

CHAPTER I



Nightmares of History

Late in the spring of 1608, after losing nearly half his men to “extremity” during the winter, John Smith heard a curious story. Hard pressed to establish cordial relations with the Powhatans, on whom Jamestown depended for food, he sojourned with the “king” of Acawmacke, “the comliest proper civill Salvage” in the region. The chief related a strange “accident.”

Two dead children by the extreame passions of their parents, or some dreaming visions, phantasie, or affection moved them againe to revisit their dead carkases, whose benumbed bodies reflected to the eies of the beholders such pleasant delightfull countenances, as though they had regained their vital spirits. This as a miracle drew many to behold them, all which, (being a great part of his people) not long after died, and not any one escaped.¹

Smith records the tale as an example of native vanity, a ghost story heralding the decline of even his most cordial adversaries. If there were risk in a colonial endeavor that had already cost so many English lives, Smith implies, that risk was hedged by the providential evacuation of Virginia. The dreamlike deaths of these civil savages had prepared the way for civilization.

The chief’s story is all the more poignant for its prophetic accuracy. Thomas Harriot’s remark that the Algonquians were stricken by disease as

if by “invisible bullets” seems painfully evident in the vision, as if the Powhatans were groping for a metaphor to explain the risks of contact.² The incident, if it really occurred, amounted to a ritual performance, as the mourners attempted to “revisit their dead” and, animating them, discovered the corruption in themselves. But despite the providential design at Acawmacke, the story could not but point to Jamestown’s own “extremity,” the fruits of a hazardous adventure for which the English were not sufficiently prepared. The English, too, died in droves from mysterious illnesses conveyed, as if magically, through contact and neglect. Even if Smith had wanted to foreclose this cruel irony, the very force of the metaphor must have made it all too evident to his many English enemies. In short, a performance designed to celebrate the colony’s triumph also underscored its jeopardy. In relating a narrative of contagion, Smith had signified his own risks as well.

The story of Acawmacke, however, is more than a metaphor for the dangers of contact. One of the earliest stories of its kind betraying English fears of contagion, it announces a pattern that I will explore in this book. At a moment of crisis, when the fledgling colony was near collapse, Smith seeks comfort in an account that confronts trauma through a double displacement: Indians, not colonists, suffered, and the dead returned to life. Yet the threat is apprehended not through a scene of apocalyptic dread but through a social ritual suggesting regeneration. It was as if the community had tried to weave new garments from its wounds, even if the garments were death shrouds. The dream thus served as a complex token in a cultural exchange in which both peoples enlisted ritual, rupture, and narrative to reflect on the hazards they endured.

The title of this book, *Risk Culture: Performance and Danger in Early America*, represents my attempt to think through the literary and historical implications of this encounter. How did early American writers weave their narratives around the traumatic displacements that all too often distinguished colonial and early national experience? Conversely, how was that experience domesticated, its dread diminished through communal rituals, exchanges, and stories? The phrase *risk culture*, which I borrow from the British sociologist Anthony Giddens, is intended to embrace these concerns. As Giddens argues, the story of modernity—that engine of social change driving the Western world since the seventeenth century—is one of the continuous and creative engagement of rupture, the productive destruction of the past. Modernity, Giddens writes in *Modernity and Self-*

Identity, is a “risk culture”—not in the sense that “social life is inherently more risky than it used to be” but that “the concept of risk becomes fundamental to the way [we] . . . organise the social world.”³ Risk, as Giddens argues and as I shall try to demonstrate, is not merely a term for the accelerated production of hazards, since these are endemic to human and social life. Nor is risk necessarily baneful, as generals, thrill-seekers, and entrepreneurs have long understood. My title, then, seeks to capture the thoroughly mediatory role of risk in the texts and lives I will examine—lives that both apprehend risk through cultural performances and also nurture, as in a plasma culture, the risky social engagements their texts and actions bring about. These texts, in short, are the medium of cultural exchange that allowed early Americans to tell the story of modernity to themselves.

