

Early American Coral: A Literary and Cultural History

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Coral reefs are disappearing. It is well established that this disappearance will have profound ecological consequences. Less widely recognized, however, is that the loss of coral also means the loss of vital ways to imagine human life and society.

Early American Coral tells the story of coral as at once a global commodity, a personal ornament, an essential element of the marine ecosystem, and a powerful political metaphor. Both a cultural history of coral in the early US—the first of its kind—and a hidden history of political thinking with coral at the center of US culture and letters, this book reveals the vital and enduring lessons that coral has always held for humans, and that we are now in danger of losing along with coral reefs themselves.

To uncover these lessons, I turn to the period before 1900, a time when coral was a more common part of daily life than it is for most people today. I examine a vast range of writings by early US authors who transformed what they knew of coral's origins, nature, growth, and global cultural history into lessons for human polities. At the center of this study is the complex history of a neglected political analogy, that of US polity to coral reef—colonial, collective, and ever-expanded by the labors of the people. This analogy was employed by a broad cross section of nineteenth-century US writers—Black and white, women and men, working and upper class—in multiple genres including essay, poetry, short story, song, novel, and natural history. It engaged well-known authors such as Harriet Beecher Stowe and Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, along with those less well-remembered today, such as poet Lydia Huntley Sigourney and feminist philosopher Ellen M. Mitchell.

But what did early Americans mean when they celebrated the nation as a model of communal polyp labor for the common good? By approaching this romantic reef analogy within a long literary and philosophical history, and within the global flows of labor and capital that brought coral itself to the US, I reveal that coral reef romances are in fact complex reckonings with the polity's reliance upon slavery and other forms of coercive human labor. During the rise of industrial capitalism, polyp labor offered humans a crucial model for understanding their own reliance on the work of countless millions who could never fully belong to the structure that they built.

Across all chapters of this study, I show that coral has always held the power to illuminate a number of political realities that tend to remain occluded, greatly to our collective peril. Reefs, it turns out, have always been more than biologically essential to humans. They are also conceptually indispensable, reflecting back to us our actual conditions, and sometimes enabling us to imagine better ones.