

TRANSFORMABLE RACE

Surprising Metamorphoses

*in the Literature
of Early America*

THERE is a man at present at the *Black Horse Tavern*, the sign of the *BLACK HORSE*, in Market-street, who was born entirely black, and remained so for thirty-eight years, after which his natural colour began to rub off, which has continued till his body has become as white and as fair as any white person, except some small parts, which are changing very fast; his face attains more of the natural colour than any other part; his wool also is coming off his head, legs and arms, and in its place is growing straight hair, similar to that of a white person. The sight is really worthy the attention of the curious, and opens a wide field of amusement for the philosophic genius.

The following certificate was given by Capt. JOSEPH HOLT, of Bedford County, Virginia.

I, *Dr. Jacoby*, that I have been well acquainted with *HARRY MOSS*, who has been now for thirty years, the whole of which time he has supported an honest character. In the late war he enlisted with me into the Continental army as a soldier, and behaved himself as such very well. From the first of my acquaintance with him, till within two or three years past, he was of as dark a complexion as any African, and without any known cause it has changed to what it is at present.

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Katy L. Chiles

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For Darrin and Grant

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Transformable Race

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{ INTRODUCTION }

Surprising Metamorphoses

Let us begin with the word *dye*. In late eighteenth-century British North America, *dye* traveled easily between different modes of discourse, from natural history to poetry and back. And the fact that it moved so fluidly between scientific and aesthetic realms speaks volumes about what we do not yet fully understand about race and literature in early America. Indeed, the *dye* metaphor tells us much about the way race was conceptualized in this period: that it was external, that it was something that happened to the surface of the body, that it developed over time, that it was related to the place where one lived, and that it could possibly change. For instance, as early as 1744, John Mitchell, a Virginia doctor, naturalist, and geographer used *dye* to clarify his ideas about race in his "Essay upon the Causes of the Different Colours of People in Different Climates." Mitchell argued that both "Blacks" and "Whites" were descended from "People of an intermediate tawny Colour; whose Posterity became more and more tawny, *i.e.* black, in the southern Regions, and less so, or white, in the northern Climes."¹ He also asserted that "all the different People in the World" descended from one, original, "tawny People," and that humans' colors could change, although more or less easily for certain groups: "As for the black People recovering, in the same manner [as white people], their primitive swarthy Colours of their Forefathers, by removing from their intemperate scorching Regions, it must be observed, that there is a great Difference in the different Ways of changing Colours to one another: Thus Dyers can very easily dye any white Cloth black, but cannot so easily discharge that Black, and bring it to its first Colour" ("ECDC" 148).

As literary scholars will immediately recognize, nearly thirty years later, Phillis Wheatley used the dye metaphor (in its now-obsolete spelling *die*) in her oft-quoted poem, "On Being Brought from Africa to America,"

Some view our sable race with scornful eye,
"Their colour is a diabolic die." (5-6)²

As I explore more fully in Chapter 1, Wheatley employed *dye* in the same way Mitchell did: to denote the process through which a “race” acquired their current surface color, presumably different from another that they had previously. The *dye* metaphor rebounded back into natural historical discourse in *Essay on the Slavery and Commerce of the Human Species, Particularly the African*, written in 1786 by Thomas Clarkson, British abolitionist and reader of Phillis Wheatley.³ Clarkson attacked the institution of slavery by claiming that humankind’s many varieties of people formed one species, thus making it grossly immoral for any human of one certain color to claim right over a person of a different one: “It is evident, that if you travel from the equator to the northern pole, you will find a regular gradation of colour from black to white. Now if you can justly take him for your slave, who is of the deepest die, what hinders you from taking him also, who only differs from the former but by a shade. . . . But who are you, that thus take into slavery so many people? Where do you live yourself? Do you live in *Spain*, or in *France*, or in *Britain*? If in either of these countries, take care lest the *whiter natives of the north* should have a claim upon yourself” (ESC 185–86, emphasis in original). Five years later, Benjamin Banneker, an African American writer who produced an almanac and worked in mathematics and astronomy, famously sent a letter to another scientific thinker—then Secretary of State Thomas Jefferson—writing that “Sir, I freely and cheerfully acknowledge that I am of the African race, and in that color which is natural to them of the deepest dye.”⁴ Here, “deepest” performs double duty; it signifies the rich, dark hue of the purported dye *and* the degree of depth the dye reaches moving from the surface of the body towards its interior—significantly, not from the inside out. In this example, circulating from a natural historical treatise to poetry, back to natural historical discourse and into personal, scientific, and obviously political correspondence, the *dye* metaphor conveys a thinking about race quite at odds with our sense of it in the twenty-first century.

