Transatlantica

Revue d'études américaines. American Studies Journal

2 | 2009

Benjamin Franklin / Richard Powers

Enlightenment and Identity : Franklin, Work, and Play

Michael Zuckerman

Electronic version

URL: <https://journals.openedition.org/transatlantica/4440>

DOI: 10.4000/transatlantica.4440

ISSN: 1765-2766

Publisher

Association française d'Etudes Américaines (AFEA)

Electronic reference

Michael Zuckerman, "Enlightenment and Identity : Franklin, Work, and Play", *Transatlantica* [Online], 2 | 2009, Online since 29 December 2009, connection on 11 February 2023. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/transatlantica/4440> ; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/transatlantica.4440>

This text was automatically generated on 11 February 2023.

Creative Commons - Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International - CC BY-NC-ND 4.0
<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>

Enlightenment and Identity : Franklin, Work, and Play

Michael Zuckerman

- 1 America was always a place of possibility. The soaring visionaries saw it. So did the adventurous and the avaricious. They sailed with Columbus and conquered with Cortes. They searched for El Dorado and the Seven Cities of Cibola. They burned with avidity for mineral treasure and, some of them, for something more. They meant to be ravishingly rich and, some of them, to explore wider horizons and wilder lusts, for power and for perpetuity. They did not just search for gold. They enslaved Aztecs and Incas, and they imported Africans when they ran out of natives. They scoured the New World for the fountain of youth.
- 2 The English came later than the conquistadors, but they came with a comparable conviction that marvels were possible in the New World that were not possible in the Old. In Guiana, Sir Walter Raleigh did not doubt the stories he heard of men whose heads hung below their shoulders. He even averred that he had seen such wonders for himself. In Roanoke, John White did not hesitate to draw the natives as noble savages. He even imagined them as men who might redeem a ruined Europe and return it to an innocent primitivity in which it could begin anew.
- 3 William Penn put it best. On the day after he received his royal charter for Pennsylvania, he imagined his unborn colony "the seed of a nation." A few months later, before he had even seen the first voyagers off from England, he confided his hope that there would "be room there, though not here," for the "holy experiment" he envisioned (Soderlund 52-3, 77).
- 4 Others less eloquent felt the same sense that what could only be conceived at home might be achieved in America. They had neither Penn's ambition to institute God's will nor his aspiration to establish a utopian community. They were driven by greed and go-getting. They went where opportunity offered. But they too were ardent for the fuller play of possibility that he sensed.

