Introduction

Performing Objects

Let's begin with an elegant avatar. A black woman wears a tiara, elbow-length white gloves, and a dress made entirely of white gloves. A sash across her bodice says "bourgeoise." A white object with a knotted handle rests on the floor, but beyond that, the almost uniformly blank background of the photograph in which this woman appears gives no indication of where she is, what she is doing, or why she is wearing this elaborate outfit, which seems suited for a pageant. And perhaps most ambiguous is her expression: lipstick-lined mouth agape, bulging throat muscles suggesting she is in mid-yell, eyes intense and glowing. Her refined and opulent attire appears at odds with the fierce, ecstatic look on her face, the disjuncture indicating that this outfit may indeed be a costume. Yet, without any particulars, one thing is clear: this woman seems to be thoroughly enjoying herself.

This image captures Mlle. Bourgeoise Noire, in the midst of one of her unruly and provocative performances. Ms. Noire is the avatar of conceptual artist Lorraine O'Grady. The playful purpose of this disruptive agit-prop persona—"French for Miss Black Middle-Class," as O'Grady describes her—is to interrupt art gallery openings. Ms. Noire, according to her fantastically hyperbolic autobiography, "won her first title in 1955," and after decades of "maintaining a lady-like silence," on the occasion of the "Silver Jubilee of her coronation in Cayenne," she deigned to celebrate by "invading the New York art world."[1]

The debut of O'Grady's irate debutante came at the opening-night benefit for the *Outlaw Aesthetics* show on June 5, 1980, at Just Above Midtown, the first gallery in New York dedicated to regularly exhibiting the work of cutting-edge artists of color, especially black artists.[2] O'Grady utilized her rebellious doppelganger as a conduit through which to express her disdain toward the overly safe work of fellow black

artists she had seen at the opening of the *Afro-American Abstraction* show at P.S.1 four months earlier. That disdain followed her initial joy at the masses in attendance—the "galleries and corridors were filled with black people who all looked like me, people who were interested in advanced art, whose faces reflected a kind of awareness that excited me"—which soon shifted to utter despondency. "By the time I left, I was disappointed because I felt that the art on exhibit, as opposed to the people, had been too cautious—that it had been art with white gloves on." Eager to respond, albeit artistically, to the artists in the P.S.1 show, O'Grady had an epiphany when walking across an "incredibly filthy and druggy" pregentrified Union Square: a vision of herself "completely covered in white gloves. That's how my persona Mlle. Bourgeoise Noire was born."[3]

At Just Above Midtown, O'Grady staged her incendiary black performance art. Dressed in the elaborate gown, made with 180 pairs of white gloves, O'Grady whipped herself with a white cat-o'-nine-tails spiked with white chrysanthemums, and shouted at bemused gallery denizens turned spectators:

> THAT'S ENOUGH!
> No more boot-licking . .
> No more ass-kissing . . .
> No more buttering-up . . .
> No more posturing
> of super-ass . . . imilates . . .
> BLACK ART MUST TAKE MORE RISKS!!!

O'Grady's confrontational character—staged again in September 1981 at the New Museum exhibition *Personae*, a show of nine performance artists—became a potent physical critique, particularly of contemporary black artists' assimilationist aspirations to enter the mainstream and, as this performed poem implies, overwhelmingly white art market.[4] The seemingly innocuous accouterments of this performed being, particularly the taut and pristine white gloves, became theatrical props symbolic of the aesthetic suffocation that black artists, and their "well behaved abstract art," voluntarily submitted to. O'Grady's satirical self-inflicted whipping was intended as a wake-up call to black artists, while her irate

embodied double temporarily transformed the neutral white cube of the gallery into a black box—a kinetic theatrical experience. O'Grady exploited the great possibility of the avatar to transform herself into an art object. Wielding her body as a tabula rasa, O'Grady's eccentric performance art hinted at the corporeal risks black artists could take: not the abandonment of representational art, but rather an amalgamation of self, a fashioning of oneself as both the subject and object of art.

* * *

The term "performance art" usually refers to art that incorporates the "body as an object" to subvert cultural norms and explore social issues; a time-based medium, performance art's most potent, electrifying, and lasting challenge is its radical evaporation of the distinction between art object and artist, blurring the lines "between action, performance, and a work of art."[5] By focusing on performance art staged by black women, *Embodied Avatars* fiercely rebukes two standard art world assumptions: the perceived incommensurability of "black" and "avant-garde," and the marginalization of black female artists within our conceptions of feminist art.[6] As I explain below, I have positioned black women performers at its center for two reasons: both to trouble the focus on white female subjectivity that serves as an unofficial norm and to recognize that the initial prejudice the black art world cognoscenti expressed toward performance art was tied to the gender of its practitioners. I examine a set of performance works, starting in the early nineteenth century and stretching to the early twenty-first century. Across four case studies, I analyze a wide breadth of cultural materials—including freak show paraphernalia, slave narratives, and engravings in the nineteenth century; artists' writings, photographs, and video art in the twentieth century—to expand the scope of materials counted under the aegis of "performance art." I extend the historical timeline, in the conclusion, to consider bravura performances exacted in contemporary art, popular culture, and new media in the twenty-first century. In doing so, I construct a robust multicentury and multigenerational network of black performance art.[7]

