

Growth and Decay in the Southern Tropics

In April 1865, a week after Abraham Lincoln's assassination and mere days before the effective end of the Civil War, renowned landscape painter Frederic Edwin Church traveled to the British colony of Jamaica. It was his third trip to the tropics, having visited Colombia, Ecuador, and Panama in the 1850s. By 1865 tropical locales had become a mainstay of his artistic practice and a significant source of his national fame. When he set sail for the Caribbean, he was working on *Rainy Season in the Tropics*, a landscape featuring a misty river gorge bridged by a double rainbow. In the artist's New York City studio, the unfinished painting stood beneath the cascading fronds of large potted palms, which transformed the studio itself into a tropical retreat (fig. 1.1).¹ The photograph constructs an easy relationship between the botanical and the pictorial tropics. Church's Jamaica journey speaks to that symbiosis. Its products, both plants and pictures, reveal the ways in which the tropics—its vegetation, climate, and people—came to inform US imperialism in the mid-nineteenth century.

Born in 1826 to a wealthy Hartford, Connecticut, family, Church found success as a landscape painter at an early age. Unlike other aspiring US artists of the mid-nineteenth century, he never studied in Europe or took a grand tour of the Old World. Instead, he became the only pupil of Thomas Cole, the nation's so-called father of landscape painting, and soon afterward began painting monumental landscapes of the continent based on his frequent and ambitious travels. These remarkably complex and detailed views were shown in elaborate touring exhibitions often featuring a single painting staged in a theatrical setting. Such orches-



Figure 1.1 S. Beer, *Interior View of Frederic E. Church's New York Studio*, stereograph, ca. 1866, cardboard, $3\frac{1}{4} \times 6\frac{3}{4}$ in., OL1985.815. Courtesy of Olana State Historic Site, New York State Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation.

trated art events attracted huge numbers of paying visitors, making Church a veritable artistic celebrity.²

For Church, the Jamaica trip was more respite than adventure. He and his wife Isabel were mourning the recent loss of their two young children to diphtheria. In a biographical sketch published two years later, critic Henry Tuckerman described the journey as a response to “domestic affliction” that made “a change of scene desirable.”³ The couple’s travel companions, a young artist named Horace Wolcott Robbins and his friend Sarah Hitchcock, watched as the Churches navigated their grief in the Caribbean. “Poor Mr. & Mrs. Church,” Robbins lamented in a letter to his mother, “She is very sad . . . [and] he works away as if for dear life.”⁴

Nevertheless, Church anticipated that the trip would be an artistically productive one. On his way to Jamaica, he wrote to a friend that he was “taking Mrs. Church to the mountains of Jamaica,” where “we propose to explore the Island and investigate the wonders of vegetation and landscape there.”⁵ Upon arrival, the couple poured their energies into the tropical activities that had attracted them to the Caribbean: sketching the landscape and collecting plants. In a July letter to his farm manager about plans to extend their stay, Church reported that he and Isabel had been busy: “I have accomplished a great amount of work—but there is so much to do that I am at a loss to decide day by day—what to paint.” On his wife’s preoccupations, the painter continued, “Mrs. Church is fascinated with . . . fern collecting and has already an enormous collection . . . of all sizes from $\frac{1}{2}$ inch to 8 feet in length.”⁶



Figure 1.2 Frederic Edwin Church, *The Vale of St. Thomas, Jamaica*, 1867, oil on canvas, 48 $\frac{5}{16}$ × 84 $\frac{5}{8}$ in. (122.7 × 214.9 cm). Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art, Hartford, Connecticut, The Elizabeth Hart Jarvis Colt Collection, 1905.21. Photo by Allen Phillips / Wadsworth Atheneum.

Once the Churches returned to the United States, their respective island preoccupations of landscape painting and tropical botany became intertwined and overlapping projects that speak to the status of the New World tropics as a colonial space during the Civil War era. Back in his New York City studio, Frederic endeavored to transform his many sketches into a large-scale studio painting, *Vale of St. Thomas, Jamaica*, which would become the only major canvas to grow out of the copious studies the artist brought home from Jamaica (fig. 1.2). Meanwhile, at Olana, the couple's country estate on the Hudson River, Isabel began cultivating ferns, planting an outdoor fern garden on the north side of the main house and potting specimens to decorate the home's interior. Among the volumes she later added to the family's library was an 1869 edition of Shirley Hibbert's *The Fern Garden: How to Make, Keep, and Enjoy It*, a popular layman's gardening book.

Frederic's *Vale of St. Thomas*, completed two years after their return, is dominated by a tree fern that towers over the scene on the right side of the canvas. It was such an emblem of the work that when it came time to deliver the painting to Elizabeth Colt, the wealthy collector and a family friend in Hartford who had commissioned it, Church heralded its imminent arrival with the gift of a tree fern direct from the tropics. In a letter to Colt in 1866, he informs his patron that "Buchanan the Florist of New York [is] to send

you by steamboat . . . a young treefern from Jamaica.”⁷ Church’s letter contains no suggestion of where the plant should reside, but he would have been familiar with Colt’s estate Armsmear and its extensive glass greenhouses, which lined the entire northern side of the house. Colt was then the richest woman in the United States because of the wartime success of the arms manufactory started by her recently deceased husband, Samuel, and Church himself had helped to design and curate the collector’s new art gallery, where his Jamaica painting was to feature as the central artwork.⁸

