Nature, Materiality, and Human Agency in the Literature of the Great Lakes, 1790-1853

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ABSTRACT

The dissertation shows that human agency in all its discursive manifestations is a product of entanglement with nature’s materiality—its physical objects and forces and this physicality’s capacity for change—and this entanglement is understood, and sometimes resisted, through the application and/or revision of aesthetic theories. Put another way, conceptions of materiality are processed aesthetically, a discursive practice intertwined with the discourse on human agency and the visceral experience of human bodies. The implications of conceptions of materiality are deeply political and a major determinant of human conceptions of self and the human species at large.

This dissertation is an original contribution to the fields of material ecocriticism, early national and antebellum American literature, and place-based studies. It is the first substantive study of the Great Lakes as a discernable literary region. Studying literature in the Great Lakes from 1790 to 1853 means investigating the ways intellectuals imagined drastic ecological, cultural, and political change in a region characterized by competing American, British, Canadian, and Native American interests. By way of material ecocriticism, the dissertation participates in current scholarly debates concerning Romanticism, Transcendentalism, sentimentalism, domesticity, the picturesque, the sublime, and nature. The dissertation contains readings of works in a wide array of genres.