The Eurocentric narrativization of performance art elides the presence of black artists as historical coconspirators. *Embodied Avatars* moves beyond these racially determined omissions to reveal how black performance art challenges the assumptions underlying what and whose

work has traditionally counted as "performance art." The standard narrative, dominated by white male artists, and since the 1970s, by mostly white and American feminist artists, begins in early-twentieth-century Europe. If we trace performance art's origins to the influence of Italian Futurist manifestos and variety theater in the early twentieth century, we find a common cause: to unsettle painting's place as the dominant artistic medium and infuse art with a vitality that directly engaged (and often confronted) audiences.[8] Eventually, performance art surfaces in the United States in forms that further upend dominant artistic paradigms, for instance, the ordinary sounds recorded by musician John Cage starting in the late 1930s and the everyday movements of dancer Merce Cunningham in the early 1950s. Feminist performance art, at its zenith in the 1970s, adopted performance art's axiom of the body-in-motion as the objet d'art, but recalibrated it to address the specific concerns and life experiences of women, albeit mostly white women.[9]

More recently, scholars like Coco Fusco and Amelia Jones have both sought to eschew traditional historical renderings of performance art, grounding it in the ethnographic displays of non-European races, for instance, or the collapse of "distances between artist and artwork, artist and spectator" that arise from artists, especially feminist artists, enacting themselves "*as representation*."[10] They have even argued that the genre needs a new name. While I agree with the impetus behind their renamings, I find it useful to retain the term *performance art*—rather than *the other history of intercultural performance* (Fusco) or *body art* (Jones)—precisely to apply pressure on the assumed meanings of the term. How do we know what we know about performance art, particularly in *who* makes it and *what* counts as such? Part of this rhetorical move is to, again, question received histories of performance art. I am not, however, advocating a simple additive—a sprinkling, if you will—of black women into already existing discourses of feminist performance art and the larger category of performance art. Instead, by beginning this study in the touring antebellum spectacle of Joice Heth, the so-called "ancient negress," I construct a dynamic matrix of black performance art that begins prior to the mythic origins of performance art *and* expands its environs to include cunning acts of self-exhibition, and dangerous subterfuge, staged by black historical actors in the nineteenth century.

I focus, specifically, on black women in this book—as opposed to black performance artists, male and female alike—for two primary reasons, beyond their fascinating narratives. My intent is partly to counter the stubborn focus on white female bodies that, too often, is the unacknowledged norm in feminist theories of the body. The writings of the late Toni Cade Bambara and Marxist feminist Hazel Carby in the 1970s and early 1980s are early forebears that articulated the importance of a feminist practice attuned to the specificities of black women's bodies and experiences. The former insisted that black women are subject to multiple dominant forces, not just whiteness and racism, but also "America or imperialism, depending on your viewpoint or your terror," while the latter cogently warned white feminists against writing black feminists' history, or "herstory," for them. In a discussion of slavery and embodiment, however, Bibi Bakare-Yusuf directly interrogates this persistent elision, when she writes, "I am talking about the body that is marked by racial, sexual, and class configurations. It is this body, this fleshy materiality, that seems to disappear from much of the current proliferations of discourses on the body."[11] Black women's performance work has deftly and unapologetically embraced the feminist axiom "the personal is political." This theme loudly resonates in, for instance, Howardena Pindell's exploration of family ancestry and satirical castigation of white feminists in her 1980 video art piece *Free, White, and 21*, discussed in chapter 4. These performances have also tangled with deep histories of objectification, particularly the memory of chattel slavery. And in some performances these twin imperatives occur simultaneously. Meanwhile, though men *do* appear as collaborators in the first half of the book—whether willingly (in the case of fugitive slave Ellen Craft's husband, William) or not (in the case of circus impresario P. T. Barnum)—I again turn my attention to how black women performers in the nineteenth century were interpreted against a different set of often gendered and racialized discourses, be it the cult of true womanhood or the visual iconographies used to substantiate biological racism. In sum, the ensemble of artful performances I analyze here illustrates both the aesthetic risks taken by performers not always recognized as such (or even as artists, for that matter) as well as the literal danger, in some cases, of assuming faux identities in the public sphere.