For both the Churches and Colt, Jamaican ferns and Jamaican landscapes brought the tropics to the temperate Northeast. In a description of Armsmear published in 1866, the main conservatory was described as “one gigantic bouquet, culled, as it were, from all the continents.” It and the house’s numerous hothouses, the writer notes, succeeded in “cheating the seasons, and transplanting the tropics to our colder climes.”⁹ Church’s effort to pair plant with painting was hardly incidental considering that *Vale of St. Thomas* was both inspired by and a companion to the fern—a plant, that as I shall show, played centrally in discourses of imperialism in Church’s circle and beyond. Transported to the temperate north, the tropics—a space of both alluring beauty and dangerous decay—had to be contained and assimilated. In the Civil War era, landscapes of the tropical Americas created for cosmopolitan US viewers depicted the region as a colonial space not so much in terms of territory but in terms of ecology. This chapter proposes that landscape paintings were more than just images of terrain. They were also ecological images about botany, and they show that plants—through their circulation and cultivation—were central to nineteenth-century US imperialism in the Caribbean and Latin America.

I am not the first to suggest that Church’s *Vale of St. Thomas* was informed by imperialism. Most scholars, however, have sought a more concrete connection between the painting and a key event of racial violence: the Morant Bay Rebellion, which took place in Jamaica in October 1865, just over a month after the Churches’ return home. That rebellion began in the town of Morant Bay when former slaves (Jamaica was emancipated in 1838) marched to protest land inequalities and disenfranchisement. In an encounter with local militia, a shot was fired into the crowd, and violence ensued. In subsequent days, Black Jamaicans, who outnumbered whites nationally, rose up in rebellion across the parish, attacking and destroying public buildings. Claiming to track down violent activists, the British governor Edward John Eyre declared martial law, empowering his troops to kill and arrest hundreds of innocent Black individuals.¹⁰ In her analysis of Church’s painting, Jennifer Raab argues that the uncharacteristic absence at the center of the composition—the blank space around which the clouds swirl and the vegetation grows—is a sign of trauma and violence related to the Morant Bay events. Raab echoes the assessment of Tim Barringer that even though Church was not a witness to

the rebellion itself, he “could not escape the fact that the Jamaican landscape . . . was haunted by the legacy of slavery.”¹¹ Other scholars have further connected the painting to postemancipation politics by way of its owner Colt, a vocal abolitionist.¹²

Rather than identify direct iconographic or networked links between *Vale of St. Thomas* and the Morant Bay events, this chapter connects tropical landscapes like Church’s to imperialism in a more diffuse manner. I am less invested in finding evidence in an otherwise figureless landscape of definitive historical events than I am in untangling the ways in which imperialist infrastructures—both physical and intellectual—informed Church’s experience and perception of Jamaica. To do so I turn to the elements of the natural landscape itself as painted, particularly its plants. As a picture that embodies notions of tropicality, *Vale of St. Thomas* speaks to colonialism and race relations not so much because of its oblique connection to specific events but because tropical flora, the unquestionable subject of the painting, was understood in imperialist terms with racial implications in the Civil War era. Such an understanding was not particular to Church. As we shall see, the same ideas emerge in the work of his associate and sometime travel companion, Louis Rémy Mignot, whose own engagement with the tropics was acutely linked to Civil War racial politics. Mignot and Church came from different backgrounds and had opposing political affiliations during a highly divisive moment in US history, and their paintings, accordingly, differ in focus. Nevertheless, their constructions of the tropics were aligned and equally shaped by botanical understandings of this region of the world. Church’s time in Jamaica is a fitting starting point for this inquiry because in his work, tropical botany is not just a detail of painterly observation but a central condition of travel and posttravel experience for the artist and his circle.

Pteridomania

Aboard the steamer *Montezuma* from Kingston to New York in September 1865, the Churches, feeling revived after five months away from home, were laden with their tropical collections. In their luggage were two sets of works on paper. The first, which art historians have studied with great care, was Frederic’s portfolio of pencil and oil sketches, both loose and bound, consisting primarily of scenic views and plant studies. The second, and one mentioned only in passing by scholars, if at all, was Isabel’s herbarium: hundreds of pressed ferns both in loose sheets and a leather-bound album. Each collection was sizable and hefty, with Isabel’s herbarium sheets bigger than Frederic’s largest oil sketches.¹³ Some of Isabel’s ferns were arranged into attractive patterns on academy board measuring 22 by 17 inches (fig. 1.3), while others were pressed into an album purchased from M. de Cordova, a bookbinder in Kingston.