- 5 From the first, America aroused a passion for outlandish wealth. The early Virginians expected to find precious metals, to discover the Northwest Passage, to cultivate silk, and to grow every exotic tropical commodity in demand in the mother country.
- 6 The pamphlets they published to attract immigrants to the infant settlement expressed their unbounded optimism, and something else as well. Those promotions promised luxurious living without effort. They offered a life of ease. They told of streams teeming with fish, where a single dip of the net would bring up more of the finny creatures than a man could eat in a day. They told of skies alive with gamebirds, where a single pull of the trigger would bring down a half-dozen or more. They told of a virgin soil grateful for seed, where a single sowing would bring up grain in an abundance unknown to the weary fields of Europe. They told of riches, but they intimated Eden.
- 7 All of those dreams were European dreams. Fabulous wealth, fountains of youth, a world turned upside down, redemption, and a paradisaal prospect of surcease from labor were all notions born and nourished in the Old World. America was always, for Europeans susceptible to its allure, the possibility of a larger life. In time, Americans themselves came to embrace those European aspirations. And no American pointed the way to the domestication of European dreams as evocatively as Benjamin Franklin.
- 8 Franklin was hardly the first colonist to achieve affluence in the New World. But those who preceded him dealt with it differently. Some, primarily the sugar planters of the West Indies, acquired extravagant wealth and used it to return to England, acquire vast estates, and live like lords. Others, on the mainland, made more modest fortunes from tobacco and tried to separate themselves from lesser planters as a creole gentry.
- 9 Franklin was the first to live the dream and boast that he had done so. He did not deny his humble past. He did not try to leave it behind him. At the end of his days, he was a more committed democrat than he had ever been in his youth. He even came full circle to manual laboring once more, on the working press he outfitted at Passy. In his last will and testament, he referred to himself as "Benjamin Franklin, printer."
- 10 The very point of his autobiography was his emphatic insistence on his humble origins. He recalled in pungent detail his father's inability to afford him more than a couple of years of inconsequential schooling, his own penniless entry into Philadelphia with those three puffy rolls, and his struggles to shed his leather apron. The salience of his story, as he chose to tell it, was that such a youth could look with pride on "the poverty and obscurity in which [he] was born and bred," after he came "to a state of affluence and some degree of reputation in the world." A low-born American son could glory in fulfilling his humble father's prophesy that he would one day "stand before kings." (Labaree et al. 43, 144)
- 11 If, to this day, Americans still identify their character with the possibility of rising wondrously in the world, it is in no small measure because Ben Franklin taught them to do so. If, to this day, they still imagine themselves inhabitants of a land of opportunity and cherish their American dream as a democratic dream, it is in substantial part because he coached them in such self-congratulation and such self-construction. It is not for nothing that his recent biographers have hailed him as the first American and even as the veritable inventor of America (Brands, Gaustad).
- 12 But such invention is more than a little equivocal. It conjures consideration of facades and phantasms rather than facts on the ground. And well it should. Franklin was nothing if not a master of the management of impressions.

- 13 He was, after all, a man who could wear wigs and waistcoats for the British, when he was provincial Pennsylvania's agent at Whitehall, and then put on that cockamamie coonskin cap for the French, when he was America's minister plenipotentiary in Paris. Acutely alert to images as he was, Franklin figured out fast that the British would ignore anyone who did not exhibit an aristocratic bearing and figured out even faster that the French would ignore any imposter who did. The court of George III was full of arrivistes. The more glittering entourage of Louis XVI teemed with real noblemen who would recognize and resent aristocratic affectation. At Versailles and in the salons of Paris, Franklin abandoned the pretense of calculated homage that he had paid to the nouveaux riches of London. He presented himself not as a gentleman, whom the British gentry could accept as one of their own, but as a backwoods Quaker, whom the French elite could patronize.
- 14 Knowing that Montesquieu, Voltaire, Raynal, and other French men of letters admired the Quakers, Franklin let Parisians think him a follower of the Friends, though he had no discernible gift for spirituality and no aptitude for the Inner Light at all. Knowing that Rousseau and his followers were infatuated with fantasies of noble savages, he posed as a frontier philosophe, though he had always made his home in the leading cities of the land.
- 15 In playing to French sensibilities, Franklin was doing what he had done all his life. His public career was a succession of performances. As he admitted in his autobiography, which was in many ways a memoir of his mastery of disingenuousness and disguise, he perfected his technique in the provinces. By the time he came to act on the grandest stage in the Western world, with the fate of the American Revolution in his hands as surely as it was in Washington's, he was ready.
- 16 From his first appearance in public life, Franklin showed his instinct for the theatrical. Rather than attempting to find his own voice, he assumed another's. Walter Isaacson caught his audacity exactly. "Silence Dogood was a slightly prudish widowed woman from a rural area." Franklin himself was "a spunky unmarried Boston teenager who had never spent a night outside of the city." (Isaacson 29)
- 17 Such an impersonation must have delighted Franklin. He found pleasure in deception for its own sake. He found special pleasure in duplicity that embarrassed the editor of the *Courant*, James Franklin, who would not have published the essays if he had known that they were written by his precocious younger brother. But Franklin's imagination of himself as different and distant from his actual condition was more than sweet subterfuge, more than a satisfying embarrassment of his brother, more even than the commencement of a lifelong habit of anonymity and pseudonymity. It was also a necessity, to evade the authority of his brother and the much more imposing authority of Boston orthodoxy. It was the only way he could "change the joke and slip the yoke," as Ralph Ellison put it in an extraordinary essay which actually invokes Franklin (Ellison 45-59).
- 18 Franklin could never have been Franklin in Boston. Sooner or later, its religious and intellectual establishment would have driven him to self-destruction, either by acquiescence or by ineffectual defiance. Even as an adolescent, he understood that much. In a society that insisted on uniformity, there were but two alternatives, compliance and opposition. Again and again in his autobiography, Franklin recalled his reluctance to comply and his awareness of the perils of opposition. He knew that he could not hold his tongue and that his outspoken alienation from local norms was

