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."[1]

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.[2]

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.[3] 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.

The abstract body of the American citizen was also haunted by various, divisive ideas about its political affiliation, as Whigs and Tories or Anti-Federalists and Federalists tried to claim citizenship as theirs only. This partisan dispute is particularly evident at the end of the eighteenth century. In addition, the "cultured American" body was also implicit in the abstract body of the citizen, because there was a pressing need to articulate and materialize a unifying notion of American-ness through literature and the arts. This cultured body, however, was fluidly shaped and inhabited by women of disparate national and diasporic affiliations: women from Gambia as well as women from England and the shores of Massachusetts created cultured host bodies, with widely different notions of what that body signified. These additional, hotly contested avenues of access to the abstract body of the citizen – these religious, partisan, and cultural host bodies – aided women critics. So, while Lauren Berlant, among many others, has contended that "American women and African-Americans have never had the privilege to suppress the body," in fact religionists, political propagandists, and literary and theatrical adventurers in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries often did just that. They adopted host bodies to suppress their material bodies and claim abstract citizenship, in social and gradually in legal terms, paradoxically and fluidly redefining the relationship between their material bodies and American-ness in the process.[4]

A consideration of strategies for gaining access to the public sphere and claiming the abstract body of the citizen has often circulated within performance studies in debates concerning "strategic anonymity." The most complex articulation of this strategy may be found in Peggy Phelan's pivotal study *Unmarked*, which calls for contemporary feminist critics to practice "an *active* vanishing, a deliberate and conscious refusal to take the pay-off of visibility." Remaining "unmarked" seems a useful tactic to avoid the pitfalls of identity politics, to value that which cannot be seen or named, and to mute the effects of privilege. Phelan adds the caveat that "for the moment, active disappearance usually requires at least some recognition of what and who is not there to be effective. (In short, this has largely been a possibility for white middle- and upper-class women.)" Phelan sees this caveat as a *momentary* concern, but this book demonstrates that the white upper- and middle-class exclusivity that can be exercised through strategic anonymity is an *ongoing* and problematic performance practice: historically, anonymity and pseudonymity have often enabled European American women to escape gender constraints while implicitly claiming "whiteness," reinforcing racial boundaries and racism.[5]

Early American women's strategies for gaining access to public debates depended upon specific, local contexts. Both visibility and invisibility proved useful, and they were not always readily distinct from one another: identities sometimes depended upon invisible entities such as the "spirit," but were also linked to visible practices, such as conversion "fits." Furthermore, sometimes readers and viewers willfully ignored a critic's "actual" identity in preference to a pseudonymous identity that served a useful purpose.

Many European and European American performing critics tried to claim American-ness by appearing as members of an evangelical or cultured "race" in street revivals, churches, literary salons, and theatres. Others entered the public sphere as performance critics. While a few performance critics, shielded by influential patrons or by their record of successful prior publication, signed their own names to their work, most adopted strategic anonymity or pseudonymity to protect their class status and perform white privilege. They appeared as male citizens or as generic feminine amateurs until they felt safe to appear under their own names and profit from their work. This strategy of claiming the whiteness of the abstract citizen through anonymity and pseudonymity enhanced their financial gain even as it complicated their ability to own their intellectual property and establish ties with other critics.

African and African American women, on the other hand, could not readily claim the abstract American body through anonymity. It was difficult for black women to publish anonymously until the anti-slavery and black press emerged. In addition, they benefited from a visible demonstration of their intelligence and humanity, so they developed other footholds on eighteenth-century ideas of colonial and national citizenship. They typically published under their own names as performance critics or appeared in person as performing critics. They often shielded themselves within a Christian host body, disguising their critiques as revelation. By the early nineteenth century, they managed to publish their spiritual autobiographies. Through literate "Afric" host bodies, they revalued blackness and revised American-ness. They also critiqued and claimed privilege by performing within "cultured American" host bodies, visibly demonstrating their cultural literacy and artistic or moral equality – or superiority – as Americans, as citizens of an African diaspora, and as citizens of a Christian realm they were determined to call into being.

This book revises the history of early American women and performance by confounding the customary boundaries between the

performances of religion, politics, and culture. Each chapter focuses upon how women critics from various nations developed particular, localized performances that granted them access to public debates in the American colonies and the emerging nation. Their performances trouble the grand narratives of American performance history, the balkanization of religious history, the genre distinctions of the literary world, and the division between the literary and performative. The first chapter, "Colonial women critics: performing religion, race, possession, and pornography," examines colonial women's entrance into the public sphere through disparate performances of spirit possession that resembled, to the eyes of many beholders, sexual acts. It focuses upon a Southern widow's editorial coverage of the religious revival known as the First Great Awakening (1725–65), which is often viewed as a Northern phenomenon, but which swept through Charles Town, South Carolina, in the 1740s when Elizabeth Timotheé (*c.* 1700–57) governed the only newspaper in the colony, the major news venue in the South. Through the anglicized host body of her son, Timothy disseminated critiques of the ways in which the colony's tax-supported Anglican church (like its northern counterpart, the Congregational church) linked the performance of whiteness to certain *visible* "signs of salvation" – wealth, good health, good fortune. Her columns reveal that revivalists donned evangelical host bodies to redefine whiteness as *invisible* salvation and respectability, open to all. The converted not only damned the religious and political elite in Charleston and the Northern colonies, but also claimed that conversion on American soil was sufficient for salvation. English soil no longer anchored access to salvation, political or cultural standing; this opened the way for revolt.

In the mid eighteenth century, women of virtually every demographic sector staged their religious exhortations in Charleston's streets and in the marketplace, which – to the distress of the town council – was controlled by African and African American slave women working on the task system. Licensed to earn their own profit after their mandatory ten hours' worth of daily labor, slave women parlayed their African trading skills and their knowledge of local South Carolina markets into economic, religious, and cultural agency. Some practiced African spirit possession, disguised as Christian conversion, in full view of their owners, who were dependent upon them for the very food on their tables. Some converted directly to Christianity. Protected by their ancestral or evangelical host bodies, these market critics called out slaveholders as black and sinful. Through their performing criticism, they unified diverse tribal and