Chance, Risk, Security: Approaches to Uncertainty in American Literature. An Introduction

JOHANNES VOELZ

‘Uncertainty,’ it may seem, has become an old hat in American Studies. Since the inception of the field in the 1930s, Americanists have often based their research agendas on the diagnoses of different kinds of uncertainties. Whether relating ‘uncertainty’ to the destruction of communal bonds and the dislocation of individuals by economic hardship or imperial expansion, the exclusion of individuals from public life based on race, gender, and other identity markers, or the contamination and devastation of natural habitats by industrial society, scholars have conceptualized ‘uncertainty’ as a condition of privation and suffering. According to this framework, uncertainty bespeaks the effects of inequalities of power, which negatively affect and disrupt the lives of the underprivileged and marginalized, while redistributing wealth, resources, and opportunities to those already advantaged.

In a currently influential version of this argument, ‘uncertainty’ goes by the name of ‘precarity’ or ‘precariousness’ and is the result of neoliberal economic policies, biopolitical statecraft, or a combination of the two. For instance, in the foreword to Isabell Lorey’s monograph State of Insecurity: Government of the Precarious (2015), Judith Butler praises Lorey for her “consideration of how precarity has itself become a regime, a hegemonic mode of being governed, and governing ourselves” (Butler). From such a perspective, ‘uncertainty’ is a mode, an effect of wielding power over whole populations. For those who subscribe to the Foucauldian perspective espoused by Lorey and Butler, the current situation does not look so different from the way it appeared to the founding generation of Americanists in the 1930s: Efforts to engage in academic work committed to politically relevant critique are expected to enter the fight against socially and politically produced forms of uncertainty.

1 Daniel Aaron, Michael Denning, George Lipsitz, and Alan Wald are among the most influential scholars to have insisted that the origins of American Studies in the 1930s grew out of Popular Front efforts to battle economic insecurity. Denning and Lipsitz both point to founders such as Charles Beard, F.O. Matthiessen, and Kenneth MacGowan, all of whom combined their work in academia with union activism (see Denning 69-70, Lipsitz 206-07). In this context, efforts to achieve ‘social security,’ both under the banner of the New Deal and by the more radical Left, had a formative influence on the construction of ‘uncertainty’ as a social ill. There is, of course, a counter-tradition that ranges from the Transcendentalists to the Pragmatists, in which ‘uncertainty’ appears as the cornerstone of a democratic outlook on life. Arguably, however, though American studies scholars of the Myth and Symbol school were intent on demonstrating the deeply democratic character of American literary masterworks, the intellectual tradition of valorizing uncertainty was difficult to incorporate into politicized attempts to bridge the gap between academic and activist pursuits.
I. Modernity and the Age of Uncertainty

While this outlook on ‘uncertainty’ has unquestionably allowed American Studies scholars to produce knowledge that has successfully contributed to various emancipatory political movements, it has imposed conceptual limits on the exploration of the crucial and contradictory functions of uncertainty for modern societies in general, and the United States in particular. The contributors to this special issue therefore reconceptualize ‘uncertainty’ as embedded in the transformations that make up modernity. From the vantage point explored here, ‘uncertainty’ is principally Janus-faced: it deprives individuals and collectives of stable frames of meaning and existence, but it also restructures the future as a matter of human concern. While the uncertainties of modernity inscribe the future in the domain of contingency, they also make it accessible to human efforts of regulating it. To be more precise, in this special issue uncertainty is considered a social and philosophical condition of modernity that has brought forth the categories of chance, risk, and security, each of which aims to better understand uncertainty.

A few words are in order at this point regarding the meaning of the term ‘modernity’, particularly because modernity has been the object of critique from many quarters of critical inquiry, ranging from postmodernists like Jean-François Lyotard to post-colonial critics like Walter Mignolo. Most critiques of modernity are in fact leveled at a simple-minded celebration of rationality and its underlying narrative of progress—two interconnected facets which have been routinely highlighted by standard accounts of modernity and which have served as the cornerstones of modernization theory. The latter defines the process toward modernity as a universally applicable pattern of social evolution not necessarily tied to the historically specific European and Transatlantic conditions that actually brought forth these concepts.

Stephen Toulmin suggests, in a now classic study, that while the dominant narrative of modernity puts emphasis on rational methods that gained dominance in the seventeenth century, that time period was less the founding moment of modernity than a counter-reaction to an earlier phase of modernity located squarely in the Renaissance, and associated with philosophical and literary humanists like Desiderius Erasmus, François Rabelais, Michel de Montaigne, and William Shakespeare. These thinkers and writers shared neither confidence in rational progress nor did they aim for certainty. They rather embraced a skeptical attitude that aimed to accommodate uncertainty, ambiguity, and plurality. Their under-

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2 For Lyotard, see *The Postmodern Condition*; for Mignolo, see *Local Histories/Global Designs*.

