

Reviews/Comptes Rendus

Joseph Fichtelberg. *Risk Culture: Performance and Danger in Early America*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2010. x+254pp. US\$28.95. ISBN 978-0-472-05094-9.

Joseph Fichtelberg's latest book opens with a discussion of John Smith's exploits in Virginia and concludes with a chapter on Aaron Burr. The stories of these two notorious adventurers make fitting bookends for a study of how the performance of risky behaviour became central to the activity of identity construction in colonial and early national America. In Fichtelberg's account, the performance of risk-taking (whether in real life or in literary narratives) responded to the new conditions of social and economic mobility associated with the European colonization of North America. Fichtelberg mixes analysis of the careers of historical figures such as Smith and Burr with readings of various genres of literary narrative, from spiritual autobiography to the novel. As Fichtelberg tells it, such constructions of identity developed over two centuries to eventually coalesce in Burr's embodiment of "the spirit of a new American enterprise—dangerous, calculating, reflexive, performative" (216). The terms Fichtelberg employs to describe Burr resonate with descriptions other scholars have offered of American identity in the nineteenth-century world of market capitalism. Hence, Fichtelberg's book can be understood to offer a prehistory of that form of performative, individualistic, market-oriented identity.

Following a brief introduction, Fichtelberg's first two full chapters analyze the reports of John Smith and other late sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century European explorers/settlers of Virginia and the Puritan narratives of "suspect grace" that dwell upon spiritual risks. Juxtaposing these two types of narratives allows Fichtelberg to demonstrate the extent to which the apparently disparate settlers of Virginia and New England were preoccupied with some common problems of risk-taking and uncertainty. Fichtelberg deserves praise for presenting a geographically balanced account of early American identity formation, one that privileges neither the spiritual strivings of New England nor the more overtly commercial purposes of the Virginia settlers. It must be noted that Fichtelberg does not go as far in this respect as have other recent scholarly accounts, such as those of Anna Brickhouse and Sean X. Goudie. Fichtelberg's account of early American writing focuses on some of the best-known figures of the Anglophone tradition, whereas other recent scholarship has emphasized the multilingual qualities and hemispheric interconnections of colonial North America and the Caribbean. However, it will not be difficult

for readers of Fichtelberg's study to extrapolate his argument to the other writers and cultural groups brought to light by scholars such as Brickhouse and Goudie.

Fichtelberg's remaining chapters leap forward to the early national period of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries; one takes up African-American identity construction in the writings of Phillis Wheatley and John Marrant, while another assesses the novels of Susanna Rowson. As the chronology suggests, there is an implicit teleology to Fichtelberg's argument. The seventeenth-century writings of John Smith and the New England Puritans instigate the preoccupation with risk that eventually flowers in the early national writings of people like Wheatley and Rowson. Indeed, Fichtelberg's readings make the African-American writers sound much like the Puritans in their preoccupation with the risky possibilities of salvation and damnation, and writers with commercial or political interests turn out to employ much the same rhetoric of risk as spiritual writers. Fichtelberg's analysis seems to owe a lot to Max Weber's famous theory linking the "Protestant ethic" to a later capitalist preoccupation with profit and loss. Ultimately, the argument of the book suggests that a certain kind of questing, which often takes a spiritual form, is consonant with the structure of human activity in the period of the nineteenth-century market revolution. This is true even for critics of risk culture, such as Rowson, whose characters, "buffeted by gossip and slander," can find happiness only through the performance of an oppositional fidelity (145). The cultural lineage stretching from John Smith to Aaron Burr thus passes through all of these diverse characters. There are both strengths and weaknesses to this style of historical analysis. Fichtelberg succeeds in demonstrating that a conception of "risk" was a common factor in colonial and early national American life. Yet readers may wonder about the extent to which Fichtelberg collapses two centuries of history around his central concept. Certainly "risk," in one form or another, has been a factor in all of human life; Fichtelberg's argument raises the question of when and how we can begin identifying a certain way of responding to risk as part of a distinctively modern culture, one linked more or less directly to commerce.

One of the strongest aspects of the book is its careful attention to the concept of "performance" (a key word in the subtitle). The term has become ubiquitous in literary criticism and cultural history since the publication of Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* (1990), but its use has grown increasingly casual and divorced from the intellectual foundations on which Butler drew. Fichtelberg goes back to the seminal philosopher of language J.L. Austin (an important influence on Butler) to re-establish a theoretically rigorous definition of "performance" based on Austin's theory of "performative utterances." For Austin, as Fichtelberg explains, "the performative is an expression that does work

or accomplishes an end, such as the pronouncement of wedding vows” (7). Fichtelberg carefully employs Austin’s ideas about how language works to emphasize agency; this book focuses on action, rather than representation. By juxtaposing Austin’s concept of performativity with a description of modernity adopted from Anthony Giddens, Fichtelberg provides a sophisticated, well-informed foundation for his readings of individual authors and genres. Fichtelberg’s close readings of texts are always lucid, persuasive, and detailed. It will be up to individual readers to decide whether these readings support the architecture of a sweeping historical argument that ambitiously seeks to connect over two hundred years of cultural history. It might have been safer for Fichtelberg to confine his study exclusively to literature of the Revolutionary and early national period, simplifying the question of historical change, but the books that last the longest tend to be those that take more risks.

Thomas Allen is an associate professor of English at the University of Ottawa, where he teaches American literature.

Toni Bowers. *Force or Fraud: British Seduction Stories and the Problem of Resistance, 1660–1760*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011. xvi+366pp. £60. ISBN 978-0-19-959213-5.

Like an earworm, Foucault’s catchy dictum “we must not think that by saying yes to sex, one says no to power” ran through my head the entire time I was reading Bowers’s new, forceful critical work. On the one hand, the formulation is entirely applicable to the central argument of *Force or Fraud*: seduction stories in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries are not so much about sex as they are about negotiating compromised forms of power for writers of tory sensibility in the wake of 1688. On the other hand, the dictum is completely misplaced since the power of Bowers’s explanatory thesis points directly away from Foucault’s modern concept of sex as speaking the deepest truths of our interiorized selves to an entirely different model of political subjectivity. In *Force or Fraud*, the sexual dynamics of seduction’s dominance and subordination are assumed, but the stability of the tale’s “topoi” precisely allows tory writers to use it to negotiate a political model of what Bowers names “collusive resistance—a paradoxical exercise of *resistance through submission*” (4). Seduction tales allegorize the “complex moral position” of remaining obedient to both a hereditary monarchy and Anglicanism, of articulating a politics that was neither jacobite nor whig. Stories of false promises, innocence duped, complicit desires, and sexual betrayals are perfect veils under which to explore a subjectivity that combines virtue and complicity, obedience and resistance.