That last phrase is itself a risky one, suggesting the grand sweep of a history difficult to document. In our postmodern era, the very status of modernity has been called into question, as if the processes and assumptions that shaped Western experience for centuries are no longer valid. One sign of that rupture is the discussion of risk stimulated by Giddens and German sociologist Ulrich Beck. It was Beck’s contention, in *Risk Society*, that the world has entered a new and dangerous phase in which nature and culture, tainted by industry, have turned on themselves. Whereas hitherto the rationalized world has been driven by the circulation of goods, now, Beck argues, we are overwhelmed by an effusion of ills that know no boundary or control. The tipping point, in Beck’s apocalyptic scenario, was the 1970s, when the mounting toll of overproduction and overconsumption made industrial menace the new norm from which no one, rich or poor, could escape. Modernity had destroyed itself through its astounding yet cancerous success.⁴

Giddens’s discussion of risk culture, though influenced by Beck’s approach, is more balanced and expansive, tied as it is to a comprehensive view of social change. Over his fifty-year career, his thought has addressed three major concerns—a critique of sociological tradition, in such works as *A Contemporary Critique of Historical Materialism* and *The Class Structure of Advanced Societies*; an elaboration of a new theory relating social structure and action (*New Rules of Sociological Method*, *The Constitution of Society*); and, most recently, an account of modern political and social conditions (*The Consequences of Modernity*, *Modernity and Self-Identity*, *Runaway World*—among many others). For Giddens, the impetus of modern history is not the Marxian contradiction of productive forces but what he

calls “time-space distancing”—the pursuit of social relations over ever greater removes. In traditional societies, village life is local life, universally conducted in the continuous presence of others. In such circumstances, social relations, the strategies through which individuals determine how to “go on,” are rooted in old patterns modified to meet present needs. The rise of cities acted as “storage containers” disturbing this steady state and generating further stresses that would transform local life through economies of scale. A decisive shift emerged in the seventeenth century, as Europeans dramatically expanded beyond national and continental boundaries. “The advent of modernity,” Giddens writes, “increasingly tears space away from place by fostering relations between ‘absent’ others, locationally distant from any given situation of face-to-face interaction.” From this perspective, modernity is not merely the effect of displacement or extensive travel; rather, it is the psychological and social expectation that the local is penetrated by the foreign. Space and time are emptied out, Giddens argues, increasingly standardized in a gradual but radical process he calls “disembedding.” Disembedded relations “lift out” social activities, both extending the range of individual influence and unsettling local habits; even as they heighten the need for trust among strangers, the dialectics of locality and distance, security and danger, mark the rhythms of the modern world. Under such conditions, even the simplest conduct may become revolutionary.⁵

By grounding his account of modernity in time-space distancing, Giddens has sought an alternative to the Parsonian functionalism that still dominated sociology when he began his career. To the Parsonian emphasis on steady states and systemic imperatives, Giddens has opposed inherent principles of change. Although his weave of evidence is intricate, ranging through philosophy, psychoanalysis, linguistics, and anthropology, two strands may be isolated. Giddens argues that social structures are constantly revised through individual action. Structure, in his analysis, is not sovereign and remote but virtual and intimate; it is a fund of rules, resources, and practices “recursively organiz[ing]” social relations. Everyday action involves the continuous mediation between experience and innovation, the knowledge of how things are done and the freedom to improvise—each free act adding to the fund of expectation and desire in a process that Giddens calls “structuration.” This stress on continuous reinvention is counterbalanced by the need for “reflexivity,” the rational self-scrutiny imperative in the modern world. The activities of instrumental

reason demand constant monitoring and reappraisal, a process that comes to dominate not only technical production but all human affairs. In this fashion, human behavior increasingly reflects the risky natural environment that moderns have brought into existence: all actions are conditional; all stances are exploratory; no domain is secure. Both nature and culture have become sensitive to the continuous inventions and displacements that mark what Jürgen Habermas calls the modern “lifeworld.”⁶

How are these concerns useful for a discussion of the early American figures I will examine? One more feature of Giddens’s modern world picture might indicate their relevance. Among the prime disembedding agents, Giddens argues, are what he calls “tokens”—those symbols, like money, that can be readily exchanged over space and time and thus build the web of trust. Money—to which one might add credit relations—compresses time and entangles local affairs in complex networks, the full force of which is felt in the price runs and market shocks that have become all too common.⁷ Tokens, it should be noted, may be productive as well as menacing and are not confined to economic relations. Indeed, as I shall argue, one of the chief tokens in the process of modernity to be discussed in this book are the texts and textual relations that John Smith and his successors wrote and undertook. Not only did their texts—circulated, marketed, and pirated—promote the extension of space and time by reaching far-flung readers, but they also contributed to the unsettling, critical scrutiny of the social relations they described. Like Smith’s account of Acawmacke, the texts and contexts I will survey—from trial transcripts to newspaper reports; from novels and poetry to journals, sermons, and promotions—formed a pattern of continuous reflection and displacement that I have organized under the rubric *risk*. Risk—a word that acquired its current sense of “jeopardy” around the time that Giddens situates the rise of modernity—is my term for what Raymond Williams calls a “structure of feeling,” that web of anxieties and expectations that has come to shape modern cultures, texts, and lives. Risk is the crisis of tradition and innovation played out through the disruption of space, time, and agency. Risk is the sensation of the normal under conditions of emergency.⁸