3 In his classic study *Cosmopolis: The Hidden Agenda Of Modernity* (1990), Stephen Toulmin has summarized what he describes as the standard account of modernity: “for much of the twentieth century, people in Western Europe and North America generally accepted two statements about the origins of Modernity and the modern era: viz., that the modern age began in the seventeenth century, and that the transition from medieval to modern modes of thought and practice rested on the adoption of rational methods in all serious fields of intellectual inquiry—by Galileo Galilei in physics, by René Descartes in epistemology— with their example soon being followed in political theory by Thomas Hobbes” (13).

standings of modernity were characterized less by a single-minded commitment to rationality than by the pursuit of a kind of rationality that was mindful of its own limits. As Toulmin puts it:

The 16th-century followers of classical skepticism never claimed to refute rival philosophical positions: such views do not lend themselves either to proof or to refutation. Rather, what they had to offer was a new way of understanding human life and motives: like Socrates long ago, and Wittgenstein in our own time, they taught readers to recognize how philosophical theories overreach the limits of human rationality. (29)

In Toulmin’s account, the toleration of uncertainty by Renaissance humanists was followed by a reactionary movement, dominant in the seventeenth-century, that touted a radical form of rationalism which prioritized the written over the oral, the universal over the particular, the general over the local, and the timeless over the timely (see 30-35). This hyper-rationalism, associated with the likes of René Descartes and Isaac Newton, came under attack rather quickly—as early as the mid-eighteenth-century. Toulmin, writing in 1990 during the height of postmodernism, even went so far as to argue the “the last timbers of [the] scaffolding [of modernity]” erected by seventeenth-century rationalists “have lost their intellectual credibility” (168)—a statement that is too optimistic in light of the iron grip of economic rationality and the maddening prestige of the homo oeconomicus in the culture of contemporary capitalism. Nonetheless, Toulmin’s overall insight remains crucial for the premises shared by the contributors to this special issue: accounts that reduce modernity to stubborn attempts to blot out uncertainty in favor of scientific and theoretical certainty overlook the fact that modern attempts to deal with uncertainty presuppose a sensibility—even a certain respect—for uncertainty in the first place. As we will see, this observation is born out by the three

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5 For a more recent, distantly related, account of the onset of modernity, see Stephen Greenblatt’s The Swerve: How the World Became Modern (2011)—which places the transition to modernity even earlier than Toulmin, in the fifteenth century. Greenblatt’s Pulitzer-Prize-winning work is of methodological relevance for the present discussion: it has met with sharp criticism from academic peers, in part concerning the absoluteness with which he distinguishes between the medieval period and modernity, and in part relating to the role he accords to the rediscovery of Lucretius’ De Rerum Natura. In a much-noted review, historian John Monfasani, for instance, bemoans the book’s “questionable premise,” namely the “full-throated Burekhardtian, or, perhaps more accurately, Voltairean view of the Renaissance as an outburst of light after a long medieval darkness.” But ultimately, Monfasani seems most upset by Greenblatt’s unwarranted focus on Lucretius—which comes at the expense of a discussion of the skeptics, favored by Monfasani (and Toulmin)—so that even Monfasani ends up conceding that there was a “breakdown of the medieval worldview by the introduction of subversive classical texts” (Monfasani). It should be stated clearly here that my own account of modernity does not presume that historical transitions from one period to another happen in any abrupt or absolute manner. But it is similarly false, as another critic of Greenblatt’s claims, “that notions such as the Middle Ages and the Renaissance are little better than shorthand for arbitrarily bracketed periods of time in which certain changes in the pattern of human life are interpreted as significant and others are not” (Hinch). That the distinction between such historical periods is messy—and always marked by what Reinhart Koselleck called, with a nod to Ernst Bloch, “Ungleichzeitigkeit des Gleichzeiten” (Practice 159)—by no means should lead to the conclusion that historical periods are bracketed “arbitrarily.”
modern modes of confronting uncertainty discussed in the articles of this issue: chance, risk, and security.

To gain a better understanding of these modes, two further aspects of the centrality of uncertainty for modernity need to be briefly addressed: the first concerns the changes in conceptions of temporality in modernity; the second the new role of experience. In his essay “Neuzeit: Remarks on the Semantics of Modern Concepts of Movement,” Reinhart Koselleck shows (with a focus on the example of Germany) that modernity—neue Zeit or Neuzeit—was able to evolve in the eighteenth century as a concept central to the emergence of historical consciousness because it was understood to stand in opposition to the Middle Ages—mitltere Zeit. From the moment the coinage of neue Zeit gained currency, that ‘new time’ was thought of as located already in the past; more precisely, in that moment of the past, around 1500, that marked the end of the medieval period. For that reason, Neuzeit, once having taken hold, quickly was accompanied by neueste Zeit, the period of the present (at the time closely associated with the events of the French Revolution). As Koselleck points out, the result was a deepening awareness of historicity as such: “The differentiation of neue from neueste Zeit became the object of increasing reflection on the nature of historical time. Here the rapid manner in which the concept [of neueste Zeit] became accepted is an indicator of an acceleration in the rate of change of historical experience and the enhancement of a conscious working-over of the nature of time” (“Neuzeit” 235).

With antiquity, the middle ages, modernity, and “the newest time” of the present having been folded into each other as an interrelating temporal sequence that provided the conceptual framework for the historical consciousness characteristic of modernity, ‘the future’ began to take on a new meaning. The present (neueste) time became regarded as a mere transition to yet more present times to come; neither the present time nor the present times of the future could be predicted with certainty from the past. Thus, the more clearly the past became understandable as an historical epoch separate from the present, the less clearly the future could be envisioned in the present. As Koselleck puts it, “The future became a challenge, neueste Zeit became accepted is an indicator of an acceleration in the rate of change of historical experience and the enhancement of a conscious working-over of the nature of time” (“Neuzeit” 235).

Acceleration became a topos of historical reflection on both sides of the Atlantic. At the turn of the twentieth century, Henry Adams spent the last chapters of The Education of Henry Adams spelling out his dynamic concept of history, which was, he suggested, characterized by “a law of acceleration” (1167).
a puzzle” (243). For the self-consciously modern subject, the past could no longer act as a guide, as a result of which “the divide between previous experience and coming expectation opened up, and the difference between past and present increased, so that lived time was experienced as a rupture, as a period of transition in which the new and the unexpected continually happened” (246).