Frederic, a longtime admirer of science whose major excursions to the tropics had been inspired by the Prussian naturalist Alexander von Humboldt, had himself become fascinated with ferns while in Jamaica. He not only supported his wife's activities but also championed the scientific potential of the often femininized activity of botanizing. In a letter written from Jamaica to his friend Joseph B. Austin, the painter reported that "Mrs. Church is insane on the fern question and is making a large collection," and he then suggested that "Mrs. Austin . . . do likewise" during the Austins' upcoming



Figure 1.3 Pressed ferns in an herbarium created by Isabel Carnes Church, 1865, 27 × 21 in., OL2001.366.3. Courtesy of Olana State Historic Site, New York State Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation.

ing travels to Venezuela. “It might serve very pleasantly to beguile hours,” Church continued, “and her opportunities are so great as she would probably secure some ferns which are as yet unknown.”¹⁴ The fern was central to Frederic’s visual record of Jamaica, taking pride of place in numerous pencil studies and oil sketches. One dated July 1865 features a tree fern against the backdrop of rolling hills (fig. 1.4). Its carefully delineated leaves demonstrate the artist’s attention to the unique characteristics of the plant’s foliage. At Olana, the Churches chose to display the oil sketch *Fern Walk* to remember their time in Jamaica (fig. 1.5). Hung in an ornate frame, the study depicts a narrow dirt track winding through a thicket dense with ferns. No doubt the subject matter prompted the painter (otherwise known for his preference of sublime vistas) to single out this unassuming view. Even decades later, in 1893, Church continued to recommend the site, writing to a fellow artist and traveler to the tropics, Charles de Wolf Brownell, that “the ferns, especially



Figure 1.4 Frederic Edwin Church, *Tree Fern, Jamaica*, 1865, brush and oil paint, graphite on cream paperboard, 12 × 12¹³/₁₆ in. (30.5 × 32.5 cm). Cooper Hewitt, Smithsonian Design Museum, gift of Louis P. Church, 1917-4-674-a.



Figure 1.5 Frederic Edwin Church, *Fern Walk, Jamaica*, 1865, oil on paper mounted on canvas, 12¼ × 13¼ in. (31.1 × 33.7 cm), OL1981.73.a. Courtesy of Olana State Historic Site, New York State Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation.

in the region known as Fern Walk—excelled every place.” He went on to note that the charm of the whole island was on “account of the wonderful variety and size of the ferns.”¹⁵

The Churches’ fascination with ferns was not unique for its time. When the Churches called on the Levy family in Jamaica, they discovered that one of the family’s four daughters shared the same interest as Isabel. Robbins, the Churches’ younger travel companion, called the young lady “the botanist” because “many were the beautiful ferns wh[ich] she had collected & pressed.”¹⁶ By collecting and cultivating ferns, Isabel was taking part in a popular pastime of the mid-nineteenth-century Anglophone world. Fern fever, or pteridomania, was then a phenomenon extending well beyond botany and gardening to other realms of culture including fashion, architecture, and

the decorative arts. Originating in the context of British Romanticism of the 1840s, fern mania grew in concert with imperialism.¹⁷ Both materially and metaphorically, collecting and cultivating ferns modeled forms of empire.

Before the 1830s there was little scientific interest in ferns. Few found the biologically ancient plants attractive since they had no flowers, and little was known about their propagation by way of spores rather than seeds. At the height of the fern craze around 1860, however, the plants' flowerlessness was often promoted as a mark of refined taste. A gardening magazine in 1856 reported that a "taste for exquisitely beautiful foliage" was "rapidly replacing merely gaudy flowers in the public favor."¹⁸ Those of Romantic sensibility especially valued the picturesqueness of the plants when set against weathered surfaces such as walls and rocks. Shirley Hibbert, an author of several gardening books including the one the Churches owned, contrasted the "pure and simple taste" for ferns with the "vulgar attention" given to flowers.¹⁹

Although fern fever began in the British Isles and early collectors focused on domestic species, it quickly expanded to global locales. Native fern species in Britain were few in number, and many were visually similar to one another, driving demand for the import of specimens from the tropics, which boast a great diversity of fern species, from miniscule to giant (tree ferns such as the one in Church's painting can grow up to fifty feet in height). A Massachusetts botanist writing in 1876 noted that "on some of the tropical islands . . . are the finest ferns, and in the greatest variety." By his count, there were 340 species of ferns in the British West Indies and 946 on the mainland of tropical America in contrast to the 150 native to temperate North America.²⁰ Just as the Churches did in Jamaica, many curious travelers took up fern collecting, or the more predatory term *hunting*, as it was commonly called, in parts of the world where the plants were endemic and brought home their finds pressed into herbaria. At the same time, commercial nurseries like the Buchanan Florists from which Church ordered his gift for Colt began supplying cosmopolitan consumers with an endless variety of live species from around the globe. In the British colony of New Zealand, dubbed the "world's fernery" because of its many endemic species, fern albums—both blank and prefilled with specimens—were sold to visitors and distant collectors as virtual tours of the island's fern-covered landscapes.²¹

As colonial outposts became key spaces for the sourcing and study of ferns, the transportation and propagation of the plants became essential. In fact it was in Jamaica that the first botanical discoveries about ferns were made. In the late eighteenth century, British doctor and naturalist John Lindsay first observed the stages of a fern's life cycle and learned how to propagate the plants from spores, though he believed them to be seeds.²² Most exotic ferns sold in the nineteenth century by nurseries in Britain and the United States were not grown from spores, however, but were transplanted as live specimens.

