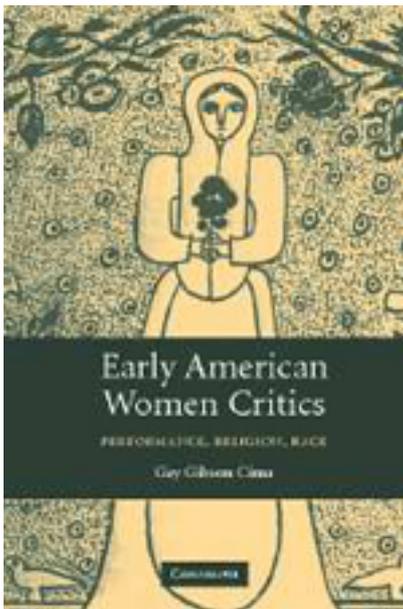


Gay Gibson Cima's *Early American Women Critics: Performance, Religion, Race*

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Cima, Gay Gibson. *Early American Women Critics: Performance, Religion, Race*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006. 241 pages. \$99.00 cloth, \$35.99 paper.



Gay Gibson Cima's *Early American Women Critics: Performance, Religion, Race* is a text of intellectual depth and meticulous scholarship matched by very few in the field of performance studies. Tracy Davis's *Actresses as Working Women* (1991) and Joseph Roach's *Cities of the Dead* (1996) come to mind as similarly muscular texts that reveal the creative intervention of an established performance theorist grappling with deep archival research. Cima is a veteran of the field with a well-known body of work in feminist performance theory. In this, her most recent work, Cima disavows the disciplinary boundaries of American studies, women's history, and African American history, among others, which allows her to come to a radical defense of the intertwined nature of race, gender, and religion in the performances of women in "America" (read: the United States) from the 1740s to the 1830s. Indeed, Cima's rich and provocative interpretation of archival materials has been duly recognized: the book won the American Society for Theatre Research's Barnard Hewitt Prize for Outstanding Research in Theatre History in 2007. It also gives the text a solidity that is at times overwhelming.

The structure of the book is straightforward and yet contributes to the sense of textual density. There are only three chapters after the introduction, and each are temporally bound, moving sequentially from the first to the second Great Awakening of religious fervor in the United States. The stories, however, are told mainly through personal narratives and are clearly shaped by the preexisting possibilities and limitations of the archive. Cima uses the stories of

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specific women, including Elizabeth Timotheé (1700–57), Phillis Wheatley (1753–84), Lucy Terry Prince (1725–1821), Judith Sargent Murray (1751–1820), Zilpha Elaw (c. 1790–?), and many others to put forth her complex arguments. In many of these individual stories, Cima stresses that protestations were seamlessly conducted through performative and textual media. The irony, however, is that Cima’s text remains bound by the weight of words. There are no images except the front cover (a lone woman, perhaps in religious garb, subtly framed by images from nature—a tree, two birds, etc.), and the internal text has no visuals whatsoever. The index and bibliography, by contrast, are extensive and impeccable. Indeed, this is such a textually driven study that the performances described sometimes seem trapped by the medium in which they are presented, becoming almost disembodied. This despite the author’s valiant attempts to read vivacity back into the archival descriptions.

Take, for example, Cima’s central argument that women critics were able to enter into the debates on civil rights through the use of “host bodies” (3). The idea of host bodies is a fascinating and rich one, and certainly extends existing literature on embodiment and agency. Here, host bodies are defined as one of many “sites of access” (3) enabling women to enter into the discursive fray of religion and citizenship. As a strategy, they allowed for powerful performances that were radically opinionated and anonymous, embodied and abstract. Cima herself notes that this idea is as an extension of Roach’s concept of “surrogation” (5) (developed in the aforementioned *Cities of the Dead*) into the realm of gender-specific analysis. This is certainly true—and Cima’s is a valid contribution to studies of embodiment, which rarely venture into 18th, much less 17th-century narratives. Yet, as with the book as a whole, the analogy is so complex and variable that it often becomes slippery. Certainly Cima analyzes differences of race and gender, and she diligently notes that women from differing backgrounds (American slaves, American white women, free women of African descent, etc.) had access to different types of host bodies, which were variously received by their multiple audiences. Yet there are moments where the term seems to turn into a catchall phrase, such as when Judith Murray is described as taking on “the pseudonymous host body of ‘An American Citizen’” (152).

One of Cima’s most important contributions is that her discussion of religiosity, while bound by questions of gender and representation in a specific location and period in history, moves across lines of race and religious affiliation. The central theme of women as “critics” enables such border crossing. As Cima notes, “gathering these women together under [this] rubric [...] creates a broad-based genealogy that illuminates their strategies for claiming a place in the early America body politic” (2). As the summary on the back cover notes, the performances of Christian, Yoruban, Bantu, and Muslim traditions are all interwoven so tightly that Cima’s collateral argument arises: race and religious diversity are inseparable in any analysis of the performance of human rights, citizenship, and the formation of the U.S. nation state in the 18th and 19th centuries.

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