In making this claim, I recognize that I am running several additional risks of my own. First, the cultural relations I am seeking to describe may well be too elusive to be easily summarized with a word so capacious as *risk*. That modern people have become more mobile, that they write, trade, build, and battle at ever greater removes, is a commonplace, one that

does not necessarily imply a grand theory or equally grand literary claims. Second, Giddens's approach to modernity is only one in a very crowded field and can lay no more claim to accuracy than any of the analyses he has himself criticized. Indeed, Giddens's theories have excited considerable resistance from sociologists who claim that his work is too abstract, a congeries of intellectual influences that make it difficult to test or evaluate.⁹ Third, my approach will not be rigorously sociological. I do not seek to write a study in the sociology of literature, in which texts are extensions of social processes, the evaluation of everyday conduct by other means. I am using risk more as a topos than as a sociological category, as a means to situate writers and readers in a complex change that the works I examine both shape and memorialize. Insofar as Giddens's claims are accurate, this topos should be visible in early American texts marked by the disruption of traditional practices. Yet, as Giddens observes, those very disruptions become part of the cultural formula for "going on," so that the interferences continuously alter attitudes and actions. It is this process of adjustment, rather than its theoretical entanglements, that I intend to explore in this book.

One aspect of my project might serve to distinguish it from Giddens's approach, as well as to respond to some of the objections of his critics. Giddens's discussion of time-space distanciation has been singled out by such geographers as Derek Gregory and John Urry for being insensitive to the local textures of movement. The habits and diversions of daily life cannot be captured, they claim, through a theory that imagines time as uniform and space as invariant; each dimension is sensitive to the pressures of accident, imagination, and desire.¹⁰ One could make a similar point regarding Giddens's view of historical change. The inexorable conduct of rational agents pursuing calculated advantage across an ever-expanding field does not quite capture the experience of dread and longing conveyed in the story of Acawmacke. Missing, I shall argue, is one final, crucial dimension, that of the performative. Smith's relation of the chief's tale not only recounts a performance but is performative in the linguistic sense of using words to effect actions. The account of the disastrous ritual inverts the colonists' jeopardy and enacts a double vow: the failed promise of resurrection entailed in the dream, and the extended promise of Smith's text that Jamestown would avoid the Powhatans' fate. That so many Virginians died testifies to the instability of such performative engagements.

The encounters I shall explore in *Risk Culture* are mediated and made

possible by these performative relations. I will use the term *performative* in a variety of ways. In the sense first announced by J. L. Austin, the performative is an expression that does work or accomplishes an end, such as the pronouncement of wedding vows. This revolutionary insight into language use has been complicated by several recent thinkers, including Jacques Derrida and Judith Butler, who point to an opposing effect of the performative—not to secure but to unsettle social order through the appropriation of everyday language. If words can do work, they argue, then words can be made to do subversive work through their citation in radically new or threatening contexts. These observations, in turn, have led to a host of studies exploring how words, gestures, and performances have made subjects of servants and have given subalterns a measure of authority. The performative, that is to say, has become a trope for the mutually challenging effects of language and power. In this expanded sense, the performative dissolves, in some measure, the difference between texts and actions, or rather, incorporates text and action in a wider field in which words and deeds are aspects of the same cultural expression.¹¹

Viewed from this perspective, the performative is very close to Giddens's concept of structuration. It provides a means to think through the relations of action, language, and order and to view them as a sensitive and malleable system. An emphasis on performance and the performative will also allow me to focus on the local resistances and adjustments made by actors coping with the risks of modernity. Their texts suggest a double strategy. Relying on the power of words to secure order, they looked to the past, recording and enacting old attitudes even as they situated them in radically new circumstances. Like Smith recounting an Indian dream, they repeated narratives and behaviors in a manner that made them rich and strange. The very extravagance of these familiar performances transformed the texts into blueprints for altered behavior, even as such new behavior was rendered in accounts that attempted to extend traditional acts. In this manner, the production of narratives in an environment of risk resembles that reflexiveness Giddens underscores as a key trait of modernity. In risk narratives, the practice of self-scrutiny helped to dislodge the settled world.