In another essay, “‘Space of Experience’ and ‘Horizon of Expectation’: Two Historical Categories,” Koselleck expands on the observation of the growing importance of expectation that came along with the historical consciousness centered on the modern understanding of the present as a time of transition. As a temporal category of a specifically modern outlook, expectation, according to Koselleck, is “at once person-specific and interpersonal” and “takes place in the today; it is the future made present; it directs itself to the not-yet, to the nonexperienced, to that which is to be revealed. Hope and fear, wishes and desires, cares and rational analysis, receptive display and curiosity: all enter into expectation and constitute it” (“Space” 259). If Toulmin aimed to rescue modernity from oversimplified accounts of stark rationality in order to make us aware of the continuing presence of skepticism and ambiguity in confronting the uncertain, Koselleck’s turn to ‘expectation’ can be regarded as a solution to the same conceptual quandary. Combining wishes, desires, and care with rational analysis, ‘expectation’ highlights the emergence of a future-mindedness that results from the modern conception of the future as uncertain, rather than emphasizing, as the critics of modernity often do, the violent follies of turning the future into a matter of concern because rationality promises to master the future’s uncertainty.

Although in Koselleck’s account of modernity, ‘expectation’ (or future-mindedness) seems to gain in importance as ‘experience’ (understood as guidance by the past) loses in stature, the turn to expectation also raises the importance of experience to new heights. From this perspective, ‘experience’ is not defined by the authority of the past or tradition, but, to the contrary, by the practical, empirical, and local engagement with the uncertain. As Jürgen Habermas notes in his discussion of Hegel’s philosophical reflections on modernity in The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity, “Modernity can and will no longer borrow the criteria by which it takes its orientation from the models supplied by another epoch; it has to create its normativity out of itself. Modernity sees itself cast back upon itself without any possibility of escape. This explains the sensitiveness of its self-understanding, the dynamism of the attempt, carried forward incessantly down to our time, to ‘pin itself down’” (7). Having to create a normativity of their own rather than relying on tradition, the moderns have had to self-reflexively resort to their own experience, in both its collective and individual dimension. As Martin Jay puts it, “understood more in terms of a present reality than as a residue of the past and benefiting from the new appreciation of transience and ephemerality, ‘experience’ did emerge at the threshold of modernity as at least a serious contender for the role abdicated by older and now discredited grounds of legitimacy” (20).

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8 For a useful intellectual history of experience that includes an account of the etymological lineage of the term, see Martin Jay, Songs of Experience. For a discussion of the modern intellectual tradition of deploring the loss of experience, see Giorgio Agamben, Infancy and History.
This new privileging of experience—articulated with conviction by Renaissance humanists like Montaigne—also meant turning away from timeless verities to an awareness of transition, flux, and change. As John Dewey argues in *The Quest for Certainty* (1929), the rationalist “quest for certainty” became replaced by a much more modest “search for security.” Whereas the rationalist aimed “for absolute certainty to the unchangeable” by purely mental means, Dewey’s ideal of security “has come to attach to regulation of change” (231). As Dewey emphasized, such efforts of regulation in the name of security draw on probability in order to actively alter the conditions of the present and future, but they must remain aware of the essential uncertainty and fallibility of all attempts of regulation, i.e., of the insight that probability fundamentally differs from certainty. Only fallibility, in fact, allows for the process of continuous revisions—of explanations, theories, and the actions consequently devised—that constitutes experience proper. With the reliance on experience, Dewey averred, the “standard of judgment has been transferred from antecedents to consequents, from inert dependence upon the past to intentional construction of a future” (231-32).

The modern emphasis on experience accommodates uncertainty by elevating the uncertain to the guarantor of the continuous feedback-loops of fallibility. By doing so, it also accords a new significance to the individual. While the Pragmatists insisted that experiences must be conceptualized as intersubjective rather than merely subjective, experience nonetheless tends to be described from the phenomenological point of view of the (most often expressly bodily) individual; it is, to recall Koselleck’s description of ‘expectation,’ “at once person-specific and interpersonal.” Whereas the timeless theories of higher truth aspired to by classical thinkers, Christian Scholasticism, and later by the proponents of rationalism, defined truth as independent of the bodily, local, and experiential, the very etymology of ‘experience’ stresses an empiricism located in concrete time and space, undergone by beings of flesh and blood. As Martin Jay points out, “the English word [‘experience’] is understood to be derived most directly from the Latin *experientia*, which denoted ‘trial, proof, or experiment’” (10). The Latin, in turn, goes back to the Greek *empeiria*—a loaded term, for instance, in medicine, where the *Empiriki*, as Jay notes, formed a school “that drew on observation rather than authority or theory,” and that was “opposed to the competing factions known as the *Dogmatiki* and the *Methodiki*. Here a crucial link between experience and raw, unreflected sensation or unmediated observation (as opposed to reason, theory, or speculation) is already evident” (10). In short, then, ‘experience’ has been a key component in the type of uncertainty characteristic of the modern age insofar as it highlights the transitional over the timeless, the fallible over the absolutely certain, and in that it invokes an authority that is individual, bodily, and sensation-based rather than abstract, disembodied, and metaphysical. Moreover, this emphasis on the senses, on *aisthesis*, already suggests the important role aesthetics, and particularly aesthetic experience, would come to play in defining the modern.9 I will come back to the link of uncertainty and aesthetics below.

