



# Early American Women Critics

PERFORMANCE, RELIGION, RACE

Gay Gibson Cima

CAMBRIDGE

# EARLY AMERICAN WOMEN CRITICS:

*Performance, Religion, Race*

GAY GIBSON CIMA



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## EARLY AMERICAN WOMEN CRITICS

*Early American Women Critics* demonstrates that performances of various kinds – religious, political, and cultural – enabled women to enter the human rights debates that roiled the American colonies and young republic. Black and white women staked their claims on American citizenship through disparate performances of spirit possession, patriotism, and poetic and theatrical production. They protected themselves within various shields that allowed them to speak openly while keeping the individual basis of their identities invisible. Cima shows that between the First and Second Great Religious Awakenings (1730s–1830s), women from West Africa, Europe, and various corners of the American colonies self-consciously adopted performance strategies that enabled them to critique American culture and establish their own diverse and contradictory claims on the body politic. This book restores the primacy of religious performances – Christian, Yoruban, Bantu, and Muslim – to the study of early American cultural and political histories, revealing that religion and race are inseparable.

Gay Gibson Cima, Professor of English and Director of the Humanities and Human Rights Initiative at Georgetown University, has published widely on feminist performance and critical race theory. Her work appears in anthologies such as *The Sage Handbook of Performance Studies* and *Women and Playwriting in Nineteenth-Century Britain* as well as in journals such as *Theatre Journal*, *Theater*, and *Theatre Survey*. She is the author of *Performing Women: Female Characters, Male Playwrights, and the Modern Stage*. The American Society for Theatre Research has recognized her work on women critics through the Kahan Prize and a Senior Research Fellowship.

*To Ronald J. Cima,  
Gibson Alessandro Cima,  
Anna Francesca Cima,  
Geraldine Smith Gibson,  
and the memory of Richard M. Gibson*

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Although female theatre critics make only a cameo appearance in these pages, they prompted my initial curiosity about women's entrances into cultural, political, and religious debates: Brooks McNamara and Maryann



Chach kindly gave me a tour of the Shubert Archives years ago, and I happened to pull from the shelf a sheaf of script evaluations written by women working for the Shubert Theatre. I thank Brooks and Maryann for the tour which sparked my interest in writing this book.

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Finally, I am ever grateful to my husband and our son and daughter for their love, their hopefulness, and their confidence in my work. Ron has supported me in so many ways large and small that he deserves a separate book of praise. He is, quite simply, my beloved partner in all things, including this book. Gib gave me a synonym for "surrogate," and in that



gift offered me a means of encapsulating my theory about women critics. My conversations with him always open up exciting new ways of thinking about performance. Anna first taught me about the evils of theodicy, and her insights prompted me to consider more closely the relationship between religious and political debates. She is a wizard woman. My mother and father gave me an invaluable legacy – a curiosity about life and hope for the future – and I wish they could know how very grateful I am.

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## Introduction

On 4 July 1740, women originally from Angola, Gambia, Senegal, West India, the Netherlands, France, Spain, England, Ireland, Scotland, and various corners of the American colonies rushed into the streets of Charles Town, South Carolina. They panted, wept, laughed, and fell on the ground shuddering and groaning, only to rise, shout, and commence “damning all others round about them.” In 1772 a prominent Whig playwright excoriated her Governor, King George III’s representative in the Massachusetts Colony, characterizing him in scene after scene as “Rapatio”; her play was performed in patriots’ parlors across the colony and published in major newspapers. The following year in Boston, as prostitutes began to troll the docks and a diverse, transatlantic community of Christians surfaced, a young West African slave girl published poems and recited them in her mistress’s home on the main thoroughfare, warning local Harvard boys to shun the “transient sweetness” of sin and reminding King George that his smile could “set his subjects free.” In the 1790s a Boston minister’s wife produced a play which excused married women’s flirtations (and her own), even after the publication of a vicious, serialized parody of her as a woman guilty not only of adultery but also of the violent domestic abuse of her husband. In her collected works, she renamed one of her plays *Virtue Triumphant*. At the opening of the nineteenth century, an unlicensed African American preacher heeded God’s command to call upon the wealthiest man in her hometown and reduce him, his family, and their guests to tears by acquainting them with “all things that ever they did.” Thus launching a successful career as an itinerant, she traveled throughout the Eastern and Southern United States and England, rousing “a great shout of victory.”<sup>1</sup>