“productive of disgusts and perhaps enmities.” Proper Bostonians already viewed him “in an unfavorable light,” as one who “had a turn for libeling and satire.” He could see that he was bound to “bring [him]self into scrapes,” by the “rubs” he gave to “rulers” and by the “indiscreet disputations about religion” from which he refused to refrain. He knew that he would have to escape the Puritan metropolis. People there were already pointing at him “with horror.” (Labaree et al. 60, 69, 71)

- 19 Franklin could only have flourished in a pluralistic place like Philadelphia, where the choices were not the debilitating ones of conformity or resistance but the vitalizing ones of an open society.
- 20 In Boston, he learned about integrity. One way and another, it was the only thing the town had to teach. But he fled Boston, and he never again lived in a place of such coercive homogeneity. In Philadelphia, he discovered a religious, ethnic, and national diversity undesired and unimaginable in the Puritan capital, and he realized as if intuitively that, though he had left his native land behind, he had arrived in his native element. He was, in more ways than not, born in Philadelphia, at the age of seventeen.
- 21 Amid the multitudinous cultures on the Delaware, he grasped from the first the one essential thing. If he meant to make his way in a community where no religion ruled and where all men and all creeds were welcome, he would have to disabuse himself of any ideals of integrity brought from Boston. If he wished to advance himself among people of so many faiths, he would have to talk to them each on their own terms. If he wished to promote his plans among people of so many nations, he would have to master the management of impressions and the presentation of self. In Philadelphia, he learned about style.
- 22 In politics, he had a genius for catching the views and values of others. He represented the artisans to the gentry and the gentry to the artisans, and the skill and fidelity with which he did made him the most powerful man in Pennsylvania.
- 23 In his prose, he ranged even more widely and wandered even more daringly from his own presumptive person. He took the part of rich people when he was poor and of poor people when he was richer. He played old folks when he was young and young ones when he was older. He did female impersonations. He did escape artistry. He did ventriloquism. Like the one American who would ever rival him, P. T. Barnum, he was always in the show business.
- 24 Franklin crafted characters effortlessly, and almost every one was strikingly unlike the Franklin we think we know. Silence Dogood forecast Alice Addertongue, Anthony Afterwit, Polly Baker, Celia Single, Jethro Standfast, Abigail Twitterfield, and dozens of others. From his first writings to his last, Franklin was fearless in assuming identities distant from his own.
- 25 He made his initial appearance in print as a woman and his valedictory as Sidi Mehemet Ibrahim, an African defender of the enslavement of Christians. He wrote as an Indian chief and, twice, as an African American slave. Indeed, his Dingo was the first “slave” voice in American letters, and his Blackamore the second.
- 26 His dying declamation as a devout Muslim was no more a fictive reach, for Franklin, than his earlier affectations of other religious personae and prose styles. He passed for a Jesuit and for a Jewish patriarch. He played both parts in a debate between two Presbyterians. More than once, he masqueraded as a Quaker lady. He composed

parables in the idiom of the Old Testament and the New. And he outdid himself in his counterfeit of an orthodox New England clergyman.

