

2017

Literature in the Key (and Time) of Science

Miles P. Grier

Queens College, CUNY, miles.grier@qc.cuny.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.wayne.edu/criticism>

Recommended Citation

Grier, Miles P. (2017) "Literature in the Key (and Time) of Science," *Criticism*: Vol. 59 : Iss. 3 , Article 8.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.wayne.edu/criticism/vol59/iss3/8>

LITERATURE IN
THE KEY (AND
TIME) OF SCIENCE
Miles P. Grier

Transformable Race: Surprising Metamorphoses in the Literature of Early America by Katy L. Chiles. Oxford University Press, 2014. Pp. 336, 9 halftones. \$69.00 cloth.

In *Transformable Race: Surprising Metamorphoses in the Literature of Early America*, Katy L. Chiles immerses readers in an Early American mindset in which race was understood to be an external, superficial trait, dependent upon climate, and, therefore, both acquired and mutable. Her method is to use what historians such as Winthrop Jordan and John Wood Sweet have revealed about the science of racial thinking in the eighteenth century “to tune our ears to what the literature is saying” (4). In four chapters and an epilogue that place Native American, African American, and Anglo American writers in conversation, Chiles aims “to maintain the historical and cultural specificity of each” and to intervene “in some of the most central scholarly debates” about these authors (25, 27). With its innovative pairings and well-considered interventions in scholarship, *Transformable Race* will undoubtedly prove useful to all who teach Early American literature. However, the issue of whether science serves as literature’s primary frame of reference strikes me as deserving an even broader consideration by historicist literary critics and cultural historians, regardless of period.

Chiles effectively dislodges any sense that her readers already know what race is and how it works. In her introduction, she arrays competing explanations for human variation circulating in North

America in the late colonial era and in the Early Republic. If European descendants learned a Biblical account that positioned Adam and Eve as the progenitors of all humanity, participants in the Indian Great Awakening averred that black, white, and red people had separate origins. Within natural history, the precursor of modern biology, the consensus held that complexion and character could degenerate from a white original with changes in climate. Yet Chiles shows early dissenters from the mainstream: John Mitchell, who thought the first color was not white but “dark swarthy” (13); Thomas Jefferson, an early proponent of the idea of unalterable racial differences (16–17); and Samuel Stanhope Smith, who suggested that social practices and cultural habits could affect bodily composition as much as climate could (18). Having established this discursive field, Chiles proceeds to chapters that make cogent interventions, by juxtaposing texts by Phillis Wheatley and Samuel Occom; Ben Franklin and Hendrick Aupaumut; John Marrant, J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur, and Charles Brockden Brown; and Olaudah Equiano and Henry Brackenridge.

In the first chapter, Chiles points to a subtle intellectual kinship between North America’s two most famous nonwhite correspondents, Phillis Wheatley and Samuel Occom. She argues that these

converts did not swallow white supremacy with Biblical literacy but rather “rel[ie]d] upon religious doctrine” to pinpoint the hypocrisies of colonial Christians (32). In Chiles’s portrayal, Wheatley is a woman of letters who draws black Africans inside the body of Christ and the literary canon by reinvigorating Biblical and classical descriptions of black complexion. In the same spirit, Chiles builds upon recent work in Native Studies to argue that Occom “indigenized Christianity” to assert “Native sovereignty” throughout this “Boundless Continent” (32, 49).

Although earlier chapters do not elaborate the distinctiveness of eighteenth-century racial theory, Chiles does so explicitly in the third chapter. There, she engages substantively with the relationship between eighteenth-century racial thinking and later models, employing three captivity narratives to delineate a version of racial masquerade particular to Early America. She argues that nineteenth- and twentieth-century passing narratives feature an external body that fails to register the inner truth of racial identity, while Crèvecoeur’s *Letters*, John Marrant’s spiritual autobiography, and Charles Brockden Brown’s *Edgar Huntly* assume that an eighteenth-century subject has no racial interior and simply “is” whatever her complexion and clothing convey (110). In conjunction with

the first chapter, with its focus on “*becoming colored*,” the third chapter helps readers enter a mode of thought in which race was recognized as an unstable exterior trait constantly acted upon by physical stimuli. For its part, the second chapter links the changeable nature of literal, racialized bodies to the construction of an imaginary body politic, in the texts of Franklin and Aupaumut (diplomats who were, by virtue of that office, concerned with national character). Finally, the epilogue considers Royall Tyler’s novel *The Algerine Captive* to illustrate that, in the nineteenth century, the genre of the sentimental novel moved race to the emotional interior while scientific racism suggested it was a trait of the anatomical interior.

