



# Transformable Race: Surprising Metamorphoses in the Literature of Early America

*Katy L. Chiles*

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## **Transformable Race: Surprising Metamorphoses in the Literature of Early America** Katy L. Chiles

As surprising as it might seem now, during the late eighteenth century many early Americans asked themselves, "How could a person of one race come to be another?" Racial thought at the close of the eighteenth century differed radically from that of the nineteenth century, when the concept of race as a fixed biological category would emerge. Instead, many early Americans thought that race was an exterior bodily trait, incrementally produced by environmental factors and continuously subject to change. While historians have documented aspects of eighteenth-century racial thought, *Transformable Race* is the first scholarly book that identifies how this thinking informs the figurative language in the literature of this crucial period. It argues that the notion of "transformable race" structured how early American texts portrayed the formation of racial identities. Examining figures such as Phillis Wheatley, Benjamin Franklin, Samson Occom, and Charles Brockden Brown, *Transformable Race* demonstrates how these authors used language emphasizing or questioning the potential malleability of physical features to explore the construction of racial categories.

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