This means a great deal for the way we read early American literatures. As the term *dye* demonstrates, the late eighteenth-century discourses of literature and natural history were tightly interwoven, and this period’s idea of race varies significantly from those that would follow it. Indeed, historians such as Winthrop Jordan and John Wood Sweet have established that 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.⁵ Instead, figuring centrally in early American writing on race is a multifaceted concept that I refer to as *transformable race*. Drawing on natural historical thinking, early Americans largely considered race—exactly as the *dye* metaphor suggests—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. This prevailing view—agreeing with the biblical account that all peoples sprang

from a single origin—held that humans transformed physically as they moved into and interacted with various parts of the world.⁶ As I will detail below, while this way of thinking had its detractors, what Jordan has termed an “environmentalist” mode of thought held sway.⁷ Not every early American thought that exposure to the hot sun would make a white person into a “Negro” over the course of time, and nativist Indians made a powerful argument for the separate creations of red, white, and black peoples. However, many subscribed to the idea that the body, its racial features, and racial identity itself were always in flux and had to be consistently maintained; this belief informed a broad cultural logic about racial construction. While historians have documented aspects of transformable race, literary scholars have yet to consider the far-reaching implications this concept has for our understanding of literature produced at the time of the nation’s founding. If we know some aspects of the story of how race was conceived in eighteenth-century America, thus far we do not know fully the literary dimension of that story.

Transformable Race: Surprising Metamorphoses in the Literature of Early America, then, endeavors to identify how eighteenth-century racial thinking informs the figurative language in this crucial period’s literature. In the following pages, I argue that the notion of transformable race structured how early American texts portrayed the formation of racial identity—that is, both the development of physical features and how those attributes were understood within emerging racial classification systems. This book examines constellations of texts produced by a broad swath of writers: Samson Occom and Phillis Wheatley; Benjamin Franklin and Hendrick Aupaumut; J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur, John Marrant, and Charles Brockden Brown; Olaudah Equiano and Hugh Henry Brackenridge; and Royall Tyler. Demonstrating how these authors used language emphasizing or questioning the potential malleability of physical features to explore the construction of racial categories, I examine how they drew upon, reworked, or questioned eighteenth-century ideas about race. This book, ultimately, 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.

Thinking Race in Early America

When a man named Henry Moss arrived in Philadelphia in 1796, he appeared to be undergoing what Sweet calls “one of the strangest metamorphoses possible in eighteenth-century America” (BP 271).⁸ A black man who had lived most of his life in Virginia, Moss appeared to be turning white. The way that his dark skin seemed to be giving way to light splotches fascinated some of the most significant figures in early American science and politics: George Washington,

Thomas Jefferson, Samuel Stanhope Smith, Benjamin Smith Barton, and Benjamin Rush, among others. As I explore more fully in Chapter 4, over the course of approximately twenty years, Moss was subjected to experiments such as the blistering of his skin to determine where his “color” resided. He also put himself on display in various US cities, where onlookers flocked to get a firsthand peek at the black man who was becoming white. Benjamin Rush took detailed notes about Moss’s condition and even pasted a broadside describing Moss as “A Great Curiosity” into his commonplace book (Fig. 1.1).⁹ In this image we see visually what the following pages take up in great detail—that on the topic of transformable race, different types of writing intersected, overlapped, and interacted with one another. Here, we see two pieces of paper literally overlaid, where the advertisement of Moss’s display and attestation of his history is interpolated into Rush’s natural historical notes.