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9 Historically, aesthetics provided the stage on which the debate over the self-understanding as modern was first fought out in the early eighteenth-century. See Habermas’s summary of the
Having laid out the concept of modernity that informs the articles collected here at some length, I now come back to a point made earlier about modern uncertainty being ‘Janus-faced.’ This description serves the aim of taking into consideration a two-sided dynamic: on the one hand, uncertainty, understood as the breaking away of social, psychological, and philosophical support structures that used to grant stability, puts individual and collective lives in danger; moreover, the reactions to uncertainty in the shape of chance, risk, and security have often had the effect (as emphasized in the Foucauldian tradition) of enabling entry points for technologies of power and control. On the other hand, however, contingency management organized around chance, risk, and security ought not to be conceptualized exclusively as a technology of rule available to those in power. The conceptualization of uncertainty characteristic of modernity is the result of a reshaping of worldviews, everyday attitudes about the past and the future, and modes of social interaction. Uncertainty has not only subtracted older forms of stability, but has also enabled individuals to play a more active role in shaping their lives and their life-world. Calling modern uncertainty Janus-faced, in other words, emphasizes that beside those aspects of uncertainty that lend themselves to the narratives of privation commonly rehearsed in American Studies, there are also those aspects of uncertainty that contain empowering and emancipatory potentials; these come to the fore in the ways that chance, risk, and security have made it possible to take uncertainty as a resource.

II. Uncertainty and Literature

Chance, risk, and security make up a triad of interacting modes of handling uncertainty, and these modes can be studied particularly well, we argue, from within the field of literary studies. The chief reasons for this have to do with the fictionality of literature. In her response to the articles of this issue, Elena Esposito remarks, “[A]ccess to the future can be achieved only through fiction because the future does not yet exist and, at the level of reality, remains inaccessible from the present. […] But if the future is a fiction, then (literary) fiction might just be the preferred means to deal with the future.” If the modern outlook is preoccupied with the future, it is concerned not with the objective occurrence of events in the future but with the present projection of what the future will look like.

Querelle des Anciens et des Modernes (based on Hans Robert Jauß’s account): “The party of the moderns rebelled against the self-understanding of French classicism by assimilating the aesthetic concept of perfection to that of progress as it was suggested by modern natural science. The ‘moderns,’ using historical-critical arguments, called into question the meaning of imitating the ancient models; in opposition to the norms of an apparently timeless and absolute beauty, they elaborated the criteria of a relative or time-conditioned beauty and thus articulated the self-understanding of the French Enlightenment as an epochal new beginning” (Philosophical Discourse 8). As Habermas further remarks, the adjective ‘modern’ was first turned into the noun ‘modernity’ as late as the mid-nineteenth-century, and again it was in the arts that this happened first: “This explains why Moderne and Modernität, modernité and modernity have until our own day a core aesthetic meaning fashioned by the self-understanding of avant-garde art” (8).
To grasp the crucial role of the future in the modern outlook thus necessitates coming to terms with the present attitudes toward the future. And this, Esposito argues, is precisely the domain of literary fiction: “Fiction, after all, can deal with what observers think rather than with how things are.” Literary fiction, in other words, makes accessible to the observer the attitudes—“what people think”—that make up the constructions of the future. Put differently, the present of fiction is the fiction of the future.

If the study of literary fiction, from this perspective, helps shed light on the fictions we employ for the purpose of managing uncertainty in everyday life, this is certainly not the only way in which the fictionality of literature becomes crucial for approaching the place of contingency in modern society. From a slightly different vantage point, literary fiction is linked to modern uncertainty in that fictional literature is a cultural practice that requires of writers and readers a mindset that is of critical importance for coping with a world of contingency. Here, it is not so much that fiction allows us to enrich sociological accounts of modern uncertainty but rather that the practice of (literary) fiction exposes the cognitive operations of modernity at large. Catherine Gallagher has traced this link historically in her landmark essay “The Rise of Fictionality.” Since the rise of the novel, Gallagher suggests, uncertainty has been the enabling condition of literature precisely because the novel helped establish a new type of fictionality. Gallagher shows, with respect to English literature, that until the modern understanding of fictionality became firmly established, literary genres and texts had to make clear that the worlds they represented were not lies. This could be achieved either by highlighting the fantastic character of their invented worlds or, alternatively, by claiming that these invented worlds referred to actually existing reality. This propensity for refuting the fictionality of the literary text occurred even up to the time of Defoe, who claimed that Robinson Crusoe was a real person. Until the novel became an established genre, literature got into trouble whenever it presented a story that was plausible enough to be true, yet was a mere invention: “in the early eighteenth century,” Gallagher writes, “a likely fiction was still considered a lie by the common [English] reader” (339).

As Gallagher explains, the modern understanding of fictionality is based on the ability to give credit to possible worlds without believing them to be true. This makes it possible to see in literature a cultural practice that is related to chance, risk, and security, each of which confronts the uncertainty of the future by creating actionable scenarios that cannot lay claim to being “true” or “certain.” Gallagher speaks of a “disposition of ironic credulity enabled by optimistic incredulity; one is dissuaded from believing the literal truth of a representation so that one can instead admire its likelihood and extend enough credit to buy into the game” (346). Such “flexible mental states,” she continues, “were the sine qua non of modern subjectivity” (346).