Where, how, and why did these women stage their disparate acts of criticism? This book addresses that question by investigating their sites and methods of access as well as the criticism itself. From the 1740s to the 1830s, thousands of early American women acted as “Criticks”: either in

person or in print, they passed public judgments on religious, political, and cultural issues, thereby shaping and contesting incipient notions of race, religion, American-ness, and gender. They shaped critical practices and discourses, gaining the respect of selected local spectators and readers. Initially amateurs, they often built a framework for professional opportunities and financial remuneration. Some critics supported themselves through their cultural criticism. Gathering these women together under the rubric "critic" creates a broad-based genealogy that illuminates their strategies for claiming a place in the early American body politic. It allows a consideration of women's diverse critical practices in relation to one another, thereby clarifying the discrete moves of any one critic or group of critics, the distinctive advantages and disadvantages of any one strategy, and the varied ways in which early American culture responded to women's initiatives. Women critics devised clever pathways into the public sphere, adjusting to fluid local conditions and institutions. Religion, partisan politics, and the arts offered them opportunities to gain access to public debates and create new ideas about "American identity."

Since criticism was regarded as a European male prerogative, these early American women critics frequently cloaked their critiques as revelation, autobiography, or fiction: they engaged in religious exhortation, printed a spiritual autobiography, sang a ballad, published a poem, staged a play. By avoiding genre-based distinctions foreign to the period or unimportant to the writers and speakers themselves, I grant these women status as serious-minded cultural commentators, even as I hold them responsible as arbiters of early American culture. I follow the lead of Americanists, African Americanists and performance theorists in allowing a diverse range of texts to act as criticism. As William C. Spengemann argues, "the boundaries we now draw between fiction and 'non-fiction' . . . did not exist in most of the periods [Americanists] study" (*Mirror*, 23). To understand early American women's cultural criticism, we must recognize it on its own terms, blurring distinctions between practice and critical theory, fiction and non-fiction. African American scholars have long advocated this approach to black culture. Valerie Smith and Deborah McDowell, for example, "allow literary history, oratory, and even autobiography to function as theory," and Geneviève Fabre and Robert O'Meally "have resisted the conventional wisdom of viewing orality and literacy as opposite cultural modalities." In like fashion, performance scholars routinely regard theatrical practice as a critical act. This book works at the intersection of these conversations,

illuminating the ways in which women critics from various "climes" issued their criticism and shaped early America.<sup>2</sup>

I take seriously the ways in which women's live performances were intertwined with religious, political, and cultural rhetoric and, conversely, the ways in which their writing was performative or self-consciously theatrical. They did not perceive performance and writing as opposites, but rather as linked systems whose operations were inextricable. Written publications were routinely regarded as performances or productions, and sermon performances, for instance, were viewed as criticism, subject to legal action. As a theatre and performance historian, I regard all performances as "scripted" through prior behavioral models, but also, paradoxically, as irreproducible. Performances resist, undercut, reshape and create new gestural patterns and modes of interaction, even as they keep cultural traditions alive. I have paid careful attention to the public record, but I have also interpreted the gaps and shadowy traces of women's interventions and unexpected performances, particularly of race. Daily performances of religious, political, and cultural affiliation were intertwined with racial discourse, as critics solidified traditional ideas of race, tried to articulate notions of race based on common denominators other than geography or pseudo-science, or tried to dispense with race altogether.

In each successive chapter of this book I investigate early American women critics' *sites of access*: the religious, political, and cultural avenues through which they gained access to the public sphere or through which they redefined private space as public. I examine the critics' *methods of access*, demonstrating that their central performance strategy was to create *host bodies* through which to issue their critiques. I analyze the various gestural or rhetorical host bodies they created to shield themselves from censure as they spoke, whether in person or in print. By borrowing gestures and rhetoric from the mainstream and re-contextualizing them, by exchanging behaviors or rhetorical figures at the margins, or by fabricating surrogates out of their bodied imaginings and discursive fancies, women critics created provisional surrogate bodies through which they could safely issue their critiques. Finally, I consider the commentaries that they delivered as *performing critics* in marketplaces, streets, parlors, ferries, literary salons, churches, theatres, and schoolrooms, and devote equal attention to their work as *performance critics* publishing in newspapers, broadsides, journals, commonplace books, subscription volumes, play scripts, novels, textbooks, catechisms, and spiritual autobiographies. I illuminate the ways in which early American women critics entered the

public sphere by performing within religious, political, and cultural host bodies that enabled them both to shape and to critique notions of race, American-ness, and gender.