Arguably, fern fever only flourished because it grew in tandem with a new technology for transporting live plants over long distances: the Wardian case, a horticultural instrument of colonialism.²³ Invented by the London doctor Nathaniel Bagshaw Ward in the 1830s, the Wardian case was a wooden planter enclosed in glass that enabled live plants and their native environments to be moved together. The first Wardian case for transoceanic transport was tested in 1833, packed with English specimens sent on a six-month journey to Sydney, Australia. Not only did those plants survive the journey, but the same case was returned to London with thriving Australian plants, including a species of fern never before seen in Britain. Protected from the salt spray and changing conditions of atmosphere, the plants lived for the duration of both journeys on deck, weathering everything from snowstorms to temperatures in the 90s.

Given its astounding success, the Wardian case was quickly embraced by commercial nurseries on both sides of the Atlantic as a way of expanding their inventory of exotic species. Soon afterward, they became indispensable for the growth of botanical institutions such as the Royal Gardens at Kew and the US Botanical Garden, whose founding in 1842 was prompted by the arrival of 254 live specimens brought back in Wardian cases by members of the US Exploring Expedition (Wilkes Expedition) from the Pacific.²⁴ Such institutions, as Lucile Brockway has shown, were instrumental in asserting colonial power around the world through transplantation. With the aid of the Wardian case, Kew and other botanical institutions helped to establish plantation economies in colonies such as India on the basis of transplanted crops such as tea and rubber.²⁵

The fern was essential for the development and popularity of the Wardian case. It was well known that Ward himself was a lover of ferns. In his 1842 book about his invention, Ward wrote that his ambition as a gardener was “to possess a wall covered with ferns and mosses,” though he soon learned that such a garden was near impossible in the smoggy conditions of central London where he resided. His initial experiment with an enclosed glass case centered on a filmy fern that had unexpectedly germinated in a bottle filled with soil into which he had placed a moth chrysalis. With little maintenance (and in contrast to his many failures outdoors), the fern in the bottle survived for nine years. Ward admitted that “if some groundsel or chickweed has sprung up in my bottle instead of the fern, it would have made no impression on me.”²⁶ The bottle experiment prompted Ward to carry out other tests in larger glass containers. He eventually cultivated some one hundred species of ferns in glazed cases, often combining plants of different ecosystems.

Although the Wardian case was adopted for all manner of live plants in global transit, it was especially associated with the ferns with which it began. Wardian cases built for ocean transit were fitted with wooden battens and wire mesh to protect plants against storm damage and other movement,



Figure 1.6 Illustration “On the conveyance of plants and seeds on ship-board” from Nathaniel Ward’s *On the Growth of Plants in Closely Glazed Cases* (London: Jan Van Voorst, 1852), 71.

but another class of ornamental Wardian case emerged for the cultivation of exotic plants at home (fig. 1.6). Ornamental cases, the precursor of the modern terrarium, were the ideal vessels for ferns, which thrive in humid environments and would, if uncovered, be threatened by fumes common to nineteenth-century fire-heated interiors. The cases were so associated with the plants that they were commonly called “fern cases.”²⁷

Unlike the greenhouse, Wardian cases were moveable and required little maintenance. They made fern cultivation just as suitable for “the drawing-rooms of the wealthy” as for “humbler dwellings,” as a Kew Gardens curator put it in 1866. The cases, he emphasized, made it possible for “amateurs to indulge their love of Ferns without . . . the expense of erecting hothouses and employing a staff of gardeners.”²⁸ By the mid-nineteenth century, ornamental cases were sold in a wide variety of sizes and shapes, with more elaborate types designed to be integrated into specific architectural features of the home, aquarium-style waterscapes, or aviaries. Ward himself built a fern case into a window of his house containing a replica of Tintern Abbey, a celebrated ruin in Wales.

In nineteenth-century homes, Wardian cases materialized colonial utopias in much the same way as the grand conservatories of state-run botanic

gardens. The clear enclosures allowed gardeners to acclimate exotic plants to their own domestic spaces. Horticultural publications reported that as a class of plant, ferns were particularly adaptive to new environments. In *The Fern Garden*, the book in the Churches' home library, Hibbert explains, "various are the climates and conditions in which ferns thrive in different parts of the earth's surface, [but] they all become amenable to conditions nearly uniform when subjected to cultivation." Hibbert advised readers to give even "the most delicate fern of the tropics treatment similar to what is advised of our native ferns." By adjusting the temperature each season, the tropical species would eventually be fully acclimated to temperate conditions. Hibbert went on to note that "this adaptability is particularly exemplified in the cultivation of ferns in closed cases." His own cases, he noted, contained "delicate ferns of the tropics side by side with the natives of the British woods, yet all in the most perfect health and beauty."²⁹ In the small, closed environments of the Wardian case, fern growers created fictional ecosystems global in scope.

The adaptable fern, whether in a small parlor case or a botanical garden's conservatory, modeled a form of ideal coloniality—the flexibility of geographic adaptation that empires required when forcibly moving human populations around the world, particularly in systems of enslavement and indentured servitude. As Jill Casid has shown, parallel tools of classification developed in the two disciplines of botany and human biology in the eighteenth century, not only to give a general sense of order to nature but to manage and maintain differences between morphological types. There was as much anxiety, in other words, concerning the purity of plants on the colonial plantation as concerning human races in colonized places.³⁰ The symbolism of plants would have been enhanced by rhetoric that anthropomorphized the fern in horticultural texts. In describing fern reproduction, Hibbert describes them as a "population" of plants "that celebrates marriages in the dark." Being flowerless, they produce spores through which "the race is multiplied." Comparing ferns to others of the flowerless "tribes" such as mosses and lichens, Hibbert went on to say that ferns are "most noble of all."³¹ The author's deployment of social and sexual metaphors to communicate botanical information suggests that nineteenth-century fern enthusiasts readily linked the tropical origins and global adaptability of the plant with broader social conceptions of colonial relations.