To be sure, the rise of fictionality in American literature is not a linear or teleological process, and it has remained contested to the present day. For
this reason, the authors of this issue discuss a wide range of genres, including (alongside novelistic fictions) the essay, poetry, as well as literature’s dialogue with Hollywood film. The contributors thereby point to several further dimensions in which literary aesthetics allows us to comprehend the challenges of uncertainty in modern American culture. I will limit myself here to pointing out three of these connections between uncertainty and literary aesthetics. Paul Grimstad, for one, stresses the provisional character of the journal entry and the essay (as practiced by Ralph Waldo Emerson) and of the various versions which Emily Dickinson produced of her poems. He speaks of “uniquely elastic and modular literary forms for absorbing accidents of revision which may arise in the course of composition,” thus aligning the nineteenth-century conception of the literary creative process itself—and its resulting literary forms—with the modern encounter of contingency. Thomas Dikant, in turn, highlights the key function of uncertainty for narrative. He points out the necessity of the accidental for the generation of plots—which holds even in the case of an author like Edward Bellamy, who strove for a rational, even mechanical, literary aesthetics as the proper vehicle for the fictional production of a utopian world in which all traces of chance have given way to successful planning. Karin Hoepker, finally, highlights how the risk semantics emerging in the nineteenth century influenced the reception aesthetics which Frederick Douglass used in his novella *The Heroic Slave* in order to work toward his desired political effect. As Hoepker puts it, Douglass used “a fragmentary style and strange hybrid aesthetic” in order to narratively stage “the seizing of self-ownership” by the former slave. In effect she argues that Douglass postulated African American agency by presenting the case of his protagonist in such a way that the reader was required to adopt an attitude that “bears all the marks of an emerging sense of an open future and a budding probabilistic paradigm.” Whether on the side of production, narrative form, or reception, literature absorbs, gives shape, and makes available as experience what I have described in abstract terms as the modern challenge of uncertainty.

I will use the remainder of this introduction to sketch out some of the specifics of chance, risk, and security, paying particular attention to the Janus-faced character of each of these modes of managing uncertainty. This will also give me the opportunity to introduce the contributions to this issue.

III. Chance

From the perspective of nineteenth-century philosophers, scientists, and literary artists, ‘chance’ was increasingly regarded as a type of uncertainty that could at best be kept in check but not mastered. This modern notion of chance drastically differs from previous conceptualizations: within the Christian tradition, chance was no more than a poor way of describing human ignorance of God’s will, and within the framework of Enlightenment rationalism, chance had simply been a different name for phenomena situated beyond the limits of human knowledge. As Ian Hacking writes in *The Taming of Chance* (1990), “throughout the Age of
Reason, chance had been called the superstition of the vulgar. Chance, superstition, vulgarity, unreason were of one piece” (1).

As the influence of probabilistic thinking in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries spread beyond mathematics to natural history, theology, jurisprudence, and emerging social sciences such as political economy and statistical sociology, there emerged a widespread understanding of the reality of chance. Statistics and probability theory helped predict the future by creating a mean out of large numbers of chancy events, but the knowledge so gained was remarkably double-edged: since every curve has its outliers that remain impossible to predict and that gain their meaning as outliers only through the predictability of the mean, the probabilistic “taming of chance” (to recall Hacking’s phrase) had to accommodate the recalcitrance of uncertainty. Accepting the reality of chance thus underlined a vision not so much of a tamed life but an uncertain one. As Charles S. Peirce writes in 1878,

> whether a gambler plays in this way or any other, the same thing is true, namely, that if [he] plays long enough he will be sure some time to have such a run against him as to exhaust his entire fortune. The same thing is true of an insurance company. [...] All human affairs rest upon probabilities. (*Collected Papers* 2:653)

In Peirce’s cunning formulation, probabilities, by failing to rein in the uncertainty that will eventually exhaust every gambler’s fortune, defend the reign of *fortuna*, all progress in the probabilistic sciences notwithstanding. Peirce’s position here may sound contradictory, but it really is not: he locates the conditions for rationality in a metaphysical groundlessness—things can only be a matter of rationality if they are not predetermined by some other, higher will—but this very groundlessness makes him insist on the invincibility of uncertainty. He is thus an ally (and heir) of Emerson’s and Dickinson’s, whose writings Paul Grimstad juxtaposes, in his essay “Providence and Contingency in Edwards, Emerson, and Dickinson,” to Jonathan Edwards’s occasionalism, i.e., to the belief that whatever is the case is occasioned by God—including human free will. In pairing Edwards with Emerson and Dickinson, Grimstad critically engages one of the founding texts of Americanist intellectual history, Perry Miller’s essay “Jonathan Edwards to Emerson” (1940). The longevity of Miller’s essay may be explained by its effect of construing an American tradition of thought that ranges from Puritanism all the way to the latter half of the nineteenth century—even if Miller pursued the aim of denigrating that tradition as dangerously prone to an enthusiastic and ecstatic celebration of nature. For Grimstad, however, Miller missed the crucial fact that the transition from Edwards to Emerson (and Dickinson) contained an epochal break: while Edwards revered nature insofar as it pointed back to God, and thus reconfirmed the certainty of God and the inexistence of sheer contingency, “Emerson and Dickinson arrive at their different nature ecstasies [as captured in their phrases “the transparent eyeball” and “the debauchee of dew”] from the insight that nature has no ultimate foundation.” Grimstad goes on to suggest that for Emerson and Dickinson this antifoundationalist approach to nature (what Walter Benn Michaels once called, in reference to another ally of Emerson’s and Dickinson’s, “Walden’s false bottoms”) also swallowed up the distinction between the
human subject and the world. As a result, human thought (and moods) are pervaded by the same contingency as nature. And if what is called thinking ultimately resides in the house of chance, then writing, Grimstad further concludes, is its accidental bedfellow.