These bodies provided women with particularly useful pathways into civic conversations. They offered various ways of claiming American-ness while articulating a sense of identity separate from dominant formulations. A host body is a spectral body, a generic body in movement, an abstraction which nonetheless serves as a life-like bodily shield. A host body may be donned in print through a set of rhetorical moves, or in person through a set of gestural and oral patterns. Because of its non-material status, the host body provides the woman critic with a certain safety. It acts as a prophylactic against censorship or censure. Sometimes it is even regarded as a sacred, inviolate body. Because host bodies emerge from the cauldron of locally defined, constantly shifting claims on the abstract "personhood" of citizenship, they are politically efficacious. Host bodies claim citizenship by aligning with and simultaneously resisting acceptable "American" bodily practices. The host body may take a variety of shapes. Critics may invent host bodies, or they may adopt hosts that others have initiated, sculpting them to their own needs.

Women's abstract host bodies – the body of the "evangelical" engaged in a conversion experience; the body of the "possessed" practicing African spirit possession; the pseudonymous or anonymous body; the body of a "rational" or "activist" Christian; of a literate and politically engaged "Afric"; of a "patriot"; a Quaker "Friend"; a "cultured American" critic – are readily apparent in the performance practices and discursive moves of African, African American, European, and European American women critics from the early eighteenth through the early nineteenth centuries.

Women critics created these ingenious host bodies to deflect attention from and to redefine their material bodies as they wedged their way into public debates, in person and in print. From every corner of the globe, women fashioned hosts out of competing religious, political, and cultural performances and discourses, simultaneously encoding and contesting inchoate notions of race and gender. They borrowed a productive gesture here, a useful word there, and re-contextualized them or imagined them in new combinations. They used self-conscious performance within these host bodies as means of manipulating the performativity of an increasingly racialized American womanhood, claiming respectability and intelligence as they repositioned themselves in terms of religious affiliation, political commitments, or artistic goals. Sometimes they hid behind anonymous or pseudonymous bodies, and sometimes they created bodies



that earned validation through Christian activism, Whig politics, or the drive toward American letters. Often these bodies were aligned with race or a developing sense of nationhood, but not always in the customary geographic or biological ways. When necessary, critics could don multiple host bodies, appealing simultaneously to disparate viewers or readers.

Women adopted diverse bodies, borrowing from a variety of discourses and behavioral systems. They created hosts in every sense of that term. They accepted the consecrated host body of Christ or of the spirits of their African ancestors, ordaining themselves as cultural critics. They attached themselves parasitically and pseudonymously to male or politically partisan bodies. They borrowed transplanted cultural practices through host bodies. They adopted the social mask of the host, transforming their homes into political arenas and their schools into training grounds for woman orators. And they established themselves as hosts for a networking web of information-sharing, becoming colonial, national, transnational, and diasporic cultural critics. In this sense, the host body granted them a collective body, a way of imagining relationality alongside of or outside of nationhood. It offered a way of being in one "body" despite their geographic dispersion. Host bodies enabled women critics to acknowledge their own individually embodied experiences even as they created new, socially acceptable bodies through which to enter and affect religious, political, and cultural movements.

With good fortune, a woman critic's host body was taken up by like-minded others, who helped wedge it into the sphere of public respectability. Hosts were often variously interpreted by the critic's culture, variously marked in Manichean terms of "blackness" or "whiteness," within fiercely contested debates. Often a host body granted a critic authority with one audience and not another. The nature of that authority depended upon a critic's ability to manipulate both the diachronic process of bodies replacing one another over time and the synchronic process of an exchange of gestures or rhetorical moves developing cross-culturally at any given moment in time. Critics fabricated host bodies out of gestural bits and rhetorical gambits they invented or learned from adjacent cultures, in addition to keeping alive and reinventing behaviors and discourses that preceded them.