- 27 His secular range was wider still. He was the dirty old man of "Old Mistresses Apologue" - written before he turned forty - and the daft old man Father Abraham of "The Way to Wealth". He was the lying shopkeeper Betty Diligent and the self-deluding merchant Mercator. He was Ned Type, the poet of the burning of the Virginia capitol, and Fart-Hing, the promoter of a natural science of flatulence. He was Obadiah Plainman and the Count de Schaumberg, Homespun and the King of Prussia. He enunciated the reply of a colonial governor's council and promulgated an Act of Parliament.
- 28 He was an incorrigible ingener, and his appetite for imposture went beyond individuals and their institutions. He took the perspective of a left hand, a handsome and a deformed leg, the flies in his apartment, the letter Z, and insects which perished in a single day. He even wrote as his own gout.
- 29 His most imperishable persona, Richard Saunders - the Poor Richard who allegedly put out the almanacs - has often been mistaken for Franklin's alter ego. He was nothing of the sort. Franklin made fun of him at every turn, and with both reason and passion. Poor Richard was a henpecked husband and an incompetent provider, and his creator had no patience with such men. Poor Richard was an astrologer, and his creator had a very genuine contempt for astrological study of the stars. Yet Franklin kept Richard Saunders alive for a quarter of a century, mocking him, improving him, always allowing him his own voice.
- 30 In his brilliant meditation on African-American masking, Ralph Ellison insisted that such facework was "motivated not so much by fear as by a profound rejection of the image created to usurp [the Negro's] identity." Some of it, Ellison went on, was "for the sheer joy of the joke," and some "to challenge those who presume ... to know [the black man's] identity." (Ellison 53-5). Ellison understood masking in the context of race relations in America. But he never misunderstood it as merely an African-American maneuver. "The 'darky' act" was, he said, "in the American grain." It made "brothers of us all." In his select company of America's profoundest champions of charade, its deepest deceivers, Ellison counted Hemingway, Faulkner, Abe Lincoln, and, first in the splendid succession, Ben Franklin (Ellison 53-5).
- 31 Ellison did not develop or elaborate his shrewd intuition about Franklin. That is the work that falls to pedantry such as this. But he did survey the terrain within which what he called the "American virtuoso of identity" worked. His reconnaissance was marvelously apt. (Ellison 56)
- 32 Take the two letters, by Abel James and Benjamin Vaughan, that Franklin set so oddly between the 1771 and 1784 parts of his memoir. Both letters begged him to resume his reminiscences and to publish them. James applauded their "power" to "promote a greater spirit of industry and early attention to business, frugality and temperance with the American youth." Vaughan thought them "a pattern for all youth" in the cultivation of "private character" and "happiness both public and domestic." (Labaree et al. 134, 138, 135)
- 33 This epistolary interlude was as bizarre in its matter as it was bound to be in its manner. The letters invaded the voice of the autobiography and fatuously misread its substance. They made Franklin a bourgeois paragon on the basis of the 1771 segment,

which simply did not sustain the moral message James and Vaughan saw in it. That first part was a saga of scheming, scamming, and self-seeking. It was, from start almost to finish, a tale of tricks and betrayals, duplicity and disappointment, thieving and conniving. It was a narrative of its author's expensive education in human nature and an evocation of the moral milieu of America. It was the confession of the first juvenile delinquent in American literature.