In his response to Grimstad, Maurice S. Lee turns our attention to the methodological implications of Grimstad’s account of literary chanciness. If taken seriously, contingency cannot be contained by explicating Emerson’s and Dickinson’s thought and writing, but must come to bear, conceptually, on the very attempt to group together authors in a literary history. Miller, then, does not simply misrecognize the fact that contingency stands between Edwards and Emerson, but he moreover demonstrates only a partial awareness of the problem that any attempt to align Edwards and Emerson has to grapple with its own implicatedness in contingency. Clearly, the problem is not only Miller’s, but also Grimstad’s, and in fact, that of every single contributor to this special issue. However, the solution to this problem, as Lee suggests, cannot lie in doing away with (intellectual) history: precisely insofar as “history [...] show[s] that history renders only probabilistic knowledge” because history writing presumes causal links whose certainty remains dubious, there is no way around acknowledging the central place of chance in whatever we do: “Chance so stubbornly occupies a social and epistemological middle ground that it is difficult to imagine extreme conditions marked by total causal certitude or the absolute absence of causal knowledge.” This middle ground occupied by chance, in other words, is the middle ground we, as cultural historians of chance, must try to take up ourselves. What such a middle ground translates to in practice remains an open question, but we would do well to heed Lee’s implied advice and recognize that “chance impels the historically minded toward an inescapable and generative irony,” since the writing of the history of chance requires its practitioners to at least partially suspend “the skeptical implications of their topic.” Irony, in other words, becomes an expression of the awareness of inhabiting that middle ground on which chance urges us to stake our ground.

In his monograph Uncertain Chances (2011), Lee shows that American writers in the nineteenth century responded to the persistence of uncertainty by forging various kinds of skepticism that moved “from representation toward agency, from ideation toward experience, and from Cartesian and linguistic conundrums toward more practical—and pragmatist—positions” (5). In his contribution to this issue, “The Specter of Uncertainty: Chance in Bellamy’s Utopian Fictions,” Thomas Dikant tests Lee’s claim by turning our attention to a limit case: Edward Bellamy’s utopian novels Looking Backward (1889) and its sequel, Equality (1898). Bellamy’s utopianism consisted in nothing less than the expulsion of uncertainty. Conquering the accidental, Bellamy hoped, would allow for the creation of a society whose members had nothing to fear from the future. The fact that for Bellamy the absence of chance qualifies as utopian may itself be a symptom of a thoroughly skeptical age that recognizes the recalcitrance of uncertainty, but as Dikant shows, chance and the accidental persist even in Bellamy’s vision of uncertainty undone. “The basic operational principle of Bellamy’s future society,” Dikant argues, “is the new science of statistics.” Bellamy’s fictions, in other words, aim to portray the taming of chance as its eradication—a conflation that is
bound to produce contradictions. And indeed, Dikant insists, [for Bellamy] “the improbable accident, the unlikely miscalculation, the intrusion of chance has to be actually possible.” Claims to the contrary notwithstanding, when it comes to creating his utopia, Bellamy cannot but make room for these “specters of uncertainty.” This persistence of chance in Bellamy’s fiction, Maurice Lee suggests in his response to Dikant, ultimately leads us back to aesthetic issues of fictionality and narrativity. “If we are prejudiced toward a belief in causality, we seem also to be prejudiced against causal certitude, at least in literary matters, for societies without differences and romances without chance may be as aesthetically impossible as Tolstoy’s happy families.” Put differently, a utopian fiction of neutralized uncertainty is no less than a contradiction in terms.

IV. Risk

Economic historians have detailed how closely the rise of risk has been tied to the emergence of capitalism. Even etymologically, the word “risk” betrays its economic origins: *rischio* or *rischiare* contains the Greek *rhiza*, which denotes both root and cliff. *Rischiare* thus originally meant sailing around cliffs, or entering waters full of cliffs, and by extension, consciously accepting the danger of shipwreck because of a potential for pecuniary gain (see “Risiko” in Ritter, *Wörterbuch* vol. 8, column 1045). Capitalism thrives on uncertainty and is thus deeply invested in its ambiguity of opportunity and danger. Risk itself is a sign of this ambiguity. On the one hand, the history of risk is the history of attempts to manage it through various kinds of insurance and hedging. This is where risk intersects with the probabilistic revolution and the attempts to tame chance. But on the other hand, there is also, as economic historian Jonathan Levy puts it in his recent *Freaks of Fortune*, “the existential thrill of taking a risk. That tension [between hedging risk and being thrilled by it] was at the very operational and moral heart of both capitalism and a rising liberal order” (2). Emphasizing how risk enables—and compels—action, the concept of risk that informs this special issue is built on its economic origins and thus differs from a competing notion of risk in contemporary critical theory that is closely associated with Ulrich Beck and his concept of “risk society.” For Beck, “risks” designate harmful future events of a broad variety, particularly those brought about by technology. The authors of this special issue, by contrast, comprehend harmful future events as only one dimension of risk and demonstrate how literary writers have explored emerging spaces of action and remedies for the economic failures that all-too often result from the requirement to act in an increasingly financialized world.