Even in Church's own circles, the link between botanical collection and human colonization were reinforced by experience. During his first trip to the tropics in 1853, a journey that encompassed overland travel through Colombia and Ecuador and a passage over the Isthmus of Panama, Church cultivated an early fascination with tropical plants. While traveling on foot to Bogotá, he wrote to his father that even the "flowers by the roadside would have enchanted a Botanist."³² In addition to creating pictorial studies of vegetation, Church counted among his souvenirs seeds that he describes

“pick[ing] up wayside” and specimens, probably pressed. Meanwhile, his travel companion and the trip’s financier Cyrus Field, a businessman best remembered for later laying the first transatlantic telegraph cable, brought back to New York a more troubling array of living things. According to Field’s daughter, his “spoils of travel” included “a live jaguar, . . . twenty-four living parroquets, and . . . an Indian boy of fourteen”—as if the human were simply an extension of other specimens collected wayside. Field apparently had plans to educate the boy, Marcus, before sending him back to South America as a missionary. He was disappointed to find his captive prone to rebellious and violent actions (hardly surprising given his circumstance). Marcus was returned home to his family after Field determined that a “civilized life was not attractive to him.”³³ Field’s deeply troubling actions—an attempt to acclimate a human child and his conclusion that the boy was unsuitable for “civilized life”—is deeply rooted in colonial prejudices around race and ethnicity.

Tropicality and the Colonized Body

Human adaptability to new environments, particularly to either tropical or temperate climates, was a subject of serious debate in the mid-nineteenth century. With the rise of Euro-American colonialism, the tropics, a physical region bound by the latitudinal limits of the Tropics of Capricorn and Cancer, became not just a geographic zone but a cultural category. In the nineteenth century, imperial powers from the Global North imagined the tropics as a place where environmental conditions, natural resources, and native populations had to be controlled or exploited. This attitude culminated at the close of the nineteenth century just as the United States was embarking on formal colonization in the tropical zone.

In 1898, the very year that the United States laid claim to tropical territories in the Caribbean and Pacific, British sociologist Benjamin Kidd published *The Control of the Tropics*, a pamphlet broadcasting this modern understanding of the tropics as a colonial space. The opening line of Kidd’s text defined “the great rivalry of the future” as “the inheritance of the tropics.” Kidd went on to describe the tropics as a region “most richly endowed by nature on the face of the globe” but warned readers to recognize “the cardinal fact that in the tropics the white man lives and works only as a diver lives and works under water. . . . Neither physically, morally, nor politically, can he be acclimatized in the tropics.”³⁴ Kidd’s version of tropicality, which developed over the course of the nineteenth century, was a socially constructed discourse not unlike Orientalism in that it legitimized essential differences between cultures on the basis of geography.³⁵ Such notions would become so ingrained in the politics of imperialism that in 1915, Yale geographer Ellsworth Huntington would point to the “climatic handicaps” inherent in

tropical and subtropical regions from the southern US states to Central and South America.

In the mid-nineteenth century, race science and botanical science intersected and converged. It was clear that some plants, such as the cash crops that had come to be associated with the tropics like sugar and coffee, were environmentally suited for a single climate. Scientists debated whether humans had similar climate limitations. Until the mid-nineteenth century, race theories were based on the concept of monogenism, that all humans shared a single origin in Adam and Eve. Monogenists believed that the descendants of these white first humans migrated to different parts of the world, in the process developing racial features as they adapted to new environments. Monogenism imagined humans as malleable and thus suitable, like some plants such as the fern, for acclimatization and adaptation to nonnative climates. A competing race theory of polygenism emerged in the 1830s challenging the view that such adaptation was possible. Polygenists believed that each race was a different species originating in a particular climate zone, with whites as the superior species of the temperate zone and Blacks as the inferior one of the tropics. One of the most notorious advocates of the theory was Harvard biologist Louis Agassiz, with whom Church was acquainted.³⁶ Proponents of polygenist theory, which included several prominent Black scientists, believed that human migration should be limited to the bounds of tropical and temperate zones because climate acclimatization was biologically impossible. Migration beyond such zones of habituation could only result in illness and degeneration.³⁷

In the United States, associations between Blackness and tropicity featured centrally in emancipation discourses during the Civil War era.³⁸ Throughout the nineteenth century, concerns about slave rebellion and racial unrest led to calls for the removal of African Americans to colonial spaces. Increasingly grounded in environmentally based race science, such efforts reinforced US overseas expansion. The first of these resettlement projects (and the most well known today) was the American Colonization Society's 1819 establishment of a colony for free Blacks in Liberia. While climatic considerations played a part in that plan, it more directly imagined a return of African Americans to their ancestral continent.³⁹ Later projects of Black resettlement targeted the tropical Americas, particularly Central America and the Caribbean. A new wave of colonization attempts around the Civil War variously proposed Cuba, Haiti, Panama, Honduras, and Suriname as possible sites for free Black colonies. On the eve of issuing the Emancipation Proclamation, Abraham Lincoln met with African American leaders in Washington to promote a new resettlement plan in an unspecified location in Central America—a place that he described as “a very excellent one . . . with great natural resources and advantages . . . especially because of the

similarity of climate with your native land—thus suited to your physical condition.”⁴⁰