Both the textual intercalation of the Henry Moss announcement into Rush’s commonplace book and the route that the *dye* metaphor takes through both natural historical and literary texts illustrate the way that *Transformable Race* conceives of the relationship between scientific and aesthetic discourses about race in the late eighteenth century: namely, that they existed in a productive, sometimes problematic, and always active intertextual conversation. Indeed, as this book strives to demonstrate, notions of transformable race were produced in a dialectical movement between scientific and literary discourses. Because much scholarship on early America has focused mostly on one side of this conversation, as early American historiographies have shown how transformable race functioned in natural historical thought,¹⁰ this study seeks to restore the literary side of this dialogue. *Transformable Race* turns our attention to the literature not because it conceives of literature as the foreground that simply reflects the background science; rather, it starts with what we have already learned about scientific thinking to help us tune our ears to what the literature is saying. In this respect, *Transformable Race* joins other studies of early American literary culture such as those by Ralph Bauer, Susan Scott Parrish, Ian Finseth, and Cristobal Silva that focus on the important relationship between literary and scientific thinking.¹¹ But, like these texts, even as *Transformable Race* takes up both scientific and literary discourses, it keeps a “distinction, rough and incomplete as it necessarily must be” between the two, as George Levine says, where one can conceive of “science” as “the disciplines of investigating the way the natural world is in as systematic a way as possible,” and of “literature” as “the works of the human imagination as it creates its often brilliant, exploratory, and moving fictions.”¹² It is my hope, then, that this approach will give us much greater insight into the thematic and formal features of the literary texts themselves *and* the particular ways that their aesthetic forms articulated, evaluated, and circulated notions of transformable race throughout early America. We will gain not just a diachronic sense of how subsequent scientific hypotheses about race displace

