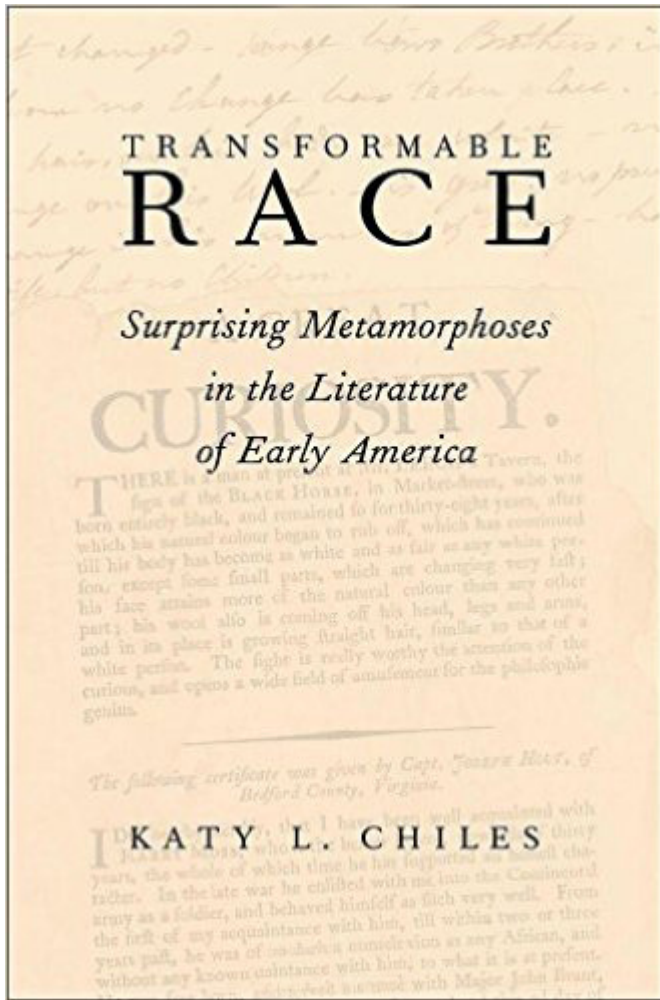


# When a Sunburn is Never Just a Sunburn



"Man," wrote John Webb, a Boston-based minister, in a 1726 sermon, "conforms to the Tempers and Manners of the Company he keeps." Warning listeners of the dangers of keeping bad company, and dedicated to the youth of his congregation, Webb's sermon quietly registers another much broader and very muscular tenet of eighteenth-century, Protestant common sense: that one's environment had an almost unlimited capacity to influence one's behavior, feelings, desires, and even one's faith. Webb's *Seasonable warning against bad company-keeping*, and the concerns about the spiritually corrosive potential of bad company that it voices, provide a glimpse into one of the major structural idioms through which residents of eighteenth-century British colonial North America understood their world. Social influences, however, were ultimately only one part of this broad logic that understood the environmental writ large—the physical, natural, climatic, gustatory, social, and spiritual environment—as one of the most definitive factors in human individual and collective development. For scholars who work on the eighteenth-century Atlantic world, this radically different way of thinking about human constitution poses one of the biggest challenges to approaching the period, as we are exhorted to do, "on its own terms." Reading eighteenth-century texts through the framework of environmental determinism,

however, is critical to developing a careful and textured understanding of the period, and essential to the project of denaturalizing categories of human difference—race, sex, sexual desire—that were beginning to be taxonomized and reified in the eighteenth century, and that continue to be live political questions for all of us today.



Katy Chiles, *Transformable Race: Surprising Metamorphoses in the Literature of Early America*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2014. xi, 315 pp., £45.00.