My focus on black women performers, moreover, acknowledges a perhaps inconvenient but nonetheless important truth: not only have the traditional gatekeepers of the art world been biased against performance art, but the black art community (itself subject to plenty of gatekeeping) historically has been biased against performance art as well. And that bias, at least initially, was tied to gender. The black art world's suspicion of performance art (and video art) in the early 1980s was partly due to its status as a noncommodity and a form not easily digested by middle- and upper-class audiences (black and white alike); yet, as Lowery Stokes Sims suggests, the resistance within the black art world was not only class based, but also implicitly gendered. In her words, if the "older guard of painters, sculptors, printmakers, and photographers" were leery of performance art as an ephemeral medium, the "overwhelmingly male focus of black American art" was slow to "accommodate an expressive form that is dominated by women."[12] Nevertheless, black women artists continued to adopt performance art for specific ends, be it autobiographical expression, or to bridge the gap between black communities and artistic experimentation, or as a manifestation of the long-useful strategy of "acting out." The efficacy and urgency of performance art practiced by black women artists continues today. As we will see below, the black women performers in this book repeatedly wield performance art—and their "ambiguous status" as both real persons and "theatrical representation[s]"—as an elastic means to create new racial and gender epistemologies.[13]

Yet the exclusion of black women artists from membership in the American avant-garde has resulted in a fraught relationship with it. For many twentieth-century artists, performance has served as a catalyst, a method of moving forward when they have reached impasses in their work. Hence, for those who populate the history of the avant-garde, those who lead the breaks with each successive field, "performance has been at the forefront of such an activity: an avant-avant garde."[14] Inclusion in the American avant-garde, though, has been selective, resulting in a lopsided distribution of the cultural prestige that attends it, frequently involving the exclusion of certain groups of artists, notably women and black Americans.[15] While artists in the vanguard have often been interested in a democratization of the avant-garde, the expansion of its membership has primarily been along lines of class, seldom gen-

der, and hardly ever race and ethnicity.[16] "The avant-garde has nothing to do with black people," a member of the New York–based Heresies Feminist Collective famously told fellow member Lorraine O'Grady.[17] For the performers in this book, both black *and* women, this quagmire becomes even more pronounced. Though they (and their work) share qualities often attributed to the avant-garde—cutting edge, marginal, seamless moves across disciplines—their relationship to it is deeply vexed. This tension surfaces in the second half of the book, in particular, in the discussion of artists Adrian Piper and Howardena Pindell, who are explicitly *not* a part of esteemed groups of artists (sometimes white, other times black) perceived as avant-garde. Piper and Pindell both desired inclusion at different times, yet often found themselves at odds with these groups. In fact, as we will see, both struggled to be recognized simply as bona fide "artists." The historical constraints of the American avant-garde, furthermore, means the nineteenth-century figures in this book are not technically part of the avant-garde either, though I argue they staged daring performances that broke new ground in various ways. The black women performers in *Embodied Avatars*, despite this erasure, execute skilled and soignée performance art that intersects with Conceptualism, freak show dramaturgy, and the 170-year history of photography.

Objecthood

My central contention in this book is that objecthood provides a means for black subjects to become art objects. Wielding their bodies as pliable matter, the black women performers discussed herein repeatedly become objects, often in the form of simulated beings, or what I term "avatars." I call this process *performing objecthood*. Becoming objects, in what follows, proves to be a powerful tool for performing one's body, a "stylized repetition of acts" that rescripts how black female bodies move and are perceived by others.[18] Put differently, performing objecthood becomes an adroit method of circumventing prescribed limitations on black women in the public sphere while staging art and alterity in unforeseen places. Objecthood's putty-like attributes are manipulated by conceptual artist Adrian Piper in the early 1970s in her philosophical experiments in self-estrangement. Likewise, her contemporary Howardena Pindell

deploys objecthood to perform multiple avatars of herself in the provocative *Free, White, and 21.* Meanwhile, in the mid-1830s, elderly and partially paralyzed Joice Heth uses objecthood to dramatically transform herself into a maternal icon of American national memory. And, a little over a decade later, fugitive slave Ellen Craft employs its slippery properties to enact a daring escape (for her and her husband, William) in the guise of a disabled white gentleman. Tracing this practice of self-objectification—one that provides the possibility for (though never the guarantee of) an emancipated subjectivity—I am concerned with the personal and artistic risks incumbent in becoming and/or performing as an object. Put simply, what are the pleasures and perils of objecthood?

Objecthood—a charged concept in postcolonial studies, black feminism, and art history—is reconfigured here as a specific strategy of black women performers. In dialogue with postcolonial treatises on the nefarious effects of colonization,[19] Hortense Spillers' theorization of black subjectivity in the New World, and Michael Fried's spirited polemic on the overt theatricality of minimalist art, my notion of performing objecthood indexes what Saidiya V. Hartman has described as the challenges in "rethinking the relation of performance and agency" in black history. Put another way, blackness and performance have, historically, existed via a violent tethering, built upon often theatrical spectacles of torment that reinforced relationships defined by dominance.[20] The muddying of the line between free will and force makes it particularly difficult to discern agency, commonly understood as the intentional choices made by humans alone or in collaboration with others.[21] Consequently, black performance art's usage of the black body as its artistic medium is especially loaded when confronting a historical legacy of objectification and the generations of slaves who did not legally own the bodies they acted with.[22] Spillers extends a similar logic to chattel slavery and the violent denial of personhood, especially to black women. She demarcates a difference between the *body* and the *flesh.* The former is the apotheosis of a liberated subject-position, while the latter is a total objectification, an "absence *from* a subject position," a forceful reduction of the body "to a thing, becoming *being for* the captor." For black women, this denial of will (coupled with other violations) is often so severe that it excludes them completely from female subjectivity.[23] Spillers strongly suggests that to be reduced to an object (or thing) is the ultimate debasement, a

denial of subjectivity. Thus, to exist as an object is to be located toward the very bottom of the "great chain of being," with humans poised at the top and inanimate objects and nonhuman animals located at the bottom. This paradoxical blending—of human, object, animal—produces what Mel Y. Chen calls an "abject object": "a subject aware of its abjection; a clashing embodiment of dignity as well as of shame."[24] Blackness itself, in this narrative, is delineated and defined by such abjection, a history of grappling with defeat and terror.[25]