The prototypical tropics—those imagined by Lincoln and others who advocated for the establishment of an African American colony—were a combination of a hot, humid climate and a junglelike, swampy terrain. The discourse of tropicality transformed such ecosystems into places that were aesthetically alluring and naturally abundant yet physically dangerous for white visitors and inhabitants. Among the most threatening of these dangers was disease, which was then believed to be miasmatic, originating in stagnant water and atmospheric vapors.⁴¹ When Church was awaiting a north-bound steamer in Aspinwall, Panama in 1853, he wrote in his diary, “Time passes slowly . . . but I am thankful that I enjoy good health in a place which has so bad a reputation.”⁴²

While race science figured the tropics in relation to human inhabitants, a parallel idea of allure and danger played out in botany. The allure of the tropics was commonly celebrated by explorers and scientists who admired the region’s natural wonders. The most influential among them was Alexander von Humboldt, whose publications in the early nineteenth century extolled the biological richness and natural beauty of the South American tropics.⁴³ Church admired Humboldt so much that his own Andean trek in 1853 followed in the older explorer’s footsteps.

Naturalists were also key contributors to constructions of tropicality as a distinctive environmental category founded on imperialism. Mary Louis Pratt has argued that in imagining the tropics as natural, unpeopled landscapes, Humboldt and other white naturalist-travelers of the nineteenth century were constructing a fiction of “anti-conquest”—a method of proclaiming innocence while asserting European hegemony.⁴⁴ Church was deeply invested in the idea of the tropics as described in such natural histories. In Jamaica he sought out experiences that climatically and botanically met his expectations of tropicality. Having arrived in the country during its dry season and amid a long drought, he was immediately disappointed with what he observed, labeling his surroundings only quasi tropical in his mind. Even though the island is four degrees south of the Tropic of Cancer (and thus undeniably in the tropics), he deemed the scenery “half Tropical at any time and much less so than ever, after a long drought.” Trying to digest this distinction, Horace Robbins, who greatly admired his travel companion and artistic mentor, concluded that the island would have to serve as a “sort of preparation before I visit the two Tropics at some future day.”⁴⁵ Later, when Church received an invitation from a friend to join an expedition to the Orinoco River in Venezuela, he replied with regret that he would “have enjoyed an excursion with you all to the real tropics.” Even summer’s “fine rains,” which turned “the mountain flanks . . . vivid green and vegetation

... bursting out afresh," he wrote, didn't measure up to the South American tropics he had experienced in earlier travels. According to Robbins, Church had miscalculated what he could expect on the island, where residents privileged the ocean such that most accommodations were too distant from "all luxuriance of foliage & grand mountain views."⁴⁶ Only when the two artists took an overland excursion to the northern town of Moneague and climbed the forested Mount Diablo did Church seem satisfied—enough at least to have selected a view along the ascent as the subject of his *Vale of St. Thomas*, a view fittingly filled with luxuriant foliage.

As the most exemplary scene of tropicality that Church painted in Jamaica, *Vale of St. Thomas* imagines the region as an environment of both botanic beauty and threat. In a letter to Elizabeth Colt on his progress on the painting, Church emphasized tropical climatic effects, describing the scene as representing "a passing shower of tropical character" through which the sun struggles but "shines . . . with most dazzling light."⁴⁷ As the storm passes, moving seemingly out of view on the left side of the canvas, the sun illuminates not the painting's middle ground—a part of the landscape that draws the eye in most of Church's tropical compositions—but the foreground covered in tropical flora.

Most of Church's tropical landscapes have a clear visual trajectory from foreground to background. His most revered tropical work, the blockbuster 1859 *Heart of the Andes* (fig. 1.7) compresses jungle, plateau, and peak into a single massive canvas but maintains a means of visually moving between the pictured ecozones. In a brochure for the painting's exhibition, writer Louis Legrand Noble encouraged spectators to imagine themselves as explorers. He even prescribed a route for their fictitious treks toward the distant peaks—one that privileged the middle ground of the painting, where the traveler was instructed to follow "the valley along the bank of the river."⁴⁸ The imaginary trail, unsurprisingly, mimicked Church's own in South America from lowland coast to the volcanic cones of the Andes.

By contrast, *Vale of St. Thomas* contains no inviting pathway through the picture. Nor is there any definitive destination visible in the distance. Because of the mists of the passing storm, the middle ground remains obscured with little to capture the viewer's attention even at the brightest points. The viewer faces what Jennifer Raab has fittingly described as "a striking emptiness."⁴⁹ In contrast to this misty middle distance and blank backdrop is an exuberantly filled foreground. Here a biodiverse tangle of vegetation, including the majestic tree fern that acts as visual anchor of the scene, glints under the sun's rays. The space that most demands attention is the lower right of the canvas, which is overloaded with foliage in varied colors and forms. Church no doubt wanted viewers to look there at the particularities of each plant. During exhibitions of *Heart of the Andes*, he had instructed viewers to scrutinize every detail under magnification.⁵⁰ Among the visitors was



Figure 1.7 Frederic Edwin Church, *Heart of the Andes*, 1859, oil on canvas, $66\frac{1}{8} \times 120\frac{3}{16}$ in. (168 × 302.9 cm). Metropolitan Museum of Art, bequest of Margaret E. Dows, 1909.