The promise of this carefully historicized reading practice is exactly what Katy Chiles delivers in *Transformable Race: Surprising Metamorphoses in the Literature of Early America*. Suggesting that we tend to analyze debates about the meaning and etiology of racial difference in the eighteenth-century through “nineteenth- and twentieth-century quotidian understandings of race” that “deemed it an internal rather than an external phenomenon,” Chiles’ monograph turns its focus to the environmental logic in which eighteenth-century, colonial North American intellectual culture was steeped (109). Pairing eighteenth-century natural historical texts with some of the most canonical works of eighteenth-century North American literature, Chiles’ careful, close readings highlight the way that these texts understood race to denote “a sense of human somatic difference (albeit, and indeed, one that could change) influenced by environmental factors, not one in the blood” (10). Putting writers such as Phillis Wheatley, Samson Occom, Benjamin Franklin, J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur, Olaudah Equiano, Charles Brockden Brown, and Royall Tyler into conversation with some of the most prominent natural philosophers and scientific thinkers of the same era—among them Benjamin Rush, John Mitchell, Thomas Jefferson, Samuel Stanhope Smith, Timothy Dwight, Guillaume-Thomas Raynal, and Georges-Louis Leclerc, Comte de Buffon—*Transformable Race* insists on reading early American literature “in relationship to its own racial epistemology of the late eighteenth-century—the very one through which these early American writers both knew and wrote their world” (23).

The central argument of the book is one that is unlikely to raise eyebrows: *Transformable Race* describes how popular cultural understandings of race in eighteenth-century North America defined it in anything but ontological terms. Pointing to the muscular place that natural historical thinking held in eighteenth-century print culture, Chiles insists that “early Americans largely considered race...to be potentially mutable: it was thought to be an exterior bodily trait, incrementally produced by environmental factors (such as climate, food, and mode of living) and continuously subject to change” (2). In *Transformable Race*, Chiles turns to myriad forms of literature (essays, sermons, true narratives, poetry, novels) from the period to illustrate two important ideas: first, that race was understood as a dynamic bodily state, a notion predicated on the idea “that the body, its racial features, and racial

identity itself were always in flux and had to be consistently maintained," and one that "informed a broad cultural logic about racial construction" (3). Second, Chiles painstakingly leads the reader through her analysis of texts that we do not usually assume to be "scientific" (an at best specious distinction when used to describe eighteenth-century writing) to illustrate the ways that writers from Phillis Wheatley to Royall Tyler were explicitly engaging in contemporary conversations about the origins and meaning of racial difference (6). Endeavoring "to identify how eighteenth-century racial thinking informs the figurative language in this crucial period's literature," *Transformable Race* "strives to illustrate for us how early American authors imagined, contributed to, and challenged the ways that one's racial identity could be formed in the late colonial and early national moment" (3).

Natural historical theories of racial difference also became a tool and an occasion for public intellectual debate by African peoples, slaves, and Native peoples—exactly the populations at whom the racist potential of this discourse was frequently aimed.

Despite the relatively intuitive character of its central argument—that race was understood in primarily environmental terms, as a "transformable" quality in humans during the eighteenth century—this is a book that deserves to be read carefully. Indeed, many of Chiles' most interesting and important interventions emerge from diligent attention to some of the seemingly smaller or subtler arguments that she makes in this project. For example, Chiles refuses to reify any distinction between "literary" and "scientific" thinkers or *thinking*, highlighting the degree to which writers we rarely think of as "scientists"—such as Equiano, Wheatley, or Tyler—actively drew upon and engaged with natural historical theories of racial differentiation that were circulating in their moment. The payoff of this careful denaturalization of the modern epistemological categories of "literary" and "scientific"—again, a specious distinction, in the eighteenth century as it remains, today—is that it changes the presumed political contours of the natural historical archive, one that we frequently think of as ineluctably bound to the emergence of racist pseudo-science and eugenics in the nineteenth-century United States. What Chiles demonstrates, however, is that this is an association predicated more upon an understanding of a nineteenth-century brand of natural historical thinking than upon an eighteenth-century version. Indeed, she insists that "notions regarding the formation of racial categories of the eighteenth century differed dramatically from those of the nineteenth—and that the ways in which they were different *really matter* to how we read and interpret the literature written in the late eighteenth-century moment" (23, emphasis original). Chiles' attention to literary engagements with natural historical thinking emphasizes the polyvocality of specifically eighteenth-century natural history. Beyond merely a racist or proto-racist epistemology developed to justify colonialism and slavery (although that is an element of this archive that certainly should not be understated), natural historical theories of racial difference also

became a tool and an occasion for public intellectual debate by African peoples, slaves, and Native peoples—exactly the populations at whom the racist potential of this discourse was frequently aimed. Chiles is nonetheless careful to not assume a recuperative position in relation to this archive; despite the fact that natural history offered another idiom through which oppressed peoples might speak truth to racist power, “it was not always necessarily utopic or liberating thinking” (24).

