

Renaissance and Reformation Renaissance et Réforme



Whitaker, Cord J. Black Metaphors: How Modern Racism Emerged from Medieval Race-Thinking

Angela Zhang

Volume 44, numéro 4, automne 2021

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1089389ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v44i4.38682>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Iter Press

ISSN

0034-429X (imprimé)

2293-7374 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce compte rendu

Zhang, A. (2021). Compte rendu de [Whitaker, Cord J. Black Metaphors: How Modern Racism Emerged from Medieval Race-Thinking]. *Renaissance and Reformation / Renaissance et Réforme*, 44(4), 318–321.
<https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v44i4.38682>

© Canadian Society for Renaissance Studies / Société canadienne d'études de la Renaissance; Pacific Northwest Renaissance Society; Toronto Renaissance and Reformation Colloquium; Victoria University Centre for Renaissance and Reformation Studies, 2022

Ce document est protégé par la loi sur le droit d'auteur. L'utilisation des services d'Érudit (y compris la reproduction) est assujettie à sa politique d'utilisation que vous pouvez consulter en ligne.

<https://apropos.erudit.org/fr/usagers/politique-dutilisation/>

érudit

Cet article est diffusé et préservé par Érudit.

Érudit est un consortium interuniversitaire sans but lucratif composé de l'Université de Montréal, l'Université Laval et l'Université du Québec à Montréal. Il a pour mission la promotion et la valorisation de la recherche.

<https://www.erudit.org/fr/>

of uses of paraliturgical set phrases in Luther-esque Transylvanian preaching promoting reconciliation. Tabita Landová's analysis of Jan Augusta and the Bohemian Brethren, as well as Jan Červenka's examination of the impact of the Basel Compacts on the Utraquist-Roman divide, provides Czech context for themes of unity and tolerance. Turning back to Switzerland, Pierrick Hildebrand traces the Reformed conception of a joint New Testament and Old Testament covenantal assembly back to Zwingli's ecclesiology, while Michelle C. Sanchez's historiographical contribution enlists Robert Orsi to interrogate Calvin and Zwingli on notions of church "presence" that resist traditional empiricist categories.

These excellent essays will surely serve a wide range of scholars in, among other fields, religious and cultural history, music history, liturgical studies, and theology. The editors are to be congratulated for an exceptional collection of studies on a foundational subject.

DAVID GREDER

Waldorf University

<https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v44i4.38681>

Whitaker, Cord J.

Black Metaphors: How Modern Racism Emerged from Medieval Race-Thinking.

Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2019. Pp. 256 + 2 ill. ISBN 978-0-8122-5158-6 (hardcover) US\$49.95.

Cord J. Whitaker's first monograph, *Black Metaphors*, features a rhetorical and theological analysis of race-thinking. He does this by applying a rhetoric shimmer using metaphor. Writing from the intersections of English literary studies and premodern race scholars, this is a foundational text in an emerging field that presents novel ways of reading medieval texts for complexities surrounding race.

Whitaker achieves two important goals. The first is a new framework that sustains the ambiguities of race where the binaries of black and white are not mapped to distinctive traits or prejudicial associations but rather show an ever-changing and non-linear relationship of unity and contrariety. The second is his

demonstration of critical race analysis in medieval texts that are not ostensibly associated with race or colour, by applying the concept of mirage as a metaphor in language. In these two points, his monograph is a welcome addition to the field of premodern race theories.

One of the most important ideas that Whitaker brings to the forefront is the interplay between blackness and whiteness that exists not as a dichotomy of sin and virtue but rather as two concepts that function as metaphor, symbolizing the inherent wideness of textual meanings. The clear articulation of this idea—successfully supported by Whitaker—offers premodern race scholars a new way of engaging with texts that are not fundamentally based on structural and legal race associated with postmodern scholarship. The lack of a direct, linear, and cogent model of colourism in the premodern world has been the fuel of detractors of premodern critical race theory. Therefore, Whitaker's monograph is particularly welcome in creating a vocabulary for the necessary ambiguities.