My exemplars of this process are refugees and wanderers—adventurers like John Smith and Aaron Burr, hounded from office and seeking land; migrants like the Barbadian Salem “witch” Tituba, who fantasized spectral flights to Boston, or the itinerant John Marrant, evangelizing in Nova Scotia; abandoned women like Charlotte Temple and women abandoned like

Charlotte's fictional sister Meriel Howard. These figures experience risk viscerally. Stunned by their sudden loss of certainty, they grope for a vocabulary of bodily ills—the Salem accusers' charges of physical wounds, Phillis Wheatley's preoccupation with death, Marrant's catalog of suffering. Yet these are not isolated preoccupations. They flow from the threats to shared values that force these writers to improvise, to provide a performative response. Values that we now associate with the public sphere, attitudes of trust, performative rituals of vows and oath taking, ideals of authority reinforced through performances of honor, patronage, or marriage are all cast in doubt for these writers, and their texts grope for a response to uncertainty. Yet the writers also experience their losses in larger terms—not merely as personal misfortune, but as disruptions in the nature of authority itself. Like John Smith at Acawmacke, risk narrators attempt to re-fashion the world with words and, in doing so, confront the limits of their agency and power.

This emphasis on agency distinguishes *Risk Culture* from many recent literary critical investigations of risk, which tend to emphasize representation rather than action. The largest class of such studies, including Nicky Marsh's *Money, Speculation, and Finance in Contemporary British Fiction*, Michelle Burhnam's *Folded Selves*, Gail Houston's *From Dickens to Dracula*, and Jennifer Jordan Baker's *Securing the Commonwealth*, addresses economic risk. Literary texts make threats visible, these writers argue, but they also blunt their impact. According to Elaine Freedgood, whose *Victorian Writing about Risk* is the most subtle discussion to date, nineteenth-century British writers imagined risk in order to dispose of it, offering "modern cosmologies" that made the world safe for the risk takers themselves. This emphasis on representation and ideology may also be seen in a second group of studies treating environmental risks. In Ursula Heise's *Sense of Place and Sense of Planet* and Lawrence Buell's *Writing for an Endangered World*, literary texts are crucial in exposing the perception of risk, the ways in which works of the imagination may enhance the dry statements of insurers and statisticians. Such studies, while valuable, however, keep risk at arm's length—as a context or a container for reflection. The writers I discuss, by contrast, make risk personal. Their texts, like the trials they record, attempt to wed the *experience* of risk to its apprehension and to make writing the means and the measure of action. To record risk, these writers demonstrate, is at once to constitute, to master, and to yield to its disruptive power.¹²

I will try to demonstrate these claims through close readings of texts

and circumstances that have provided a cultural vocabulary for risk. Chapter 2 examines John Smith's many accounts of his adventures as an attempt to secure the promise of colonial expansion in a milieu where the very meaning of promise was decisively changing. In both England and Virginia, the courtly world of status and honor was yielding to riskier relations of contract and trade—relations that Smith would attempt to mediate in a complex and shifting manner. Already in his youth, the performative function of promising and oath taking, preserved in elaborate state-supported ceremonies under the Tudors, was giving way to political and material strains represented with equal force by Puritan casuists and by tradesmen given wider legal authority to make their own bargains. Promising was no longer restricted to the domain of courtly ceremony; it had been appropriated by an array of cultural Others who used this performative act to assert their own authority. Smith's accounts of Virginia both exploit and resist these opportunities. Bargaining with the Powhatans for food, he falls back on the courtly language of obligation, a language that competes throughout his narratives with a rhetoric of shame and loss. To avoid the risk of pollution, of turning into the very "salvages" he seeks to dominate, he must turn to performance in the literal sense, staging colonial encounters as dramatic set pieces. Yet at such moments as his citation of the dream of Acawmacke, he also glimpses the costs of these performances in a heightened sense of his own exposure. His narratives of mastery put colonial dominance itself at risk.