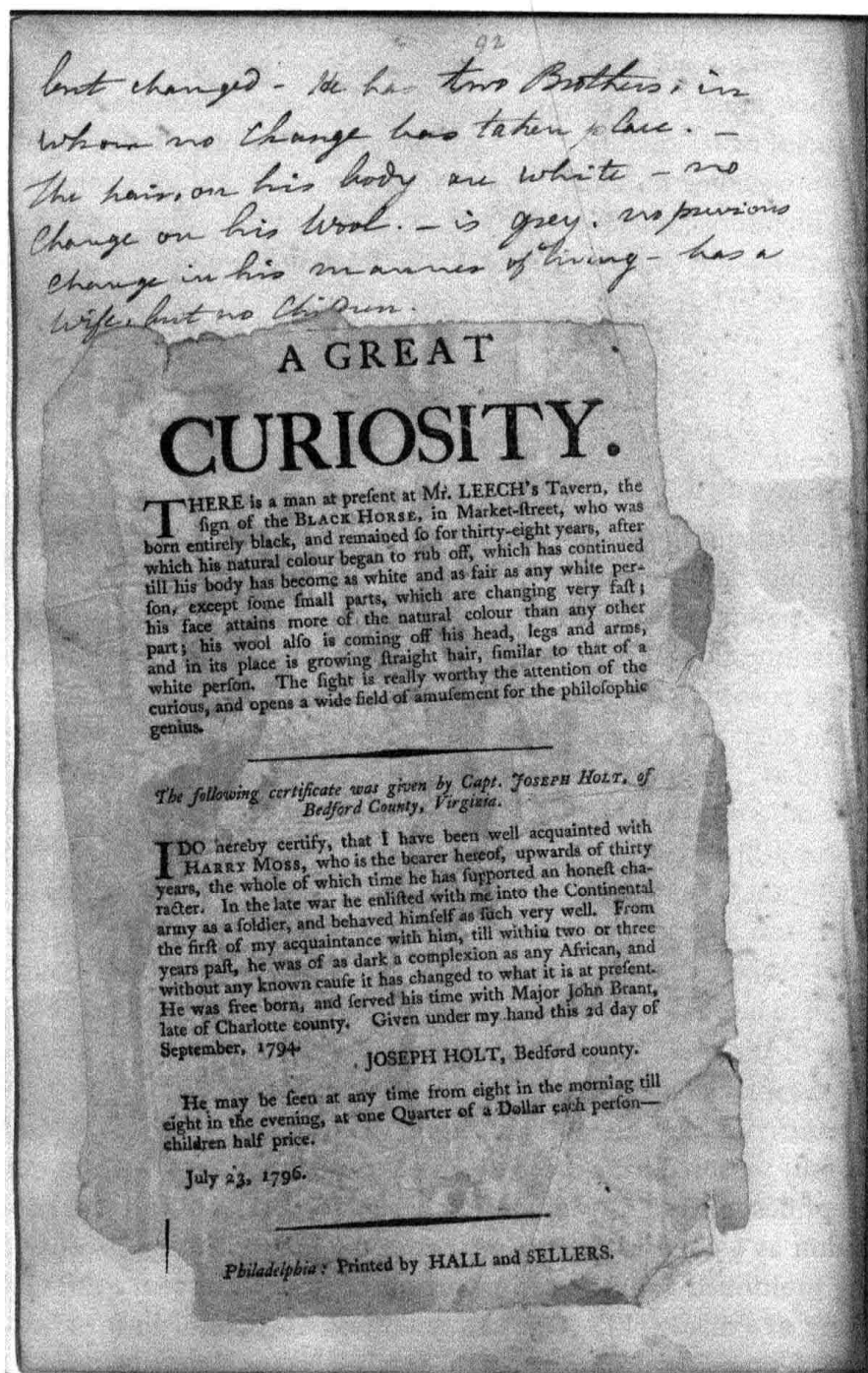


FIGURE 1.1 Benjamin Rush's Commonplace Book

Courtesy of the American Philosophical Society.

earlier ones but also a synchronic sense of the complex process by which powerful ideas about race in this period are formed. Indeed, a focus on and a knowledge of only the science might lead us to believe that a full understanding of the idea of race or an answer to many of the problems caused by it will be provided by (yet) another advancement in scientific thinking. But as even the

most recent developments in science involving DNA and the mapping of the human genome—and the debates they engender—make clear, part of this understanding must come from a much broader, extra-scientific focus on the formation of racial identity.¹³ Thus, by listening to the literary side of this conversation, we come to understand more about the literature in and of itself, how the literature contributes to the way racial identities form and function in the material world of early America, and, thus, much more about the broad cultural logic of transformable race in this important historical moment.

EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY THEORIES OF RACE

To that end, in the next few pages, I describe in detail several (sometimes overlapping) systems of thought—such as natural-historical, nativist, environmentalist, and theories of social influence—that circulated in the United States during the late eighteenth-century, and here I take the time to delve into particular points because these ideas inform the close readings of literary texts that constitute the subsequent chapters. After first introducing how debates about the possible mutability of the physical body circulated through early American society, I describe how natural historians and those who are now referred to as “nativist” Indians offered conflicting accounts of the creation of humankind and, therefore, explanations of racial difference. Then I discuss how natural-historical ideas influenced the ways US leaders discussed racial identity around the time of the Revolution, specifically their theories of environmentalism and social influence. These ways of thinking are usually only studied in isolation; this book brings them together, incongruous though they may seem to be, juxtaposing them to provide a newer and much richer understanding of the multifaceted rhetorics early American writers used in their depictions of racial identity.¹⁴

To return our focus to natural history, we must note that Henry Moss was not the only person during the late eighteenth century to draw the attention of natural philosophers. In 1789, John Bobey, a West Indian who was relocated to London as a child in the 1770s, captured public attention because of his striking multihued appearance. A portrait of Bobey was sent to the Library Company of Philadelphia (Fig. 1.2), and German natural historian Johann Friedrich Blumenbach commented on him in his 1795 *On the Natural Variety of Mankind*. Still earlier, Maria Sabine captured the imagination of natural philosophers. Born in 1736 in New Spain, she too had light patches on her dark skin, and Georges-Louis Leclerc, Comte de Buffon, included her case and portrait in his 1777 *Histoire Naturelle* (Fig. 1.3).¹⁵

By the early nineteenth century people such as Moss, Bobey, and Sabine would be considered fabulous anomalies rather than legitimate objects of scientific inquiry and debate. But in the eighteenth century they were seen as what historian Joanne Pope Melish calls “products of systematic transformation that



FIGURE 1.2 “Primrose: The Celebrated Piebald Boy.”

Courtesy of The Library Company of Philadelphia.

could be explained and reliably replicated.”¹⁶ At the close of the eighteenth century, the “phenomenon of people of color who seemed to be turning white became a matter of intellectual concern and public interest,” and attention to them had been increasing for several years (BP 274). Examples abounded in colonial newspapers, as did explanations to account for them and even political tracts parodying them.¹⁷ Philadelphia physician Charles Caldwell over fifty years later reflected on the public’s fascination with Henry Moss, claiming that his name “was almost as familiar to the readers of newspapers and other periodicals (so frequently was it recorded in them) as was that of John Adams, Thomas Jefferson, or James Madison.”¹⁸ As Sweet points out about Maria