Mark Twain, who famously recalled having “examined its beauties minutely” through opera glasses.⁵¹ If *Vale of St. Thomas* is examined minutely, one can easily notice that in the lower right corner, plants extend over and climb atop one other in lush disorder, recalling the studies Church painted outdoors in Jamaica. One of these studies, *Tropical Vines and Trees, Jamaica*, done in early summer of 1865 (fig. 1.8), features such an overgrowth of shrubs and climbing plants that the whole landscape—made up of a dense sea of small brushstrokes in variegated greens (save for a small corner of blue sky)—is exceedingly claustrophobic.

Church’s botanical vignettes reflect broader associations of the tropics with botanical excess. One of the first impressions that the Amazon made on naturalist Alfred Russel Wallace in 1848 was that “the vigour of vegetation is everywhere present.” Plants, he wrote, sprouted from every natural and built surface: “ledges and mouldings . . . wall-tops and window openings of the churches often spring luxuriant weeds and sometimes small trees.”⁵² On the one hand, such fecundity could be aesthetically pleasurable. In the earliest European descriptions, the American tropics were commonly associated with ideas of a bountiful Eden.⁵³ For Church’s companion Horace Robbins, Jamaica was exceedingly Edenic. He repeatedly marveled in his letters home about feasting on exotic fruits that were adding inches to his waistline. In one letter, he describes a scene akin to the one Church painted in his claustrophobic sketch of vines and trees, but he uses terms that deem the Jamaican



Figure 1.8 Frederic Edwin Church, *Tropical Vines and Trees, Jamaica*, 1865, oil on paper mounted on wood, $18\frac{1}{8} \times 12\frac{1}{2}$ in. (46×31.8 cm), OL1980.1948.a. Courtesy of Olana State Historic Site, New York State Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation.

landscape mesmerizing, awe inspiring, and beautiful. “It is pleasant to take a ride here,” he wrote, “to see . . . the great clumps of foliage so massive & thick that the light scarcely penetrates them—the high mountain luxuriant with foliage to their very tops.”⁵⁴

On the other hand, botanical fecundity could be destructive, even frightening. This “dark side of tropicality,” as David Arnold terms it, went hand in hand with a broader negative representation of the tropics that had been circulating since the mid-eighteenth century.⁵⁵ Travelers’ accounts of Jamaica in the 1850s and 1860s frequently described scenes of botanical destruction. In 1858 one US journalist noted, “The traveller, who lands in any of the seaport towns of Jamaica, witnesses a scene of decay . . . [a] wide expanse of ruins meets his eye.” Such ruins were characterized by the rapid growth of tropical flora, which, according to the writer, “is fast weaving a dense jungle over the houses and gardens . . . burying all traces of civilization from view.” In the highlands, he noted, once productive and lucrative coffee plantations had become “overgrown with . . . impenetrable jungle” and “entirely overrun with rank tropical vegetation.”⁵⁶

The abandoned plantation—a unique kind of tropical ruin—was a defining feature of the mid-nineteenth-century Jamaican landscape. Some decades later, perhaps remembering the abandoned plantations he saw, Church recalled that “there were evidences everywhere of decaying prosperity.”⁵⁷ On their return from Mount Diablo, the site of Church’s major canvas, Church and Robbins joined a planter for a tour of some coffee and sugar estates. The visit, Robbins recorded, included a rest at an abandoned residence called Endeavor. Pense that the younger artist described as “very high up—airy & cool.”⁵⁸ Later that summer, when the group moved from a suburban villa near Kingston to Galloway Hill, a property owned by the British pastor Charles Fyffe at higher elevations to the north, Church made note of the centrality of the plantation to the island’s economy. Describing his changed surroundings to his farm manager at Olana, Church reported that at “3500 feet above the sea . . . [t]hese are all Coffee Estates. . . . This coffee brings the highest price in England.”⁵⁹

United States press accounts of Jamaica’s deplorable economic state were liable to call the island as a whole a “ruin,” just as travelers there were witness to the actual decay of plantation architecture.⁶⁰ A correspondent for the *Knickerbocker* wrote in 1854 that though Jamaica was once “the *brighest* jewel of the British crown,” it was now “the most humiliating spectacle of wretchedness and ruin.”⁶¹ A journalist traveling in 1860 from Kingston to Moneague (following the same route that Church and Robbins later took to Mount Diablo) described the many abandoned plantations on route, overgrown with “brushweed and rank weeds.” “I don’t think that five miles can be traveled, on any road in Jamaica,” he reported, “without seeing one deserted estate at the very least.”⁶²

In Jamaica, then, aggressive tropical overgrowth, like that which Church painted so vividly into the foreground of his *Vale of St. Thomas*, was a sign not just of natural fecundity—a trait also celebrated in the discourse of tropicality—but of decay and erasure of British colonization. Indeed, when

Church recalled his Jamaican sojourn, he remembered the ferocity of parasitic plants, describing them to fellow artist Charles DeWolf Brownell in 1879 as “unusually ferocious monsters” choking the trees “while the juicy flat leaves of the parasite seemed to clap their hands in fiendish joy.” He went on to call the sketches he once made of these plants a scene of “Parricide,” or the murder of one’s parent. Further anthropomorphizing Jamaica’s plants, Church recalled that “Twilight was the hour I watched these blotched demons—It required little effort of the imagination to endue them with cruel intentions.”⁶³ In the overgrown patches of earth in Church’s oil studies, like *Tropical Vines and Trees*, it takes only minimal encouragement to imagine the rectilinear forms in the center as plants swallowing more than just one another but also the remains of human inhabitation.