Each chapter applies the main idea of black metaphors to medieval texts through mirage and the rhetorical shimmer. These comprise texts that are traditionally associated with premodern critical studies, such as *The King of Tars*, Mandeville's *Travels*, and the "Song of Songs." Also interspersed are those texts that do not necessarily come to mind when discussing premodern race, such as Chaucer's "The Miller's Tale," works by Julian of Norwich, and the Pseudo-Ciceronian *Rhetorica ad Herennium*. Among discussion, too, are modern critical race texts such as Toni Morrison and W. E. B. Dubois, as well as examples from the languages of race in contemporary reporting and political discourse.

The first chapter discusses the medieval English text, *The King of Tars*, which functions as a place where qualities such as black and white are delineated but also unsettled. While a Muslim sultan is washed white by taking the name of a Christian priest, his violence against his ex-coreligionists demonstrates the permeability of colour binaries and their superficial value judgments. This reading of *The King of Tars* is innovative in its embrace of ambiguities within the text and their corresponding meanings. The second chapter returns to the basics of medieval rhetoric and grammar where the central ideas of contrariety are developed. The explication of classical and medieval rhetorical texts on the concept of blackness and whiteness displaces the linearity of race-thinking to leave room for subtleties in the distortions of symbolism and pluralistic meaning presented through contrariety, unity, and irony. A temporal framework

takes shape by the end of this chapter, presented as part of the shimmering rhetorical mirage that ranges from Aristotle's black-and-white theories to the shift to practicality in the Middle Ages.

Chapter 3 functions similarly to the first chapter in which a text—in this case Chaucer's "The Miller's Tale"—is examined in depth to demonstrate the interplay between black and white, sin and virtue. Paired with the theoretical framework established in chapter 2, this chapter demonstrates the value of Whitaker's study of metaphor in his use of the spirituality of Christian ideas of "just desserts" to demonstrate the interplay between blackness and whiteness in the character of Alisoun. In a text not generally associated with race, Whitaker strips away the veil of the invisibility of whiteness to demonstrate the ideologies of race underlying the rhetorical shimmer. Chapter 4 considers three different texts in a similar context but also logically progresses closer to a Christianized and theological context in an examination of the *Three Kings of Cologne*, where blackness is paired with the fear and the heresy that came out of the "Black" Nestorian Christians of the East.

Chapter 5 is the climax that demonstrates the temporal lineages and symbolic ambiguities of metaphor through three works across a trajectory towards modern race ideas. This chapter functions as a clear demonstration of how the metaphorical and rhetorical concepts of chapters 1–4 can be put into a temporal relationship. Starting with Julian of Norwich (late fourteenth century) and moving towards G. W. F. Hegel (1807) and W. E. B. Dubois (1903), the hierarchical relationship of master and servant, racialized, theologized, and codified, becomes one where the black-white binary is entrenched as essentialized and hierarchical difference—especially in respect to identity creation. The dénouement begins in chapter 6 where the concept of enthymemes is expounded in a more traditional critical race text, *The Book of John Mandeville*, whose popularity in the Middle Ages led to its use in the colonial agenda of the Voyages of Exploration. Whitaker uses this text to demonstrate the development of enthymemes and its relationship to the attributing of values and judgments to difference. Finally, the conclusion straddles the medieval and the early modern eras through a textual analysis of the infamous 1444 account written by Zurara, who documented the 235 West Africans enslaved and brought into Lisbon on the order of Henry the Navigator.

Whitaker concludes with the necessity of applying premodern race theory to the Middle Ages in the politics of the twenty-first century. Such a conclusion

draws the reader into the world of rhetorical shimmers through a vocabulary of strife and unity, which the book explores in the context of the medieval, that is still very much at play in modern political and literary discourse. Whitaker's work is thus not simply grounded in the theoretical world of grammar and metaphor but is a foundational text for premodern race scholarship to build on and develop.

ANGELA ZHANG

York University

<https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v44i4.38682>