Within theatre studies, Joseph Roach has been particularly interested in developing a theory of bodily substitutions, but the process that I am articulating in this book differs from his concept of "surrogation" in several important ways. In *Cities of the Dead*, Roach defines diachronic replacement, the process through which new material bodies replace those

that have vacated a particular social space, as "surrogacy." He is especially interested in embodied performance: "into the cavities created by loss through death or other forms of departure," he suggests, "survivors attempt to fit satisfactory alternates." To illuminate the hybrid performances of the "circum-Atlantic" world of the slave trade, Roach builds his concept of surrogation, in part, on René Girard's studies of the relationship between violence and the sacred. Girard was primarily concerned with the ways in which a community holds violence at bay by locating – through religious rituals – a surrogate victim, a fringe figure who can be violently erased and replaced by a substitute, an effigy. This process of locating a "monstrous double" restores the social equilibrium.<sup>3</sup> I find these theories rich and illuminating; they eloquently describe many of the performances of early American culture. But I think that the concept of the surrogate requires amplification. It requires a more acute attention to gender performances and to the ad hoc ways in which critics – who are not quite a part of the community and yet who refuse to become sacrificial victims – perform through "host" bodies. I am interested in the middle ground between center and margins, material and immaterial. I hope, then, to extend Roach's theory of surrogation and to remind performance scholars of Girard's lead in placing religious performances at the core of thinking critically about race, culture, and politics.

The phenomenon I am exploring in this book differs from displacement concepts of surrogation in crucial ways. I am interested in the ways in which women critics attempted to find a zone in between embodiment and abstraction, a bodily space within which they could safely speak or write, while protecting their material bodies and creating new hermeneutic pathways for perceiving those bodies. I am calling this space the "host body." Host bodies resist materialization. They move toward the abstract rather than the fleshy, toward efficacy rather than effigy. They protect the bearer's flesh. They may be collectively occupied. They may be passed down from one generation to another, but they may also be invented on the spot, a self-construction of an individual critic. Host bodies also are enmeshed in a synchronic process of exchange. Like Roach, I investigate the ways in which cultural groups exchange and merge practices, creating hybrid performances. This synchronic process of exchange is routinely a part of the creation of host bodies: women critics borrowed from one another's cultures in ways conscious and unconscious, adopting the gestural patterns and notions of the "body" that seemed useful at the moment. A consideration of these host bodies

enables scholars to recognize the ways in which material and abstract bodies connect, the ways in which performance and writing participate in overlapping systems.

Another customary approach to thinking about what might be called a host body has been to focus upon the abstract body of the citizen. Feminists, critical race theorists, and Americanists have disclosed the ways in which Enlightenment notions of the abstract body of the citizen functioned to build nationhood in the late eighteenth century. By taking part in the politicized public arena, each potential citizen in the emerging American republic took on a new body, suppressing his or her own material body in the abstract, bodiless personhood of citizenship. In return, the community promised the person protection. White male privilege was embedded in this generic, bodiless citizen, however, because the concept of personhood legitimated an implicit standard of propertied white male embodiment. The white, propertied male body, then, was the person's route to legitimacy, but only white males might appear to be disembodied and universal while occupying that body. Only white male property-owners were truly American citizens.

What is missing from this narrative of access to American-ness, I contend, is a consideration of the ways in which particular abstract religious, political, and cultural host bodies that preceded the national body are also implicit in the abstract body of the citizen. The notion of the American citizen in the colonial, revolutionary, and republican periods is inextricably tied to a highly contested Christianity, partisan politics, and American literary and dramatic efforts. Especially during the pre-national period, performance and proffers of religious liberation complicate issues of visibility, invisibility, and access. The Christian host body, I argue, haunted eighteenth-century notions of citizenship, despite American rhetoric of the separation of church and state. This Christian host body was variously imagined through different denominational lenses. The New Light Anglicans and Congregationalists argued with the Old Lights within their congregations about the nature of the Christian body and its relationship to performing whiteness and blackness. The Methodists, Baptists, and African Methodist Episcopalians disputed mainstream notions of the relationship between the Christian body and abstract notions of citizenship. In what Paul Gilroy calls "radical Methodism," for instance, African Americans found a useful host body (Gilroy, *Against Race*, 118). Religious performances, I contend, have allowed for more crucial substitutions than have been previously recognized.