The central argument of *Transformable Race* is developed and complicated over the course of four chapters and an epilogue, all of which put works of natural historical thinking into conversation with various forms of popular literature. In each chapter, Chiles offers close readings of her focal texts to highlight the often very subtle or implicit references to and engagement with eighteenth-century racial science that are actually remarkably proliferate in many of the most canonical works of early American literature. Each set of texts she considers—Occom and Wheatley in chapter one; Benjamin Franklin and Hendrick Aupaumut in chapter two; J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur, John Marrant, and Charles Brockden Brown in chapter three; Olaudah Equiano and Hugh Henry Brackenridge in chapter four; and Royall Tyler in the epilogue—calls our attention to how the writers in question engaged popular concepts deriving from eighteenth-century natural history and other forms of racial science. Her careful, close readings convince us that writers from Occom and Wheatley to Franklin and Tyler were not just deploying the vocabularies of racial thinking incidentally or unreflexively, but were doing so with care and intention, explicitly engaging natural historians and their ideas.

For example, in the first chapter of the monograph, “Becoming Colored in Occom and Wheatley’s Early America,” Chiles reads three pieces of Samson Occom’s writing ( “A Short Narrative of My Life,” *A Sermon, Preached at the Execution of Moses Paul*, and “To All the Indians of this Boundless Continent”) and Phillis Wheatley’s *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral* (1773), alongside writings by naturalists such as Linnaeus (Carl von Linné) and the Comte de Buffon (Georges-Louis Leclerc) in order to emphasize how Occom and Wheatley “min[e] Christian and natural-historical explanations for where color comes from” (63). Her analysis highlights the way that each discourse relies on “a symbolics of metamorphosis” that both these writers differently mobilize “to explore the construction of racial categories in ways particular to early America” (31). In other words, “transformable race, a sense of the external mutability of the racialized body, figures centrally in how Occom and Wheatley characterize racial formation” (31). Ultimately, Chiles argues that Occom’s and Wheatley’s writings offer an intervention into eighteenth-century racial thinking by “represent[ing] the process of ‘becoming colored’ as a God-inspired design,” Wheatley by gesturing to “changing beliefs about the effect of the African climate to intervene in debates about race, science, and aesthetics” in her poetry, and Occom by asserting “a particular kind of indigenized Christianity and Native sovereignty” based on the ideological chasms separating “both Christian and nativist” accounts of the origins of racial difference (32). In the wake of Chiles’ close reading, we are left with a new awareness of

the way that Occom and Wheatley are invested in the project of “refigur[ing] what ‘blackness’ and ‘redness’ might mean”—and to what ends (63).

One of the most promising elements of the historiographic project in which Chiles is engaged is the potential that *Transformable Race* bears to contribute to our understanding of the history of racism and of struggles for racial justice, and this is one of the many things that I deeply admire about this book. Chiles explicitly imagines this monograph in direct and intentional relationship to critical race theory, and implicitly suggests that broad eighteenth-century debates over the origins of racial difference constitute an early moment in a long genealogy of specifically North American racial thinking. Pointing to the ways that “critical race studies has importantly pried apart scientific from social conceptions of race,” she argues that critical race theory has nonetheless “been using temporal perspectives that we have not yet understood to be temporal,” and offers a definition of transformable race that “replaces prevailing critical race frameworks particular to later periods with one that is apt for early America” (26, 25). Chiles’ careful attention to the historicity of racial thinking—and specifically, her concept of “transformable race”—“demands that we rethink axiomatic angles of analysis in critical race studies, such as passing, iteration, and performance,” and challenges “unexamined tenets on which critical race theory has operated in literary studies” (26). In her efforts to “posit a historically specific, transformational model of critical race theory” that derives from early thinkers—white colonists and people of color (both colonists and indigenous peoples) alike—*Transformable Race* “refigures our understanding of racialization in early American literatures and advances a new paradigm that offers critical race studies a fresh way of understanding racial formation” (26).

