

A Most Amazing Scene of Wonders: Electricity and Enlightenment in Early America. By JAMES DELBOURGO. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2006. 378 pages. \$29.95 (cloth).

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Moving beyond while not abandoning the story of Benjamin Franklin's discovery, *A Most Amazing Scene of Wonders* presents electricity as the story of the American Enlightenment. Electricity exposes central intersections between reason and wonder, mind and body, God and nature, and the elite and "the masses" (10). What is electricity? In James Delbourgo's study, it is the Franklinian discovery that led to the formation and legitimization of powerful scientific centers in North America. Electricity is also a discourse-generating phenomenon that transformed a range of cultural practices. A rhetoric of electricity infused Methodist camp meetings, for example, and Thomas Jefferson described revolutionary resistance as "a shock of electricity" (135). Delbourgo's study shows that scientists, preachers, and politicians participated in a shared culture of rhetorical and phenomenological appropriation. Electricity illustrates the significance of science in popular culture (and vice versa) in the eighteenth century, much like Alison Winter's account of Victorian Britain's obsessions with the medical science of mesmerism.¹

Delbourgo brings together recent critical developments in Atlantic history and the history of science, a combination that has appealed to scholars including Jorge Cañizares-Esguerra and Susan Scott Parrish.²² In recent years Enlightenment studies in particular have replaced a universal and national paradigm with explorations of the relationship between local specificities and transatlantic circulation, dovetailing with a parallel shift in Atlantic history. Both fields also give increased attention to how philosophical and cultural developments map along class and gender lines as well as across different publics.

In place of the "misguided" notion that "early modern knowledge-making is essentially an asocial, elite history of ideas" (7), Delbourgo shows that electricity's rhetorical and experimental practices were intimately linked to modes of sociability and cultural life. Nonelite practitioners found new links between self, society, and nation, establishing a connection with people such as Franklin while "refashion[ing] his methods and principles to their own ends" (10). A chapter on "Wonderful Recreations" explains how Ebenezer Kinnersley learned from Franklin in Philadelphia and then taught audiences from New England to the West Indies to experience embodied electricity as an avenue to rational contemplation, pious practice, and polite sociability.

Dependent on an embodied experience of "sensory disorientation," electricity registered the limitations of empiricism while challenging Cartesian dualism. Since its inception in Baconian observational practices, empiricism had both affirmed the human capacity to base

¹ Alison Winter, *Mesmerized: Powers of Mind in Victorian Britain* (Chicago, 1998).

²² Jorge Cañizares-Esguerra, *How to Write the History of the New World: Histories, Epistemologies, and Identities in the Eighteenth-Century Atlantic World* (Stanford, Calif., 2001); Susan Scott Parrish, *American Curiosity: Cultures of Natural History in the Colonial British Atlantic World* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 2006).

rational judgments on sensory information and exposed the failure of the senses to convey accurate information about the external world. Delbourgo argues that electrical experiments exaggerated this double bind, given that sensory disorientation is a primary condition of the electrified body. Additionally, besides demonstrating empiricism's limitations, electrical experiments violated Cartesian dualism by recentering the body as a space of experiential and epistemological information.

From sensory disruptions to Cartesian challenges, from rational curiosities to wonderful experiences, Enlightenment epistemologies shaped electricity in complex and intricate ways. Delbourgo's nuanced assessment of these overlapping influences positions electricity as a prism through which scholars might rethink more traditional approaches to Enlightenment studies. Oscillating between rational knowledge and marvelous experience, electricity violates dichotomies between mind and body, matter and spirit, and nature and revelation. Of course, Delbourgo is not the first to argue that the Enlightenment did not simply replace religion with science or that rational inquiry did not succeed in supplanting and containing divine authority. But he contributes to Enlightenment scholarship an exemplary case study of how this web of competing authorities and systems of knowledge worked out in practice. Electricity becomes a forum for seeing the Enlightenment as a complex and contested space where evangelicalism and philosophy as well as popular and professional science could coexist.

Delbourgo shows what was uniquely American about electricity at the same time that he connects it to broader Atlantic trends. We travel from London's Royal Society to the French Academy to electric eels in South America to see how colonial scientific knowledge circulated through the hierarchies encoded in relationships between center and periphery. Yet at the same time, we learn that philosophers on both sides of the Atlantic believed that "the American atmosphere was, literally, more electric" (50). Delbourgo makes his strongest claim for American exceptionalism in a conclusion that asks, "What Is American Enlightenment?" It turns out that an American Enlightenment is also an electrical Enlightenment, since Franklin's discovery marks the first "major rupture" (279) in long-standing epistemological hierarchies. America emerges as a scientific powerhouse through Franklin, who also promotes "new theoretically emboldened American way[s] of knowing" (279).

This concluding assertion points to a pivotal methodological issue in Atlantic and early American studies right now. We have moved away from previous models of American exceptionalism to situate early American history, literature, and culture within a network of transatlantic and hemispheric currents. But this critical move has had to negotiate the danger of producing the opposite extreme: a homogenous history of the Atlantic world. In facing this challenge, to what degree should current Atlanticists reconstitute the exceptionalist paradigm in an effort to localize and particularize Atlantic history? How does Delbourgo's question about American enlightenment differ from the one that Henry F. May responded to more than thirty years ago in *The Enlightenment in America*?³³ For one thing Delbourgo considers North American particularity as integrally linked to, rather than existing in

³³ Henry F. May, *The Enlightenment in America* (New York, 1976).

isolation from or in opposition to, larger currents of Atlantic culture. Yet there are tensions between Delbourgo's Atlantic circuits and his American Enlightenment. For example, he claims that the American Philosophical Society was an extension of the transatlantic circuit, not a patriotic replacement of it, but the conclusion presents Franklinist electricity as fostering a uniquely American scientific institution. This ostensible contradiction opens up a question for Atlantic historians: how can we describe a shared culture and maintain analytic distinctions between the local, the national, and the Atlantic?

In *A Most Amazing Scene of Wonders*, the characterization of Franklinist electricity as a major rupture does much of this analytic work, as rupture prompts the realignment of power, agency, geography, and epistemology. Scientific authority becomes American in a new way. Currents of colonial knowledge shift direction. Practice becomes democratized as it extends to "hands-on medical entrepreneurs and men on the margins" (279). Rational knowledge ceases to assume that it can contain and control the wonderful and marvelous. But is electricity an exemplary or anomalous case within either the American Enlightenment or the Enlightenment more generally? I suspect that it is exemplary within the former and anomalous within the latter, which suggests a provocative new way of conceptualizing intersections between the history of science and Atlantic studies as well as the future methodological directions of each respective field.