In this book, I argue for rescrambling the dichotomy between objectified bodies or embodied subjects by reimagining objecthood as a performance-based method that disrupts presumptive knowledges of black subjectivity.[26] What happens, I ask, if we reimagine black objecthood as a way toward agency rather than its antithesis, as a strategy rather than simply a primal site of injury? Far from avoiding the high stakes delineated above, I contend that precisely because of them, objecthood is a concept that offers us a powerful lens to think through art, performance, and black female embodiment. In its counterintuitive logics, performing objecthood is akin to what Darieck Scott calls an "embodied alienation."[27] Scott's term gestures toward the surprising powers, and even pleasures, possible in blackness-as-abjection. Taking up a different archive, and focusing more precisely on black women and their archival traces, I propose that forms of subjectivity and agency are always present, however minuscule they may be, in the often complex and rigorous performances of objecthood I trace in this book.

Objecthood, as practiced here by black women performers, is not the negation of art—as Michael Fried decries—but rather a method of suturing art *and* performance together. In his notorious essay "Art and Objecthood," published in *Artforum* in 1967, Fried wrote of his dismay at sculptures by artists Donald Judd and Robert Morris (among others) that had a peculiar, aggressive relationship with viewers. As opposed to passive paintings on a wall, these works seemed to make spectators subject to their presence. These objects' dubious theatricality, he argued, nullified their status as "art." In these pages, I celebrate objecthood's ostensible staginess and the ability of these art objects to get in the spectator's way—like the "silent presence of another *person*."[28] The very qualities that Fried treats with alarm I treat with amazement, the hallmarks of how figures like Adrian Piper and Ellen Craft, separated

by over a century, both adroitly navigate slippages between subject and object and, in doing so, reveal that the borders between subjectivity and objecthood are not nearly as distinct as we pretend they are . . . and never have been.

Akin to anthropologist Bruno Latour's "hybrids," the black female objects I discuss violate the "distinct ontological zones" between human and object. Meanwhile, the sense of the uncanny provoked by some of these more nefarious objects, as Bill Brown observes in a discussion of black collectibles, is precisely because they uncomfortably remind us that "our history is one in which humans were reduced to things (however incomplete that reduction)." Indeed, he argues, this subject/object uncertainty is one of slavery's most sordid leitmotifs, its ultimate moral crime. Yet, while I concur with this logic, I depart from Brown's exclusive focus on the eerie material objects that contain this repressed history of "ontological confusion," focusing instead on the performers whose bodies bore those slippages.[29] Thus, I investigate the elastic recurrence of this dialectic in black performance art, specifically the savvy performances of objecthood staged by the cultural subjects in this book. Put simply, theories of object life[30] become deeply fortified when black women's performance work is recognized as a key player, rather than an aberration, in interrogating the dense imbrications of beings, objects, and matter.

What I call *prosthetic performance* serves as an instance of how objecthood, far from acting alone, instead often acts in collaboration with inanimate props that are transformed into active agents. I develop this term in my discussion of fugitive slave Ellen Craft, whose impersonation of a disabled white male slaveholder enabled her and her husband, William, acting as this gentleman's valet, to escape from slavery in 1849. It includes both her feigned behaviors as well as the quotidian items, such as two poultices, that facilitated her multiple role-reversals. Her clever use of one of these poultices, and a sling, to hide her right hand not only enhanced the myth of her white male avatar's disability, but also allowed the illiterate Craft to avoid being called upon to sign in at hotels or to register "him" (or "his slave") with white officers en route. Seemingly inert matter, Craft's sling can be reinterpreted as an "actuant," to use Latour's term: a source of action that makes things happen. In Craft's case, the sling's strange abilities to repeatedly incite white spectators to

act on Craft and *its* behalf "rewrite[s] the default grammar of agency" to include both embodied acts as well as inanimate things.[31]

In what follows, prosthetic performance is one example of the unique object lessons these black women performers implore us to heed. It is my contention that the various artistic and social concerns of these performers repeatedly coalesce around a single strategy: the use of avatars.