If this project has a weakness, it is that the conversation it ultimately delivers vis-à-vis critical race theory is less developed than the book’s introduction promises. Putting the eighteenth-century intellectual traditions that Chiles examines in *Transformable Race* into dialogue with specific texts and exchanges in the development of critical race theory in the twentieth- and twenty-first centuries—or, alternately, a more explicit discussion of the way that Chiles seems to be reading many of the texts at the center of her analysis as an early moment of the *longue durée* of critical race theory—would have made this already very strong book even stronger. For example, in chapter four, “Doubting Transformable Race: Equiano, Brackenridge, and the Textuality of Natural History,” Chiles’ reading of Olaudah Equiano’s *Interesting Narrative* calls our attention to the way that “Equiano...question[s] the limits of what others such as Phillis Wheatley and Samson Occom saw as the beneficial aspects of transformable race,” arguing that “Equiano subscribes to specific natural histories and then questions them, both by troubling certain facets of their theories and by noting how they fail to influence white behavior” (148, 149). Ultimately, she argues, Equiano arrives at the economic argument against slavery (in short, he suggests that if the British were to establish a broader trade network in the African continent, that commerce would become more

lucrative than the slave trade [167]) that he advances at the end of his narrative because he realizes that engaging with monogenetic natural historical theories of racial difference has a limited impact on the practices and predations of anti-black racism:

...it is *precisely because* whites foolishly do not recognize and base their actions upon an equality implicit in the single origin story that Equiano himself is skeptical about the theories' ability to make a difference in the world. Understanding Equiano's vexed investment in natural historical theories and his skepticism about whether these theories and their implications can change white behavior also helps us comprehend his turn at the conclusion of his text to the economic argument he makes against the slave trade because, as we shall see, he advances it only after his narrative has shown how arguing the equality of Africans through natural-historical and/or religious means has not been effective. (152)

This is very compelling, but in keeping with Chiles' suggestion that the discourse of transformable race in the eighteenth century has something important to say to understandings of the processes of racialization that gird critical race theory (in its early moments and today), I also believe that Equiano's economic argument against slavery might be fruitfully put into conversation with the large body of critical race scholarship that addresses the relationship between whiteness, blackness, property, and political economy. I am thinking, in particular, about whether or how Chiles' analysis of Equiano's frustration with the precarity of various forms of legal enfranchisement (e.g. legal manumission) and subsequent turn to the economic argument above might complicate or augment Cheryl Harris' famous theorization of whiteness as property (1993), now considered one of the foundational texts of early critical race theory. If eighteenth-century debates about transformable race—and efforts to engage those theories, penned by people of color living in the eighteenth-century Atlantic world—indeed constitute part of the long history of critical race theory or critical thinking *about* race by people of color (as I believe they do), Chiles' book envisions the felicitous prospect of conversation between these bodies of work that, while historically distant from one another, nonetheless share crucial ideological and ethical territory.

Ultimately, *Transformable Race* makes an important contribution to both early American studies and to the history of race more generally; this is a book that will find a very broad audience, and frankly, a book that scholars of early American studies should all both read and teach. It seems worth noting that beyond being an important piece of scholarship, Chiles' lucid prose, careful close readings, and analytical pairings of very canonical writers alongside understudied ones make this a book that might also be appropriate for advanced undergraduates. It is unusual to come across book-length studies of eighteenth-century North America that so deftly pair careful historicization of thick, challenging concepts (such as race) with the explicit intention of rendering those concepts more clear in our own time, yet this is exactly what Chiles sets

out to do: she baldly asserts that “if we develop a better sense of how science and literature interacted in the definition of early American racial categories *and* how this interaction has changed over time, we will have a better sense of how to think about our own conceptions of race, right now” (30). And this is precisely what Chiles manages to achieve with *Transformable Race*, rendering this a project as politically refreshing as it is intellectually rigorous. Chiles leaves us convinced of the *current* political significance of the fact that “in the eighteenth century, a sunburn is never just a sunburn” (217).

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