

# ‘the breath of flowers that perished’: Imperial Ecologies in Mark Twain’s Early Letters

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This article will trace Mark Twain’s early notes and letters to the *Sacramento Union* and *Alta California* during his four-month stay on the Hawaiian islands in 1866 and his subsequent trip down the Rio San Juan in Nicaragua later that year, considering his poetic meditations on a diversity of flora and fauna alongside his occasionally direct and sometimes elusive commentaries on territorial annexation, missionization and settler-occupation in the Pacific and beyond. Reading across a colonial archive of nineteenth century environmental surveys of the Pacific atolls and the Central American isthmus, this article will highlight Twain’s alignment toward and departure from a tradition of writing about non-European ecologies as bearers of disease and decomposition, dangers to the legibility and coherence of a traveler’s corporeality. Twain’s ambivalent, non-Western ecologies, I argue, mark a politics that extends well beyond his familiar satires and pointed expositions, offering pathways for re-imagining the place of non-human environments throughout his subsequent literary canon.



Norton Bush, *On the Rio San Juan* (1871) [Colección Patricia Phelps de Cisneros]















J. Henry Fair, *Application of Industrial Fertilizer to Imploded Mountain as part of the Eastern Kentucky Mountaintop Removal Program* (2011)



J. Henry Fair, *Phosphate Fertilizer Mining Runoff* (2011)



J. Henry Fair, *Buffalo Creek Coal Mining Slurry Flood, West Virginia* (2011)



Eduard Hildebrandt, *Sunset over Pedra da Gávea, Rio de Janeiro* (1860)  
[Colección Cisneros; formerly New York Metropolitan Museum of Art]

There was a dreamy tropical scene - a wooded island in the centre of a glassy lake bordered by an impenetrable jungle of trees all woven together with vines and hung with drooping garlands of flowers - the still lake pictured all over with the reflected beauty of the shores - two lonely birds winging their way to the further side, where grassy lawns, and mossy rocks, and a wilderness of tinted foliage, were sleeping in a purple mist. I thought it was beautiful, but I suppose it wasn't. I suppose if I were not so ignorant I would have observed that one of the birds' hind legs was out of line, and that some of the "effects" were criminal transgressions of the laws of art. (Twain, *Travels with Mr. Brown* 239)



Martin Johnson Heade, *Sunset - A Scene in Brazil* (1865) [Colección Cisneros; formerly New York Metropolitan Museum of Art]



Frederick Edwin Church, *Heart of the Andes* (1859) [New York Metropolitan Museum of Art]



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Frederick Edwin Church, *Heart of the Andes* (1859) [New York Metropolitan Museum of Art]

...a broad, low land, densely clad in a green tropical vegetation, among which the cocoanut tree is prominent; occasionally we see a thatched native hut. In full view are three noble mountains - tall, symmetrical cones, with sides furrowed with wrinkle-like valleys veiled in a dreamy, purple mist that is charming to the eye, and summits swathed in a grand turban of rolling clouds. They say these are volcanoes, but we cannot see any smoke. No matter - it is a fairy landscape that is very pleasant to look upon. (Twain, *Travels with Mr. Brown* 36)



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Frederick Edwin Church, *Heart of the Andes* (1859) [New York Metropolitan Museum of Art]

In this land of rank vegetation, no spot of soil can be cleared off and kept barren a week. Nature seizes upon every vagrant atom of dust and forces it to relieve her over-burdened store-houses. Weeds spring up in the cracks of floors, and clothe the roofs of huts in green; if a handful of dust settles in the crotch of a tree, ferns spring there and wave their graceful plumes in the tropic breeze. Filibustering Walker sunk a steamboat in the river; the sands washed down, filled in around her, built up a little oval island. The wind brought seeds thither, and they clothed every inch of it in luxuriant grass. Then trees grew and vines climbed up and hung them with bright garlands, and the steamer's grave was finished. The wreck was invisible to us, save that the two great fore-and-aft braces still stood up out of the grass and fenced in the trees. It was a pretty picture. (*Travels with Mr. Brown* 48)



J. Henry Fair, *Glyphosate herbicide runoff in Luling, Louisiana* (2019)