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978-1-107-00543-3 - Environmental Practice and Early American Literature

Michael Ziser

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ENVIRONMENTAL PRACTICE AND EARLY AMERICAN LITERATURE

This original and provocative study tells the story of American literary history from the perspective of its environmental context. Weaving together close readings of early American texts with ecological histories of tobacco, potatoes, apples, and honeybees, Michael Ziser presents a method for literary criticism that explodes the conceptual distinction between the civilized and natural worlds. Beginning with the English exploration of Virginia in the sixteenth century, Ziser argues that the settlement of the “New World” – and the cultivation and exploitation of its bounty – dramatically altered how writers used language to describe the phenomena they encountered on the frontier. Examining the work of Thomas Harriot, James Grainger, James Fenimore Cooper, Henry David Thoreau, and others, Ziser reveals how these authors, whether consciously or not, transcribed the vibrant ecology of North America, and the ways that the environment helped codify a uniquely American literary aesthetic of lasting importance.

MICHAEL ZISER is Associate Professor of English and Co-Director of the Environments and Societies Program at the University of California, Davis.

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Acknowledgments

While this book exerts itself to uncover the broad and complex more-than-human processes that give rise to literary texts, its own conception and completion involved plenty of good old-fashioned individual human beings. From my extraordinarily generous graduate school mentors I absorbed three distinct but complementary models of what literary scholarship might be. Larry Buell reset my expectations regarding just how broadly and deeply one must read to develop a valuable perspective on American literature, as well as just how lightly all that learning might be carried. Lisa New was a constant reminder of the coruscations that draw us to literature – and of our obligations to honor them in our own work. And Elaine Scarry showed me what it means to give one's whole mind and spirit to the elucidation of the deep mysteries of our situation amidst things and words. My still-unrealized – and perhaps impossible – dream is to write in a way that does full justice to the influence of all of these remarkable people.

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Two grandparents who set the stage for this book did not live to see it published. My grandmother, Phyllis Ambrose, so prized and embodied education – especially literary education – that I sometimes feel my own career choice is the delayed expression of her academic potential. My

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Acknowledgments

grandfather, George Ziser, was the first to open my eyes to the philosophical significance of agriculture. Put them together and you can easily see the sources of a book on environmental practice and American literature.

This book is finally dedicated to my own domestic crew: Carrie, my beloved partner in so many things, and our children, Anna and Eli, who are daily reminders that the future, however deeply bound it may be to the past, remains an open field.