Avatars

This hybrid group of black women performers, as we shall see, repeatedly performed objecthood by deploying the tactics and aesthetics of the avatar. The concept of the avatar has a distinct genealogy. "Avatar," a term from Hindu mythology, is derived from the Sanskrit word *avatara*. Combining the prefix *ava* ("down") with the base of *tara* ("a passing over"), its translation of "downcoming" denotes the descent of a deity to earth in order to be reincarnated in a human form. Entering the English language at the end of the eighteenth century, its meanings grew less spiritual and more rhetorical and allegorical. In 1985, the word "avatar" was first applied to virtual persona.[32] As a result, it has acquired a much more banal, technological meaning, specifically to denote a graphic representation of a person—a human-like figure, usually—controlled by a person via a computer. Today, it is most often used to refer to the computer-generated figures that abound in video games. James Cameron's 2009 film *Avatar* has brought the obsession with these alternate selves—long the purview of geeks and techies and gamers—into the global zeitgeist. Meanwhile, avatars increasingly act, as B. Coleman argues, as "reliable proxies for mediated face-to-face engagements" in a "wider array of media forms and platforms," including text messaging (SMS) and social media like Facebook.[33] As we increasingly communicate via our various screens, she suggests that avatars act as extensions of our agency, while also revealing a persistent slippage between real and virtual worlds, a phenomenon she calls "x-reality." Avatars, in short, act as mediums—between the spiritual and earthly as well as the abstract and the real—and the uses of those mediums, as well as their attendant meanings, continue to morph.

While befuddling, the dual connotations of "avatar"—of a spiritual reincarnation and an alternate self—are in fact quite revealing for our

purposes. I rerender "avatar" in the service of black performance art to gesture toward some of the oldest (and newest) forms of impersonation staged by black women *and* the conversion of these self-effacing performances into literary, visual, and digital remains.

I employ what I call *avatar production* as an analytic for understanding the cogent and brave performances of alterity these women enact. As Hazel V. Carby and Carla Peterson have noted, black women have historically been excluded from forms of artistic production (writing and oratory, for example), if not from the category "woman" itself.[34] Black women performers have long utilized the tools of performance to assert claims to social space; these artistic strategies were "forms of mobility" that "were key in claiming subjecthood."[35] Avatars, as alternate beings given human-like agency, are akin to the second selves the black women performers in this book create, inhabit, and perform. I use the concept of avatar production to foreground how these women engage in spectacular, shocking, and even unlawful role-plays. The deployment of avatars in these performances, however, extends beyond mere mimesis; instead, these avatars are a means of highlighting (and stretching) the subordinate roles available to black women. Thus, I conceive of avatars functioning, to borrow the words of Sianne Ngai, as particularly unique "ways of inhabiting a social role that actually distort its boundaries." The efficacy of these avatars, in other words, is their agile ability to comment back on identity itself, to subvert the taken-for-granted rules for properly embodying a black female body. The performances I delineate here push us, then, to consider the morphing of social roles, "from that which purely confines or constricts to the site at which new possibilities for human agency might be explored."[36]

Furthermore, I utilize avatar production to reveal how these performers transmute their simulated identities into transhistorical figurations. Put differently, avatar production describes how these rogue corporeal stagings are "reincarnated" into other mediums, transcending the original place of their conception. Objecthood, as noted earlier, made it possible for these performers to become objets d'art. In doing so, these cultural subjects, in the words of Stuart Hall, "used the body—as if it was, and it often was, the only cultural capital we had. We have worked on ourselves as the canvases of representation."[37] The concept of avatar production, similarly, limns how experiments in ontological play create haunting res-

onances in word and image. Thus, I utilize it to analyze the reanimation of these disguises and fraudulent identities in faux biographies, video art, printed newsletters, and by the book's conclusion, digital media like Tumblr and YouTube. In this manner, this book is not only about avatars that are embodied, but also those that become *dis*embodied, as these synthetic selves are distended across disparate representational forms.

I argue that avatar production is a unique and particularly useful prism through which to view and interpret these dazzling performances. This frame, of course, is my own. After all, none of the performers in this book explicitly call their constructed characters "avatars." Nor do they term their intricate labor in fabricating and animating these secondary selves via performance "avatar production." And yet, I suggest, these performances all share qualities remarkably analogous to both older and more contemporary understandings of avatars. For example, the supernatural and transcendent properties of avatars—able to seemingly supersede normal progressions of time—are present in Joice Heth's performed hoax as a living (yet impossibly old) embodiment of national history. They are also present in artist Adrian Piper's description of the Mythic Being as "timeless," with a personal history existing "prior to the history of the world."[38] Meanwhile, the idea of the avatar as a flexible representational stand-in is visible in the multiple supporting roles Howardena Pindell alternates between in her plaintive and confrontational *Free, White, and 21*. Finally, the reappearance of Ellen Craft's white male slaveholder likeness in print and portraiture is a literal illustration of how avatars are projected into other representational forms.

I also make use of avatars' shape-shifting qualities to index the slipperiness of time itself. While this book unfolds in a historically chronological form, beginning in the nineteenth century and ending in the twenty-first, it does not aspire toward linear temporalities. Indeed, its pointed *moves*—leapfrogging over short and long temporal spans—disrupt any semblance of taut historical causation or a sequential passage of time. Instead, I argue, time (like avatars themselves) recurs, reverberates, and exceeds artificial distinctions between the past and the present. Time is *polytemporal*;[39] what has come before is not contained in the past, but is continually erupting.