Chiles’s readings are astute and deeply engaged with contemporary scholarship and political implications. Yet I find a tension between the local readings and the broader framework. Throughout the text, Chiles uses New Historicist methods, letting nonliterary works of scientists supply the context for the interpretation of literature. The paradigm shift in science from environmental theory to the notion of hereditary race allows her to posit a Foucaultian epistemic break between eighteenth- and nineteenth-century science—and, therefore, between the literatures “interwoven” with each (2). Although such an approach is a

paragon of one version of interdisciplinary scholarship on literature, history, and culture, Chiles has uncovered a rich variety of intellectual contexts that arguably points to the limits of that scientific frame and its attendant periodization.

Chiles thoroughly tracks the ways in which Franklin, Jefferson, Brockden Brown, and even (in a brief cameo) Mary Wollstonecraft read, produced, reviewed, and debated the scientific literature on race. Yet in the case of nonwhite writers, it seems that other currents supplied the intellectual context for their racial imaginations. For example, Chiles consistently demonstrates that Occom and Aupaumut employed “nativist” theories of a separate creation of “red” people. In her telling, Occom uses nativist racial theory to seize and inflect Biblical authority and not to directly engage natural historians’ accounts of the body. I also wondered if Wheatley employed the metaphor of dye because of her experiences with ink, textiles, and paints—everyday substances in the world of an enslaved woman writer, the properties of which would not all have aligned with the idea that race was transformable. While the scientific literature may “tune our ears” to white writers, that frame does not seem to work as well for nonwhites.

Chiles is aware of other temporalities, as when she notes: “the oppressive ends to which . . . racial

categories were put to use sadly remain relatively consistent from the eighteenth century into the nineteenth and beyond” (24). Yet while acknowledging that the view from below yields a single period, *Transformable Race* marks time by the succession of “scientific hypotheses” regarding race (4). What if explanatory context could be located not in the changing views of scientific experts but in subalterns’ sense of the “long history of defeat” that characterizes both slavery and settler colonialism?¹ Would one of these temporal schemes prevail, or could they somehow be reconciled without privileging either? Furthermore, would finding multiplicity or disunity within a single period unsettle our sense of radical difference across time?² For its achievements, and for these questions it leaves us, I find Chile’s work fulfills one historicist approach while inviting us to another that resists the consolidation of a scholarly idea of Early American Literature as bound to a single time.

Miles P. Grier is an assistant professor of English at Queens College, CUNY. His essays have appeared in Politics and Culture, Genders, The Journal of Popular Music Studies, the volume Scripturalizing the Human (Routledge, 2015), and The William and Mary Quarterly (2016).

NOTES

1. Saidiya V. Hartman, “The Time of Slavery,” *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 101, no. 4 (2002): 759. See also Patrick Wolfe, “Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native,” *Journal of Genocide Research* 8, no. 4 (2006): 387–409; Scott Lauria Morgensen, “Destabilizing the Settler Academy: The Decolonial Effects of Indigenous Methodologies,” *American Quarterly* 64, no. 4 (2012): 805–8; Stephen Howe, “Native America and the Study of Colonialism, Part 1: Contested Histories,” *Settler Colonial Studies* 3, no. 1 (2013): 102–26.
2. Scholars of early modern Britain, Asian America, and African America have suggested that it is not possible to sustain the idea that premoderns had fluid, external notions of character while we, in modernity, always believe that race is invariable and internal. David J. Baker, “‘Men to Monsters’: Civility, Barbarism, and ‘Race’ in Early Modern Ireland,” in *Writing Race Across the Atlantic World: Medieval to Modern*, eds. Phillip Beidler and Gary Taylor (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 153–70; Étienne Balibar, “Racism Revisited: Sources, Relevance, and Aporias of a Modern Concept,” *PMLA* 123, no. 5 (2008): 1630–39; Lara Bovilsky, *Barbarous Play: Race on the English Renaissance Stage* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008); Leslie Bow, “Racial Interstitiality and the Anxieties of the ‘Partly Colored’: Representations of Asians under Jim Crow,” *Journal of Asian American Studies* 10, no. 1 (2007): 1–30; Ann duCille, “The Blacker the Juice: O.J. Simpson and the Squeeze Play of Race,” in *Shin Trade* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), 136–70.