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In her provocative account Early American Women Critics: Performance, Religion, Race, Gay Gibson Cima turns to a broad array of performances by women—in the arenas of literature, journalism, religion, theatre, and political debate—to analyze the many strategies white and black women used to assert themselves as players on the stage of early American culture. Foremost among these, Cima argues, is the strategy of adopting the “host” body of another individual—most often that of a white man—in order to enter into forbidden territory and to shield against attacks that might follow such trespassing. For instance, Cima argues that Elizabeth Timothy, editor and printer of the South Carolina Gazette from 1738 to 1746 (the sole paper in the colony of South Carolina at the time), occupied the “host body” of her son, Peter Timothy, in order to maintain a highly public position that otherwise would be proscribed for women. In more vernacular terms, one might say that she borrowed her son’s name in order to carry on the printing business of her deceased husband. Cima’s critical vocabulary is not, however, in the least gratuitous with respect to the larger project of the book: the concept of a “host body” serves as a central methodological tool that enables Cima to conjure in vivid terms a newly configured scenario of women’s shrouded presence in culture and politics in colonial North America and the early national United States.

Cima’s notion of the “host body” draws, as she states at the outset of the volume, on Joseph Roach’s influential paradigm of performance and “surrogation.” As Roach tells us in Cities of the Dead: Circum-Atlantic Performance (Columbia University Press, 1996), performance often fills a hole in the fabric of the collective culture, serving as a kind of kinesthetic memory or a patch over the location of loss: performance substitutes for what is absent and thus, with respect to culture, is a process of surrogation. Cima, too, is interested in substitution and performance—she focuses on women who occupy the social positions and prerogatives of alternative “host bodies”—but she is less concerned with memory and loss than is Roach. Indeed, one might say that Roach’s account of performance and surrogation is diachronic (the loss of the past is recovered by surrogation in the present), whereas Cima’s account is synchronic (the
encumbered female body is temporarily abandoned in favor of the “efficacious” body of another). Cima’s theory is thus a refinement of sorts of the concept of the performativity of identity; for Cima, identity is performative but only by way of occupying or working within certain preexistent forms. This modification seems extremely useful for historical examinations of the liberating and nonetheless limiting nature of performance as a rubric for understanding cultural agency.

Brought to bear on the history of women’s participation in the public sphere in colonial North America and the early national United States, Cima’s framework is indeed “efficacious.” Most forcefully, the rubric of performance enables Cima to bring together a rich cross section of women as cultural actors who are often not treated together within a single critical framework; for instance, the opening chapter discusses Elizabeth Timothy together with African American market women of Charleston and lower-class white women and slaves who attended revival meetings of the Great Awakening. Later chapters treat Phillis Wheatley, Lucy Terry, Mercy Otis Warren, Judith Sargent Murray, Jarena Lee, Zilpha Elaw, and Susannah Rowson. Each of these women fashions an alternative host body with which to enter into public discourse, Cima contends, and each serves as a “critic” and shaper of early American culture. The term “critic” is thus broadly defined by Cima. Note, however, that the women enumerated above have more often been described as poets, playwrights, printers, and preachers. Cima’s methodology, then, has the virtue of making visible a different set of players than we are accustomed to seeing, particularly in early America. Describing religious exhortation, written work, and dramatic performance as cognate forms of critical performance, Cima succeeds in bringing black and white women together on common critical ground. This recasting of the paradigm of scholarly address toward women in the eighteenth century is both admirable and important for future work in the field.

In many respects, the strongest aspect of Cima’s study is the very paradigm that the study enacts. Often the primary research informing her analysis is significant and compellingly narrated: readings from the letters of Judith Sargent Murray are revealing of Murray’s engagement with the theatre world, and the overall reconstruction of Timothy’s editorship of the South Carolina Gazette and her coverage of the Great Awakening is intriguing. On the other hand, however, Cima’s analyses of specific acts of inhabiting a host body are occasionally quite suppositional: the terms “may have” and “perhaps” surface repeatedly as Cima works to recover the meaning of performances to which our access is limited. For instance, Cima argues that some white Americans inhabited black host bodies while undergoing the paroxysms of conversion during the Great Awakening:

At the moment of Christian conversion, when European believers were wracked by physical convulsions, wrenching by pain and ecstasy as they faced the fires of hell, they carried these imaginings or memories of tortured, fleeing and redeemed ‘black’ bodies with them. . . . Because the guilt thus exorcized could be felt but remain unnamed, conversions were particularly useful to a European populace grappling with the unnamable sins of slavery. (28)
Cima offers an interesting reading of the conversion performances of whites during the Great Awakening, yet her account of a psychology of guilt linking white conversion and black bodies is not supported with any additional evidence other than the assertion above. As is always the case with performance, finding the traces of the meanings these performances embodied for a contemporary audience can be difficult and, to my mind, is best done with constraint. What Cima’s study enables, however, is new path of access to the cultural work of women in early America—particularly of African American women—which scholars in a variety of fields (history, literature, religion, theatre) would do well to explore.