- 34 Franklin must surely have incorporated those letters for what Ellison called the sheer joy of the joke and, more, for the fun of challenging those who presumed to know his identity. James and Vaughan thought Franklin an epitome of the Protestant ethic and an embodiment of benevolence. He would give them the slip. They would not imprison him, not even in the most congratulatory confinement. He was an inveterate masker, and masking is, as Ellison said, "a play upon possibility." (Ellison 54)
- 35 Franklin doubled the joy of the joke in the second part of his memoir. There he assumed the role that he had never played in the first part, the role on which his correspondents wanted to empedestal him, as ethical and economic exemplar to the youth of the new nation. There he set out his project for moral perfection.
- 36 The project was a spoof, an extravagant jest, almost a shaggy dog story. It subverted itself in a mocking myriad of paradoxes and preposterous pomposities. And as it did, it made fools of James and Vaughan, who stood for all those, then and since, who hoped to hold Franklin hostage to middle-class morality.
- 37 Some of the subtlest, sweetest humor in the autobiography lurked in the byplay between the letters that prefaced the project and Franklin's ironic account of the project itself. Vaughan, for example, went out of his way to praise Franklin for his modesty. Franklin went out of his way to admit that he added humility to his original list of twelve virtues because a friend "kindly informed" him that he was "generally thought proud ... and rather insolent." Yet Franklin undermined his resolution to achieve humility as swiftly as he enunciated it. He "annexed" to each virtue "a short precept, which fully expressed the extent [he] gave to its meaning." For humility, the precept which gave that meaning was "Imitate Jesus and Socrates." There was only the most modest humility in an ambition to subdue pride by emulating the two most famous men in the history of Western civilization (Labaree et al. 138, 158-59, 150).
- 38 Similarly, there was scant silence in an injunction to speak solely "what may benefit others or yourself." There was not much frugality in the avoidance of all expenses but those that "do good to others or yourself." There was slender sincerity in abstinence only from "hurtful deceit." There was little more than a mockery of chastity in a resolution to refrain from "venery" except for "health or offspring." (Labaree et al. 148-150.)
- 39 Putting such conundrums at the very heart of his project, Franklin dismantled it in the very act of describing it. His playful send-ups of his virtues implied the incoherence of his endeavor itself. And he did not stop there. He framed his enterprise in episodes that aspersed its authenticity even more explicitly.
- 40 He set two stories before his recounting of the project and another after. None of these tales seemed to have anything to do with the project or with one another. But they were far from the aimless anecdotes of a garrulous old man.
- 41 In the first of the two that preceded the project, he marked "how luxury will enter families." All his married life, he had eaten from an earthen bowl with a pewter spoon.

Then, one morning, he came to breakfast to find in their place a china bowl and a silver spoon. His hitherto-frugal wife Deborah had bought them, for “the enormous sum” of twenty-three shillings. Asked why, she had “no other excuse or apology” than that she thought he deserved such service “as well as any of his neighbors.” But Franklin did not scorn her paltry justification for her petty extravagance. He accepted them and far exceeded them. All on his own, he accrued “several hundred pounds” worth of “plate and china.” (Labaree et al. 145)

- 42 In the second story, Franklin recalled his resentment of a minister of the Presbyterian church to which he belonged. The man put Franklin off by preaching “the peculiar doctrines of our sect” rather than any more general “moral principle.” He sought “rather to make us Presbyterians than good citizens.” Finding such sermons “unedifying,” Franklin rarely attended them, despite the minister's admonitions “to attend to his administrations.” The men's differences came to a head when the minister promised a sermon on a verse that Franklin thought “could not miss of having some morality.” Giving up his “studying-day,” Franklin went to church, only to hear the minister confine himself to five points of Presbyterian dogma. “Disgusted,” Franklin “attended [the minister's] preaching no more.” (Labaree et al. 146-148)
- 43 In the last story, the one which followed his account of the project, Franklin made even more plain his disdain for doctrinal purity and his preference for goodness over perfection. In an offhand fable, he told of a simpleton who bought an ax and “desired to have the whole of its surface as bright as the edge.” The blacksmith from whom he purchased the ax, seeing a prospect of sport, promised “to grind it bright for [the simpleton] if he would turn the wheel.” The poor simpleton turned and turned, though the labor was “very fatiguing.” Finally, he stopped and said he would take his new ax “as it was.” Reluctant to give up the game, the blacksmith pressed him to continue. “We shall have it bright by and by; as yet 'tis only speckled.” The simpleton, seeing at last that he'd been played for a fool, spurned his tormentor's importunity. “I think I like a speckled ax best.” (Labaree et al. 155-56)
- 44 And then, in case all his paradoxes of virtue and parables of resignation to imperfection were too subtle, Franklin spelled out their significance in so many words. The project was a hoax. He had never meant to master the virtues in which his admirers meant to enclose him. He had never been so fondly foolish as to seek the moral perfection that they thought they saw in him. He had known all along that “such extreme nicety” was nothing but “a kind of foppery in morals, which if it were known would make [him] ridiculous.” Indeed, he had understood from the first that “a perfect character” would have made him “envied and hated.” He would, he concluded, keep his “faults” in order to “keep his friends in countenance.” And the cream of the jest, the perfection of the paradox, was that the very friends for whose sake he resigned himself to imperfection included those like James and Vaughan who saw in him a figure of the perfection he repudiated (Labaree et al. 156).
- 45 Exactly as Ellison said, American virtuosi of theatricality such as Franklin maintained “an ironic awareness of the joke that always lies between appearance and reality.” They caught the comedy “at the center of American identity.” Their country was, and was bound to be, “a land of masking jokesters.” (Ellison 53-55)
- 46 In fact, Franklin was as open and articulate about all this as Ellison. When he abandoned “abrupt confrontation and positive argumentation” and took up the Socratic method, he did not suddenly turn to truth-seeking or a concern to learn from

