contemporary Neoliberal Life*. Bloomsbury, 2021.

Abstract

Review of Emily Johansen. *Beyond Safety: Risk, Cosmopolitanism, and Contemporary Neoliberal Life*. Bloomsbury, 2021. xiii + 171 pp.

Keywords

cosmopolitanism, literature, culture, food, viral infection, climate change, individualism

Emily Johansen. *Beyond Safety: Risk, Cosmopolitanism, and Contemporary Neoliberal Life*. Bloomsbury, 2021. xiii + 171 pp.

Known for his monumental and stunning photographs of dramatically human-altered landscapes, Canadian photographer Edward Burtynsky was inspired by an epiphany when he realized that many of the radically altered landscapes he captured were linked to oil and the automotive culture of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Depicting a desolate landscape filled with a square mountain of car tires at midfield and a flood of tires spilling toward the viewer in the foreground, his photograph *Oxford Tire Pile # 5, Westley, California, USA* (1999) is a case in point. This artistic framing of the awareness of global danger that is a consequence of an interlinked world economy visualizes underpinning arguments advanced in the book under review. Emily Johansen argues that these economic interconnections have shaped the massive and pervasive dangers confronting our global world and humanity itself.

The book explores narratives structured around everyday risks—food, viral infection, climate change, and individualism—with each theme presenting a focus of the book’s four chapters. The compelling corpus, with its crossing of national borders and narrative mediums, dismantles the binary between literature and popular culture and visual and verbal narrative. Consider, for example, Chapter 1, discussing food writer and television host Anthony Bourdain’s best-selling books *Kitchen Confidential* (2000) and *A Cook’s Tour* (2001), where risk is associated with crossing boundaries of class, ethnicity, and nation. Bourdain contrasts the “extremeness” of global cuisine and its focus on authenticity with the banality and wastage of plastic-wrapped and mass-produced American food. While most of the works discussed are admittedly anglophone (including works from Brazil, Canada, the UK, and the USA), and the language tradition is squarely English, language scholars will be interested in the transnational and comparative methodologies employed by Johansen, as her focus is on world travelers who negotiate different cultures (and many of the creators discussed exhibit hyphenated identities). Moreover, her focus on visual art practices helps transcend linguistic borders as a form of intercultural communication in her rhetorical call for readers to become aware and confront the often dangerously obscured risks. In Johansen’s words, to recuperate a sense of safety, we must resist neoliberalism’s individualism and use our privilege for positive social transformation. To find remedies for these global risks, we must respond to our cosmopolitan linkages, or in other words, our action must be guided by an “ethics of interconnection” (1).

In her methodology, too, Johansen shows the limits of thinkers like Immanuel Kant whose positive understanding of cosmopolitanism found safety in German Enlightenment rationality and the belief in a universal humanity. Such idealistic thinking was questioned in the wake of World War II and the Holocaust,

when German philosopher Hannah Arendt argued that a language of rights was required to navigate the dangers of cosmopolitan mobility and displacement. Arendt's thinking influenced postcolonial notions of cosmopolitanism as a negative force obscuring the hierarchies created and cemented by neoliberal thoughts and practices. It is from these latter traditions that Johansen derives her central concept of "risky cosmopolitanism," in which individual choice cannot be the solution to structural problems on a global scale (1).

By turning literary and cultural criticism into social practice, Johansen insists that the risks in culinary cosmopolitanism (Chapter 1) are visceral in everyday life and individual consumption as is the viral cosmopolitanism that is the focus of Chapter 2. The latter is adapted from Priscilla Wald's theorization of the outbreak narrative, highlighting the global networked culture in crisis. In contrast, the environmental risk of climate change discussed in Chapter 3, the most compelling chapter of the book, influences the entire world's future. The photographic landscape representations in the works of Sebastião Salgado (Brazilian) propel an urgent alert to material and ethical consequences of consumer culture; Robert van Waarden (Dutch Canadian based in Prince Edward Island) advances a visual rhetoric of risk to reassess the interconnection between the rural and the metropolitan through oil pipelines; and Burtynsky frames climate change with implicit demands for ethical responsibility that make his works powerful rhetorical acts of communication.

That said, risk is not only a political issue but also an aesthetic concern as the insistent aesthetic focus of the works illustrates. Whereas we might expect the representation or effects of disaster to instill discomfort, here the work's aesthetic focus invites a more subversive contemplation of the artistic construction—dimensions that could have been made even more explicit. Johansen's forte lies in the fresh insights she generates, giving familiar texts a new spin, as in her focus on the political activism of cosmopolitan risk in reading John le Carré's 2001 novel *The Constant Gardener* (based on the infamous real-life case in Kano, Nigeria, when pharmaceutical company Pfizer used two hundred children to test its new antibiotic). The book culminates in the timeliest risk, that of viral infection, with an afterword focused on the COVID-19 pandemic. COVID-19 narratives sound the alarm prompting westerners to consider "the urgency of thinking of ourselves as risky cosmopolitan subjects" (141). Indeed, the pandemic has made global inequalities even more palpable and has led to a profound and ongoing social and political awakening.

Ultimately, with its call for an ethic of global interconnection, Johansen's book will be most appreciated by scholars and graduate students in comparative literature, media, and intercultural studies, as well as cosmopolitan politics. It will also benefit university courses focused on crisis and disaster.

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