In “Frederick Douglass’s *The Heroic Slave*: Risk, Fiction, and Insurance in Antebellum America,” Karin Hoepker uses the historical emergence of risk semantics to draw parallels between the historical *Creole* case of the early 1840s and its literary rendition in Douglass’s fictional novella *The Heroic Slave* (1852). Following a slave insurrection on board the brig *Creole* in 1841, an insurance lawsuit before the Louisiana Supreme Court turned into a crucial step toward the legal recognition of the humanity of slaves—not from humanitarian motives, however,
but because insurance law played a key role in codifying, within capitalist parameters, the meaning of contingency, risk, and human agency. Drawing on Levy’s recent account of the case (see *Freaks*, ch. 2, 21-59), Hoepker relates how the merchants in charge of the *Creole* filed an insurance claim for the goods damaged by the insurrection, including, first and foremost, the economic value of the slaves. Unsurprisingly, the insurance companies challenged this claim by trying to find a loophole that would legally absolve them from payment. They found this loophole in the ‘inherent vice’ clause, which stated that the deterioration of goods from natural causes (e.g., fruit rotting over time) could not be insured. To make this case, the insurance companies’ legal defense argued—successfully, it would turn out—that slaves had a natural inclination toward freedom. Moreover, they argued that the slaves, in following their inherent tendency to deteriorate as an economic good by searching for freedom, had acted with foresight in planning the revolt, and had thus appropriated their own risk. This could only mean that the slaves’ futures were no longer the property of the slaveholders and therefore could not be insured by them. While the court case gave legal recognition to the appropriation of risk by the slaves, it confronted slaveholders with a level of uncertainty to which they were unaccustomed: As Elena Esposito remarks in her response, the ‘inherent vice’ clause entailed an “inevitable uncertainty [for the slave owners]: they were exposed to a risk that remains open.” This fascinating episode of legal history builds the backdrop for Hoepker’s article, in which she argues that Douglass’s fictionalization—and political appropriation—of the *Creole* case in *The Heroic Slave* rested, like the reasoning of the insurance companies’ legal strategists, “on the conviction of a non-providential open future,” which was accompanied by the presumption of “a basic human capacity, in white citizens and African Americans alike, to assume responsibility and possess the risk of one’s own future.” Hoepker makes a case for the importance of the fact that Douglass turned to fiction in order to present his case to the reader. Rather than employ the sentimental protocols of the non-fictional slave narrative, in which the reader was expected to feel sympathy for the fugitive, Douglass, she argues, employed fiction in order to make the reader aware (not unlike Melville in *Bentio Cerenio*) of his or her own prejudiced assumptions. Put differently, Douglass used fiction to turn his readers into self-reflexive skeptics. Ideally, this would allow them to recognize in Madison Washington, Douglass’s version of the leader of the slave revolt, a model of the modern, skeptical risk-taker to which they could only aspire.

If Hoepker presents a case in which the capitalist logic of risk had an unintended emancipatory side effect that lent itself to literary appropriation by an activist like Douglass, in the current historical situation, portrayals of economic risk management as emancipatory have become a hard sell. What the late cultural theorist Randy Martin called “the financialization of daily life,” i.e., in Christian Kloeckner’s words, the expectation of people “to accept more risks and become investors in their own lives,” rather appears as a kind of imprisonment holding more and more people captive. In “Risk and Nostalgia: Fictions of the Financial Crisis,” Kloeckner therefore inquires into available cultural models for resistance against the ever-more pervasive logic of investing in the future. For this purpose, he turns to recent novels by Paul Auster (*Sunset Park*, 2010) and Dave Eggers (*A Hologram*
Both of these texts give expression to the longing for a real, non-virtual dimension of life that counteracts the overwhelming future-directedness exemplified by finance capitalism. Esposito, in responding to Kloeckner, points out how closely the nostalgic longing for a non-financialized past mirrors the speculative frenzy of the financial markets. While financialization is a cultural and cognitive operation in which the “present future” (the future as it looks from the vantage of today) is falsely equated with the “future present” (the future that is unknowable today and will only come to pass in the future), nostalgia construes a “present past” that was never real, and falsely equates it with the “past present” (which once indeed was real, but which nostalgia outright denies). Esposito concludes that because nostalgia is “situated at the site between the fiction of a future that does not yet exist and the fiction of a past that exists no longer, [it] does not contradict the ‘futurism’ of finance but paradoxically confirms it.”

Kloeckner, on the other hand, does not seem to share completely Esposito’s radical critique of nostalgia. Drawing on Svetlana Boym’s influential distinction between ‘restorative’ and ‘reflexive nostalgia,’ he reads Auster’s and Eggers’s novels as “gestur[ing] towards a search for an alternative to finance’s future.” This alternative—nostalgic in what Boym calls the ‘reflexive’ sense—does not consist of mirroring the futurism of finance into the past, but rather of devising a sense of the future “based on an aesthetics of uncertainty.” Instead of aiming to subdue uncertainty by equating ‘present future’ with ‘future present,’ as is common practice in the models of finance, Kloeckner’s emerging notion of nostalgic futurism thus aims to sever the semantics of risk from the instruments of its ostensibly management.

V. Security

Whereas risk describes an active stance of seeking out uncertainty for the possible gains contained in it, security designates a constellation in which the perception of a malevolent threat creates the necessity to act. Evoking necessity, the logic of security plays on an existential register: figuratively at least, security is a struggle of life and death. Because what is at stake is survival, the rhetoric of security has proven to be a potent way of legitimating extraordinary measures, whether that rhetoric is used by the state or other actors. The influential Copenhagen School of Security Studies builds its theory on exactly this idea: actors endowed with sufficient symbolic capital can make “securitizing” speech acts that remove a given issue from the realm of deliberation and instead sanction emergency measures (see Buzan et al.). However, theories that explain the essence of the cultural logic of security to reside in emergency measures and states of exception face difficulties in capturing the intellectual, affective, and aesthetic dimensions of security, for they tend to portray the population as the passive victim of exceptional—and ultimately oppressive—rule. Doing so, such theoretical approaches neglect the fact that security is a distinct protocol of handling the uncertainty of the future. Threats principally point to merely potential futures, which is why it is possible to confront threats in the first place. In confronting a threat, an alterna-
tive future is created, which, however, remains essentially uncertain itself. In finding
a response to insecurity, the subject of security thus turns the uncertainty of
the future to its own favor. In the logic of security, no less than in those of chance
and risk, uncertainty is a generative force, which is the reason why security, like
chance and risk, has the capacity to bring to the fore the Janus-faced character of
modern uncertainty.