those with whom he argued. He merely discovered that he could embarrass his enemies as well as vanquish them if he “put on the humble inquirer.” He admitted frankly that he “took a delight” in debasing as well as defeating them by his “diffidence.” (Labaree et al. 64-5)

- 47 Even as a youth, Franklin apprehended what the Andre Agassi commercials for Canon would tell us 250 years later, that image is everything. We will never know whether he worked hard with any regularity, but we do know that worked assiduously at being seen working hard. He did not clank his paper-laden wheelbarrow along the cobblestone streets of the city at midday, when it would hardly have been heard in the hubbub. He went much earlier or much later, when the neighbors would notice. As he advised a young tradesman, “the sound of your hammer at five in the morning or nine at night, heard by a creditor, makes him easy six months longer.” (Franklin 321)
- 48 To the end of his days, he recognized that he could not conquer pride. “Mortify it as much as one pleases, it is still alive.” But the persistence of vanity did not disturb him much. Though he had never had “success in acquiring the reality” of humility, he “had a good deal with regard to the appearance of it.” (Labaree et al. 159, 160)
- 49 Max Weber thought Franklin the ultimate embodiment of the Protestant ethic, and the project for moral perfection the ultimate expression of Franklin's outlook on life. But Weber never understood Franklin. Weber did not notice the American masks and did not get the American jokes. Franklin's father was a believing Puritan. His youngest son was an unbeliever who could never have practiced the Protestant ethic. His priority on appearances took for granted a world without the God of his father. That God could see beneath the surface. For Franklin, there was nothing beneath the surface to see. His life, in the *Autobiography*, was “an incessant act of staging a self.” He never invited his readers to penetrate the veil of appearances that he presented from his youth to his dying days. On the contrary, as Mitchell Breitweiser said, he “scrupulously blocked” the curiosity that his account of his successive fronts was bound to arouse. It was not the man behind the veil that he thought would be of use to posterity. It was the veil itself, and “the strategic decisions governing [its] manufacture,” that were “the gist of what he considered worth preserving” in his memoir. Surfaces were his depth, and dissembling the closest he could come to truth. An unrepentant relativist from his first writings to his last, he was always at home in Philadelphia and the truly new American world that it anticipated. Such a society was an unending masquerade ball, and masking was its only essence. (Breitweiser 816)
- 50 In that sense, even Ellison missed Franklin. Ellison held that, “out of the counterfeiting of the black American's identity there arises a profound doubt in the white man's mind as to the authenticity of his own image of himself.” (Ellison 53) But no profound doubt arose in Franklin's mind. Once he left Boston behind, he cared no more for authenticity than he did for integrity. In the plural society of his adopted city, such qualities were nothing more than impediments and impossibilities.
- 51 Over the years, a multitude of writers have seen in Franklin the ultimate embodiment of the self-made man. But they never understood Franklin either. Franklin never claimed, as they claimed for him, that he had hoisted himself by his bootstraps. Quite the contrary. In the autobiography, he made very clear that he had risen by enlisting the mutual assistance that the members of the Junto pledged to one another and, especially, by cultivating the patronage of wealthy merchants.