Mammy memory, a concept I develop in this book, begins to delineate this ontological and temporal slippage, capturing both the hazy mergers

between self and other endemic to avatars and the entanglement of the *then* in *now*.[40] I make use of mammy memory, specifically, to describe how Joice Heth's impersonations as George Washington's feeble nursemaid indexes the very real historical practice of black wet nurses caring for white infants. I also deploy it to reveal the more ephemeral and inchoate: the affective surplus produced by nineteenth-century white spectators as they reexperienced this ostensibly tender cross-racial kinship—and romantic vision of an American past—through Heth's performances. Her fraudulent exhibits routinely tripped up the logic of linear time; indeed, through her virtually immobile proxy, the past and present seemed to touch. This fluidity of time, where history refuses to stay dead or seemingly finished, is inherent to the category of reenactments themselves. In them, "the past is the stuff of the future, laid out like game show prizes for potential (re) encounter."[41] Heth's *performance* of history (scripted by P .T. Barnum) suggests a break from a narration of history "as presenting the past 'as it really was'" and instead introduces the possibility of getting it wrong, of a historical memory "ridden with glitches and mistakes."[42] And this temporal ambiguity, as we will soon see, is amplified not only by the *multiple* elderly black female avatars that perform mammy memory in the mid-nineteenth century, but also by the confusion over the "real" Joice Heth. This uncertainty, over the limits between the role of "Joice Heth, George Washington's nursemaid" and the black female slave portraying her, continues to plague the archive. This indeterminancy, though, is the quintessence of avatars, producing a "zone of relationality" where "the categories of self and other are rendered undecidable."[43] In short, mammy memory is illustrative of how the maverick black women performers in this book, from Joice Heth to Nicki Minaj, repeatedly manipulate avatar production as a strategy to transubstantiate themselves into porous beings with the capacity to mutate across time.

Malleable Bodies, Flexible Methodologies

This book's emphasis on the critical moments where black performance art, objecthood, and avatars meet challenges foundational (and often fetishized) notions of "truth" and accuracy that are thought to reside in more typical forms of evidence. After all, if performance itself is by

definition elusive, how does one then analyze these proxy characters, whose protean qualities and unmooring from temporal constraints make them further resistant to capture? The study of these nimble performers, their savvy bodily acts, and their reanimation in literary, visual, and digital mediums does not require us to forsake empirical tools of analysis, but does require us to use them differently.

Performance's ephemerality, at first glance, seems fundamentally at odds with the production of knowledge. Put differently, how do we study that which "becomes itself through disappearance," as Peggy Phelan so famously put it?[44] Several scholars have sought to debunk this idea, suggesting that performance is not inherently loss. They have proposed queering evidence by suturing it to ephemera, argued that performance is intrinsically linked to memory and history, or insisted that performance remains and becomes itself not through disappearance but through its "messy and eruptive re-appearance."[45] In this way, performances are not simply the residue of past events but closer to, in Joseph Roach's words, "restored behaviors that function as vehicles of cultural transmission."[46] Performances are indeed captured and stored, albeit in unusual ways. This seemingly contradictory linkage, "the *conjunction* of reproduction and disappearance," as Fred Moten explains, is "performance's condition of possibility, its ontology, and its mode of production."[47] The clasping of performance to liveness, to the *here* and *now*, is particularly pronounced in conceptualizations of performance art; yet that idea and its attendant belief—that one has to witness performance art directly in order to fully understand it—has been rebuked as well.[48] Amelia Jones has questioned, for instance, whether her writing about Carolee Schneemann's *Interior Scroll* would have been more "truthful" if she had observed Schneemann pulling the scroll out of her vaginal canal firsthand. If bodily proximity, she argues, does not guarantee full knowledge of the subject, neither does the documentation (photographs, writings, etc.) that scholars like myself analyze and that performance art is dependent on to become an object of analysis in culture writ large.[49]

I utilize the porosity of performance studies, a self-professed "provisional coalescence on the move," to similarly construct a dynamic and flexible methodological apparatus capable of mutating across time and shifting across disciplines.[50] Consequently, I perform in this book a "more panoramic reading" of black performance art, placing objects

of analysis together that previously would be kept apart.[51] I purposely position black women's audacious (and at times, coerced) self-displays in the antebellum era alongside increasingly self-conscious works of contemporary visual and conceptual art in a single, if necessarily discontinuous, study. In doing so, Nicki Minaj's exuberant manipulations of grotesque aesthetics in the twenty-first century and Joice Heth's staging as a spectacularly aged negress in the nineteenth century are squarely situated within each other's environs and, in the conclusion, discussed *together* via their sonic outbursts. The different political stakes of these performances do not always lead to their easy alignment, even within time periods; this seeming discordancy, however, is exactly my aim: to suggest, in other words, how black women performers have repeatedly seized upon performance, objecthood, and avatars as instruments to gain agency—with varying degrees of success—precisely because of the pesky persistence of oppressive social forces encouraging their use.