Michael C. Frank’s contribution, “At War with the Unknown: Hollywood,
Homeland Security, and the Cultural Imaginary of Terrorism after 9/11,” ex-
plores how the recent deployment of security in the so-called ‘war on terror’ con-
ceptually differs from risk. While the techniques of risk management developed
in the financial sector aim to neutralize uncertainty, the Bush administration
aimed to popularize an understanding of security which rested on the awareness
and acceptance of uncertainty. Frank notes that the official rhetoric insistently
stressed “the notion that the enemy was (essentially, not accidentally) unknown
and even unknowable.” While this “considerably increased [the enemy’s] per-
ceived dangerousness,” Frank suggests that the jargon of unknowability—Don-
ald Rumsfeld’s ruminations on ‘unknown unknowns’ may be the best exam-
ple—seems to have been more than a strategy of fear-mongering (though that
played an important role as well). If in the context of financialization, Christian
Kloeckner interprets the “aesthetics of uncertainty” as containing a potential for
resistance, Michael Frank proposes that in the case of security an aesthetics of
uncertainty lies at the very foundation of state power: “By constructing a world
of uncertainty, the security system maintains itself [and] immunizes itself against
the corrective of empirical evidence.”

As a corollary of the official emphasis on uncertainty, Frank points out (build-
ing on the work of sociologist Frank Furedi), security discourse after 9/11 increas-
ingly began to lament the failure of the imagination to foresee the attacks. Con-
sequently, “the creation of imaginative scenarios soon became an official means
of complementing—and, if necessary, substituting for—observation and analysis.”
Frank’s provocative claim is that since the ‘unknown unknowns’ would always
remain unknown, knowledge had to make way for the imagination. This has en-
dowed popular terror fictions across different media (which Frank terms “the
cultural imaginary” of terrorism) with a new role. Because such texts are taken
to be prophetic, their prophecies become (partially) self-fulfilling: in operating
as Ersatz-knowlege, their fictional scenarios have an actual effect (though its
magnitude, Frank admonishes, should not be overstated) on the shape of security
measures taken by the state. In his response, Donald E. Pease calls into ques-
tion precisely this point of Frank’s argument. The cultural imaginary, Pease in-
sists, should not be conflated with the analytical work carried out clandestinely
by counter-terrorism agencies. The cultural imaginary is rather used strategically
by the state so that covert operations can “become representable as ‘real’ to the
public,” as Pease puts it. At issue in this debate is whether state officials are them-
selves caught up in the cultural imaginary of terrorism, or whether they are in
control of its strategic deployment and its continuing remaking. In other words,
the crucial question debated by Frank and Pease concerns how, in the political
practice of security, the condition of uncertainty gets converted into state power.
If Frank emphasizes the ways in which the complex interplay of uncertainty and imagination has become instrumental for the politics of the security state, my own contribution, “In the Future, Toward Death: Finance Capitalism and Security in DeLillo’s *Cosmopolis,*” provides a complementary view that aims to come to terms with the cultural power of security, which is, I suggest, better understood as a fascination with insecurity. Related to Kloeckner’s reconstruction of a nostalgic alternative to the future-fixation of finance, I interpret the appeal of security as a promise of offering such an alternative. In DeLillo’s homecoming tale of a mega-rich currency trader, financial risk and the contemporary cult of security come together as the novel’s two thematic axes. The future-mindedness of financial risk management is counteracted by the lethal-threat constructions that drive the concern with security and that emphasize finitude and mortality. The preoccupation with security enables a turn to existential matters that the virtual abstractions of finance have seemingly made inaccessible. Yet, DeLillo’s novel isn’t a fantasy of some simple return to the real and authentic. Ultimately, DeLillo suggests, in a financialized world like ours, there is no direct exit out of the temporality of risk, and security certainly does not provide it. But the focus of security on vulnerability does offer a way of perverting the contingency management of finance capitalism. It is security’s fascination with mortality that can transform finance’s business with the future into what DeLillo calls “the business of living,” i.e., a life lived in the awareness of contingency and the certainty of death. The paradox is that, seen from a different angle, security’s recovery of the business of living appears as enamored with death itself, as is attested by the violence committed in its name. This paradox seems to lie at the core of Donald Pease’s suggestion, in his response, of an alternative reading to my own. While I claim that DeLillo’s concern with insecurity and physical vulnerability pierces through the shields of virtuality in ways that had been reserved, in his earlier novels, for terrorist figures, Pease suggests that with the creation of the protagonist Eric Packer, DeLillo may not in fact have strayed from the terrorism formula at all. The larger ramification would be that the transvaluation of security I undertake in my essay is a construction that lacks textual evidence. This introduction is not the place to settle this debate. Pease’s intervention, however, insightfully shows what is at stake in calling security ‘Janus-faced’: such a description of security may amount to an attempt to imagine emancipating potentials in what is ultimately a celebration of deadly violence.

Works Cited