- 52 But Franklin was a self-made man in a deeper and indeed a more literal sense. He made and re-made his identity, in an incessant succession of sympathetic triumphs. He had an uncanny knack for imagining himself as another, for feeling himself into another, for becoming another. He lived his life and made his career in such creations and recreations. They were, for him, his recreation, his play and his playground. In Clifford Geertz's sense of play, they were his deep play indeed. They were about the meaning of things.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- BRANDS, H.W. *The First American: The Life and Times of Benjamin Franklin*. New York, Doubleday, 2000.
- BREITWEISER, Mitchell, review of Ormond Seavey, "Becoming Benjamin Franklin: The Autobiography and the Life", in *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd ser., 46 (1989), 816-9.
- ELLISON, Ralph. "Change the Joke and Slip the Yoke," in *Shadow and Act*. New York, Random House, 1964.
- FRANKLIN, Benjamin. "Advice to a Young Tradesman, Written by an Old One," in J. A. Leo Lemay, ed., *Benjamin Franklin: Writings*. New York, Library of America, 1987.
- GAUSTAD, Edwin. *Benjamin Franklin: Inventing America*. New York, Oxford, 2004.
- ISAACSON, Walter. *Benjamin Franklin: An American Life*. New York, Simon & Schuster, 2003.
- LABAREE, Leonard et al., eds. *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin*. New Haven, Yale University Press, 1964.
- SODERLUND, Jean, ed. *William Penn and the Founding of Pennsylvania, 1680-1684: A Documentary History*. Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1983.

ABSTRACTS

America was seen by Europeans as a place of possibility from the first and none better than Benjamin Franklin proved these democratic dreams could become reality, recent biographers seeing him as the first American. Yet Franklin was a man of many identities and many masks, to please his publics and rise in the world. However beyond appearances, there was no other depth in Franklin than this theatrical genius and constant re-invention of self.

Les Européens virent immédiatement en l'Amérique le lieu de tous les possibles et nul mieux que Benjamin Franklin ne prouva que ces rêves démocratiques pouvaient devenir une réalité, des biographes récents voyant en lui le premier Américain. Cependant Franklin eut de nombreuses identités et revêtit de nombreux masques, pour plaire à ses publics et s'élever dans le monde. Derrière ces apparences, pourtant, il n'y a d'autre profondeur en Franklin que son génie théâtral et sa constante réinvention de lui-même.

INDEX

Mots-clés: Africains-Américains, Amérique britannique coloniale, Identité américaine

Keywords: African-Americans, American identity, colonial British America

AUTHOR

MICHAEL ZUCKERMAN

University of Pennsylvania

mzuckerm@history.upenn.edu

Michael Zuckerman est Professeur au département d'histoire de l'Université de Pennsylvanie, mais également spécialiste de « American Studies ». Connue pour son travail en histoire sociale dans le célèbre *Peaceable Kingdoms: New England towns in the eighteenth century* (New York: Knopf, 1970), il s'est intéressé depuis à l'identité américaine (*Almost Chosen People: Oblique biographies in the American Grain*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), et en particulier à celle de certains Pères fondateurs comme Thomas Jefferson ou Benjamin Franklin, à propos duquel il a écrit de nombreux articles au moment du tricentenaire, dont « An Inclination Joined with an Ability to Serve, » in Peter Conn, ed., *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin* (Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005), « Food for Thought: America's Accessible Founder, » *Pennsylvania Legacies* 6:1 (May, 2006), et « Benjamin Franklin at 300: The Show Goes on. A Review of the Reviews, » *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 131(2007).