Mirroring the intrepid moves of these fleet-footed performers (and their avatars), I deploy an amalgamation of methods and interpretative frames suitable to the sinuous paths these performances take. Adrian Piper's kinetic experiments in self-estrangement (see chapter 3) are a prime example; in tracing and unspooling them, I necessarily move through conceptual art, black dance, photography, and theories of racial formation, not to mention Piper's own voluminous writings. After all, as scholars *and* artists, both Piper and Howardena Pindell have been explicit about the need for their art to be properly considered, i.e., that the art objects take precedence over their personal biographies and the theory that aids, Darby English notes, "in making such art visible *as criticism*."[52] I heed their calls by taking their art (and them, as artists) seriously on the rigorous terms they offer. But I also purposely analyze their art outside of strictly art-historical contexts in efforts to expand the range of interpretations applied to this work while, simultaneously, highlighting what black performance art can *do*. In short, a vigorous and interdisciplinary black arts criticism is one of this book's raisons d'être. For antebellum figures Joice Heth and Ellen Craft, I employ a similar approach, applying a concatenation of disciplinary gazes to them and their rogue acts, including disability studies, visual culture studies, psychoanalysis, and African American literary theory. Still, my use of performance studies as my primary frame is intentional, to anchor

performance theory in discourses of blackness, particularly to illuminate how, in Stephanie Batiste's words, "black performers made meaning within often problematic representational structures."[53]

Overview

The efforts that percolate in *Embodied Avatars* do not represent the entirety of black performance art nor that staged specifically by black women; there are certainly other nervy acts that fit within the genre. Yet the six cultural subjects discussed here were chosen for their aesthetic affinities and what they reveal about the interwoven workings of black performance art, objecthood, and avatar production at seemingly disparate moments. Each chapter assiduously attends to the historical, cultural, and artistic regiments these performers operated in and that influenced, if not shaped, their performances of alterity. To build a fulcrum for this investigation into the stakes of avatar production, the possibilities of objecthood, and the problem of agency, I begin my study with the phenomenon of Joice Heth, the "ancient negress."

Chapter 1, "Mammy Memory: The Curious Case of Joice Heth, the Ancient Negress," focuses on resituating Heth's brief but iconic impersonations, as George Washington's nursemaid in 1830s America, as performance art. I begin to do so by tracing what I earlier termed mammy memory, an affective charge suturing race, childhood, and nostalgia, both in photographic depictions of the black wet nurse and that figure's seeming recurrence in two additional black female avatars enacted in this time period: "Joice Heth's Grandmother" and "Mother Boston." Paired with her performances of disability, I ruminate on these sundry attempts to script the partially paralyzed Heth as both a cultural and biological anomaly as well as an embodied portal to a mythic and majestic American past. I then shift gears to the brief rumor of Heth as an inert automaton ventriloquized by Barnum, using Sianne Ngai's concept of "racial animatedness" to delimit the complex interplay between race and the mechanical. Coupled with Barnum's visual and literary reanimations of Heth, I detail the seduction of this ontological mystery: is Joice Heth a human or a machine? These incidents lead us to a final discussion of her ostensible resistance, a brief vocal interjection that I call a *sonic of dissent*. My focus on Heth's sonic of dissent, while *not* an explicit

attempt to solve the quandary regarding her agency, has a dual aim: (1) to privilege embodied memory over the textual and visual distortion of Barnum (and others), and (2) to engage with the disturbing legacies of brute objecthood and fabulation[54] that are central components of black performance art's haunting historical backdrop.

I continue reinterpreting otherwise banal nineteenth-century behaviors and fierce acts of bravery as forms of black performance art in chapter 2, "Passing Performances: Ellen Craft's Fugitive Selves," shifting to an examination of Craft's passing performances; her radical actions succeeded in freeing Craft and her husband, William, from chattel slavery in rural Georgia, and eventually transforming them into veteran performers in the United States and British Isles. I lay bare the sundry sartorial and synthetic props of Craft's handicapped white male avatar, "Mr. William Johnson." I reveal how her aforementioned *prosthetic performances*—fusing clothing-based items to faux acts of disability—succeeded in eliciting sympathy (and prompting action) from white spectators. I also briefly turn to Craft's cousins, Frank and Mary, to emphasize their shared use of performance-based methods in their equally perilous collaborative escape. I then lead us across the Atlantic Ocean as I move from Craft's improvised escape acts to her otherwise banal peregrinations at the Great Exhibition in London in 1851 and her staging of her white mulatta body as a disruptive agent. I end with a discussion of the engraving of Craft in her partial escape costume that appeared in the *London Illustrated News* the same year (and later as the frontispiece to *Running a Thousand Miles to Freedom*), urging a reading of it as a unique depiction, neither of her nor of her white male avatar, but rather *both* simultaneously.