Chapters 3 and 4 use the religious vocabulary of dread to examine threats to personal agency. In chapter 3, I focus on the clash of ritual and testimony in seventeenth-century Massachusetts. While Puritan ritual has often been depicted as a cohesive force binding communities, close attention to Puritan testimony may tell a different story. Just as John Smith sought to gain mastery in an entangling logic of performance that undermined him, so the Puritan ministers John Fiske and Samuel Parris enacted rituals that challenged their authority. For Fiske, pastor of a church in Wenham, just north of Salem, the contradiction involved the performative nature of church discipline. All communicants were required to narrate their personal encounter with the Word, enunciated in the private and compromised language of the sinful believer. When ministers had to discipline unruly members, as Fiske did with one George Norton, they were faced with the dilemma of using the fallen testimony of neighbors and rivals to discern spiritual truths. That testimony was bound up with a host

of worldly concerns, conflicts over property, social standing, and the pressures of in-migration that turned church discipline into a trial of disembedding agents. For more than a year, Norton teased and frustrated the church that wanted to humble him, and in doing so, exposed the fragility of ritual speech. If spiritual testimony were open to such doubt, Fiske found himself wondering, on what basis could he trust his own motives and judgment?

The Salem crisis disclosed the risks of ritual in sublime episodes of traumatic displacement, as accused witches like Tituba claimed to be bodily transported and as accusers like Mercy Lewis imagined confrontations with ghostly bodies. Here displacement took on a terrifying power, as Salem villagers struggled with the shocks of war and social change. However, as I will argue, the source of these traumatic rifts lay not in novelty but in the uses of a tradition conveyed in the sermons of Samuel Parris, minister of the Salem church. The hypnotically repetitive sermon cycles that Parris delivered to celebrate communion in the years surrounding the witchcraft crisis were of a piece with the gossip, recriminations, and testimony involved in the Salem trials. All of these linguistic events were performative in both the strict and the extended sense: they used language to create and enforce the illusion of community. Yet that language also incurred a frightening risk, for the hallucinatory testimony was but the distorted repetition of Parris's own words. The sacred language that bound the community was also the means of its undoing.

Chapter 4 transfers these concerns to the black Atlantic. Both Phillis Wheatley and John Marrant were Calvinists for whom threats to the body were literal—Wheatley by virtue of her enslavement, Marrant through his painful ministry to freed slaves in Nova Scotia after the Revolutionary War. Like Tituba, who used her performative power to translate Parris's warnings into narratives of possession, Wheatley and Marrant use the terror of Calvinist sin to figure both their frailty and their authority. Both writers responded to the ferment of the period, its expanded possibilities for mobility and personal expression, with a mixture of reticence and assertion. Wheatley's finely crafted poetry was literally performative—delivered before her master's friends in Boston and, after the publication of *Poems on Various Subjects* in London, securing her freedom. Her words, from this vantage, had an obvious spiritual and social authority. Yet Wheatley's aesthetic was rooted in spiritual assumptions that also denied power. As an heir of the Great Awakening, she was drawn to scenes of traumatic fail-

ure—hurricanes, sudden deaths, biblical depictions of slaughter—as a means of preaching to her readers. Enunciating these catastrophes, she forced her audience to confront the Calvinist sublime and to acknowledge that terror as their animating principle. Yet in doing so, Wheatley was also forced to confront her own abysses, the limits of thought and feeling that everywhere circumscribed her freedom. Hers is a chastened aesthetic in which performative power declares and undoes itself.

That same performative ambiguity characterizes John Marrant's *Journal*, the only extended work that he wrote himself. This account of the minister's sojourn in Nova Scotia has recently been seen as a testament to recuperative power. Whereas Marrant, like the expatriate slaves who took refuge in Canada after the Revolutionary War, suffered physical and mental distress in an unforgiving land, he preached a revolutionary rhetoric that, it is claimed, had redemptive force for his listeners. But if some of Marrant's sermons suggest the performative power of what Henry Louis Gates Jr. calls "signifying," a far larger share of the *Journal* testifies to his subtle mixture of impotence and assertion. Contending with Canadian Methodists, or "Arminians," vying for the same souls, the Calvinist Marrant had to present himself as the passive recipient of God's grace. Hence his account, unlike many Methodist journals of the period, is a record of failed progress—of weakness, of illness, of the terrors of abandonment, of silence. These episodes, which echo the weakness and silence of his auditors, suggest a complex exchange in which assertion rests in failure, and inspired language emerges from the inability to speak at all. If Marrant can lay claim to spiritual authority, it is the authority of one who recognizes his own abjection. Like Wheatley, he turns his experience into both a revolutionary emblem and a testament to the continuing subjection of black bodies.