We then travel back to the United States—and leap across a century—as I move from 1850s Britain to 1970s New York. The purpose of this strategic maneuver is twofold: (1) to construct a more far-reaching view of black women's performance work, as I shift from politically resistant self-displays in the shadow of chattel slavery to self-conscious performance art that circulated in New York's fine art world, and (2) to highlight how, in spite of these temporal divergences, traces of coercion and subjugation haunt more recent black female performance art. Chapter 3, "Plastic Possibilities: Adrian Piper's Adamant Self-Alienation," focuses on conceptual artist Piper's dense explorations of objecthood

and her bold experiments with disorientation, self-estrangement, and becoming a confrontational art object. Utilizing Daphne Brooks's concept of "afro-alienation," I argue that Piper's complex praxis of self-observation and an aggressive nonidentification with her audience is suggestive of a strategic self-alienation employed by black historical actors, albeit in the halcyon days of 1970s performance art. Building on conceptual art's emphasis on ideas and process, and Minimalism's antipathy toward formal art objects, Piper deftly manipulates her body as artwork and as a catalytic agent for audiences. I illustrate this in my initial discussion, mapping her unique traversal from Minimalism to Conceptualism to performance art, to reveal her agile attempts at aesthetic mobility. Following this, I briefly ponder Piper's relationship to incipient notions of "feminist art" and "black art," meditating on her seeming absence from both. I then focus on two sets of Piper's lesser-known performances—the *Aretha Franklin Catalysis* (1972) and *The Spectator Series* (1973)—revealing how she probes objecthood via black dance in the former while engaging with the disguise of a mysterious witness in the latter. Both lead us to *The Mythic Being* performances (1973–75), in which she dressed as a third-world male avatar in blaxploitation-esque attire, before ceasing street performances and shifting to a strictly visual icon. I dissect the various artistic strategies and ideological aims of *The Mythic Being* performances as well as the posters and advertisements featuring the avatar; both, I assert, are in the service of deconstructing the visual field that racial formation (and racism) maneuver in. Finally, I address Piper's very public withdrawal of her work from the 2013 exhibition *Radical Presence* at New York's Grey Art Gallery, arguing that the tactical removal of her work is in closer dialogue with her larger corpus than we may initially think.

Chapter 4, "Is This Performance about You?: The Art, Activism, and Black Feminist Critique of Howardena Pindell," centers on Piper's historical contemporary, abstract painter Howardena Pindell, as we shift from Piper and her inscrutable black male avatar in the streets of New York City to Pindell and her white feminist impersonation on film. Specifically, this chapter focuses on her controversial *Free, White, and 21* (1980), a video art piece in which Pindell—playing all parts—staged a dialogue between plaintive reincarnations of herself and a caricature of a white feminist who callously debunks the veracity of her experiences. I

interpret the video as creating a black feminist counterpublic that is not simply about critique, but also racism-as-trauma; furthermore, I detail its performative engagements with cross-racial embodiment and avatar-play. Yet in efforts to contextualize both the video's content and Pindell's career, the chapter begins with an examination of the various political and artistic communities she participated in, or was denied access to, in the late 1960s and 1970s. In doing so, I aim to render visible not only the manifold tensions that arose from the merging of art and politics in this period, but more explicitly the difficulties in being a black woman artist excluded from avant-garde circles (both black *and* white), partly for making abstract work that was deemed not sufficiently "black." In the last part of the chapter, I detail Pindell's vociferous rebuke of "art world racism" through her involvement in PESTS, an anonymous arts organization that, the evidence suggests, grew out of her activism. I turn to PESTS's remains—a flyer, poster replicas, and two obscure newsletters—that serve as public engagements with the invisibility, exclusion, and tokenism faced by artists of color. As such, I contend, these visual paraphernalia enable the possibility of counterpublics as well.

The conclusion, "'I've Been Performing My Whole Life,'" serves both as a summation of the book's arguments and an extension of its recurring trio—objecthood, black performance art, and avatar production—into the twenty-first century. Mimicking the architecture of the chapters, I end the book with yet another unlikely historical pair: pop and hip-hop dynamo Nicki Minaj and sculptor Simone Leigh. I zero in on Minaj's canny manipulation of her voice in her zesty cameo on Kanye West's single "Monster"; her thrilling scream in that song recalls Heth's earlier outburst, and the women's shared wielding of *grotesque aesthetics*. Building off of Kobena Mercer's scholarship, I restage and develop this term through Minaj's artifice-laced performance in the music video accompaniment to West's single, a particularly fraught piece that was swiftly banned upon its release. I follow this discussion with Leigh's video art opus *Breakdown*, in which an archetypal black woman (performed by opera singer Alicia Hall Moran) performs a stunning mental breakdown. I dissect this artwork's avatar-play via its skilled execution of failure, its suggestion of the roles diasporic black women perform for the duration of their lives. This provocative pair, bridging high art and popular culture, is enhanced through brief appearances by other

contemporary subjects (and their avatars)—including visual and performance artist Narcissister, digital creation Kismet Nuñez, and musician Janelle Monáe.

What emerges is a fantastic cacophony—of voices both raucous and dirge-like—that confirms the urgency of black female avatars in performance art, new media, and black musical cultures of the twenty-first century. The artful performances of objecthood and avatar-play I amass here are a capacious worlding;[55] they hint at new possibilities for self-making in the African diaspora amid the imbroglio of history, as well as an expansive vision of the incredible risk and rewards of art making—a demanding black art that is made, and as Lorraine O'Grady suggests, must be received by taking the white gloves off.