Where Wheatley and Marrant addressed the risks incurred by African Americans, Susanna Rowson—actress, novelist, immigrant, nationalist—imagined the terrors faced by women betrayed by the promises that secured the public sphere. If, as Giddens argues, the modern world functions on trust established between distant actors through media of exchange like money, then Rowson portrayed a nightmare world where trust is routinely violated, women abandoned, and men undone by avarice. In chapter 5, I examine two of Rowson's novels, *Charlotte Temple* and *Trials of the Human Heart*, performances that, taken together, represent the fall and redemption of public virtue. Though each novel depicts a long-suffering heroine,

their problems are in many ways opposed. Charlotte, a disgraced youth forsaken by her lover in America, ends life shivering, wandering, and half mad. Meriel Howard is a self-sacrificing wife in England who must repeatedly defend her staunch virtue against predatory men. Uniting the novels is a keen sense of social disorder. The Revolutionary War hovering over *Charlotte Temple* is a symptom of a greater unrest that Rowson shrewdly associates with the rise of the public sphere. Just as the new political order depended on the exchange of oaths to secure virtue, so Rowson imagines a society in which oaths and obligations are routinely violated and trust is shattered. Far from the orderly exchange of vows imagined by liberal apologists, Rowson's risky world was governed by unrestrained desire precipitating ruin. But if the novelist uses her best seller to imagine the terrifying collapse of civility, the later novel attempts to restore order by examining the contingencies of slander and honor. Incited by an attack leveled at Rowson by the incendiary critic William Cobbett, *Trials of the Human Heart* explores how even the most virtuous women may be debilitated by scorn. Yet the heroine's severe suffering, marked by brushes with incest, bankruptcy, infidelity, and the theft of her very identity, also suggests a performative strength. If the liberal order risked chaos through its absorption in unruly desire, Meriel Howard, a heroine whose public scorn and debased marriage make her an emblem of ruined trust, would show how the gift of undying chastity could restore honor to public affairs.

Where Rowson imagines the earnest redemption of the public sphere, Aaron Burr represents its emphatic ruin. Standing over the wounded former secretary of the Treasury Alexander Hamilton, Burr suggests the triumph of avarice over honor, even as the duel was fought in accord with the gentleman's code. Indeed, Burr is often seen as the living threat to republicanism—a self-serving opportunist who used public office to advance his own career. Yet, as I argue in chapter 6, the effect of his most spectacularly avaricious act, the alleged western conspiracy, was to legitimate a far more risky public order premised on the force of unrestrained desire. For months, Burr had been rumored to be plotting an insurrection that, by seizing Louisiana land in consort with Spain, would make him the emperor of Mexico. Such fantasies, expertly stoked by Burr himself, fed the former vice president's need to remain an actor on the national stage. But the conspiracy took on a life of its own, and in the rampant speculation broadcast from newspaper to newspaper, a national contest began to take shape, one that pitted the uncertainties of ownership and enterprise

against older expectations of patronage, sponsorship, and rational control. The treason trial in Richmond, Virginia, presided over by Chief Justice Marshall, allowed the entire country to examine its assumptions about the riskiness and utility of private enterprise in markets so wild and ungovernable that they seemed themselves treasonable. Burr's not-guilty verdict not only represented a victory of narrowly defined evidence over federal manipulation and rampant rumor; it was also an endorsement of the private career. Before the conspiracy, the word *career* had often meant the mad onrush of private desire, like the career of a runaway horse. Careers, that is to say, had been the very signature of risk on the individual body. With the shattering of the legal fiction of conspiracy, Burr's fellow plotters emerged as embodying rational careers of their own. They became the actors—opportunist, skeptical, reflexive—that Giddens assigns to the modern stage. Burr's trial helped to make their menace lawful.

With its mixture of fascination, fantasy, and sheer terror, the Burr conspiracy embodies many of the issues I explore in *Risk Culture*. Like Smith's dream of contagion, the stories surrounding the vice president focused communal anxieties, magnified into a powerful story of risk. The post-revolutionary generation, too, transformed its fears of displacement and loss into a performative display, a truly communal narrative of catastrophe. Burr's alleged ability to be everywhere and nowhere, to whip up the fears of people a thousand miles off as if he were the very genius of discord, is only the most acute instance of a quality evident in all the texts I consider. In playing out their fears and tracing the many contradictions that both torment and empower them, the writers in this study locate the greatest source of risk just beyond their own limits, in that impalpable region where uncertainty and order coincide.