Church’s departure from his standard compositional scheme in *Vale of St. Thomas* signals an erasure of the picturesque, a mode used by printmakers to disseminate idealized images of pre-emancipation Jamaica.⁶⁴ In the painting, the picturesqueness of the view, veiled by the “passing shower of tropical character,” seems to struggle against the more threatening tropics evident in the artist’s corner of exuberant vegetation. In Jamaica, the overwriting of the picturesque narrative of landscape went hand in hand with physical decay—a ruination enacted by plants. Dotting Jamaica’s hillsides, the abandoned estates overgrown and covered in vines signaled colonial failures. If the Wardian case, beautifully arranged in the parlor with thriving tropical ferns, allowed those in the temperate north to envision a utopian ideal of empire as bound and transportable, then the ruined plantations of Jamaica were its antithesis. With the end of slavery in 1838 and resulting loss of imperial control in Jamaica, the order brought to the tropics by plantation monoculture was, in a matter of years, lost to the aggression of native plants.

Building on associations between the hothouse and the tropics, a US newspaper columnist in 1850 described Jamaica’s postemancipation economic and social struggles as a metaphorical hothouse in ruin. Noting the British abandonment of their Jamaican sugar plantations and the high rate of unemployment among the Black population, the writer blamed the British state. Britons, he lamented, have “been paying enormously during whole generations for maintaining a huge hothouse” in the Caribbean. Now that forced labor was no longer economically viable, “the glass house tumbles to the ground, and the forced plants within it, not having vitality or strength to live in an ordinary atmosphere, have dwindled or perished.”⁶⁵ The plantation in the tropics, in other words, was no more than a carefully preserved environment apart. Like a Wardian case in a temperate climate, the nonnative plants inside depend on the glass enclosure to preserve their livelihood. Without that fragile barrier, the colonized environment inside breaks down and descends into ruin.

Ruinscapes

Vale of St. Thomas has but a single architectural detail that is easy to miss. A tiny white building perches on a hill over the river in the shadowy distance. The building's features are hard to make out. Whether a plantation house or church, as some scholars suggest, the structure is a marker of colonialism on the landscape.⁶⁶ Years later, remembering his time in Jamaica fondly, Church wrote to a friend planning his own Jamaica trip about "fine old Houses perched on the bold shoulders of the mountains [that] are deserted."⁶⁷ Church's white building—perhaps an image of one of these fine old homes—is not exactly in ruin, not yet strangled by "fiendish" plants, but it is nevertheless engulfed by the surrounding landscape.

In general, Church seemed to have little interest in ruins in the tropics, seldom spending time sketching architecture at all in his South American and Caribbean travels.⁶⁸ To better understand the idea of the ruin and the tropics, we need to turn to one of Church's friends and travel companions, the painter Louis Rémy Mignot, whose landscapes of the South American tropics from the 1850s and 1860s are punctuated with them. Mignot's ruinscapes offer a deeper understanding of tropical nature in relation to empire both at home and abroad.

Mignot traveled with Church on a four-month journey through Ecuador in 1857, when he was still a young artist trying to find his footing in New York City. His recent artistic training in The Hague may have given him a fondness for ruins, as they were picturesque features in the paintings of his teachers and of northern European Old Masters. As a newcomer to the New York art scene, he probably saw the tropical excursion as an opportunity to learn from a more successful colleague who, with one South American expedition already under his belt, was well known as a painter of the region.⁶⁹

Mignot and Church left New York in May 1857. Their journey took them first to Panama, where they crossed the Isthmus to board a Pacific steamer bound for Guayaquil. After a brief time in the port city, they traveled to Quito by boat and then on horseback, spending time also in the highland town of Riobamba, their base for excursions to nearby volcanos. For Church, the highlight of their trip—and one of the chief reasons he undertook the entire expedition—was the four-day overland trek to the active volcano Sangay with a group of Quechua-speaking guides. (Church had missed the mountain on his 1853 visit to Ecuador, learning about it just before his departure.) In 1857 Church recorded each detail of his Sangay trek in a diary, including a rapturous description of seeing the smoking cone emerge from behind the clouds just hours before a snowstorm prevented the group from attempting further ascent.

Figure 1.9 Louis R  my Mignot, *Landscape of Ecuador*, 1859, oil on canvas, 24 × 39½ in. (61.0 × 100.3 cm). North Carolina Museum of Art, Raleigh, purchased with funds from gifts by the American Credit Corporation, in memory of Guy T. Carswell, and various donors, by exchange. 91.2.



Mignot, by contrast, had missed the sighting entirely. He had not joined Church to scramble up to a viewpoint to see the cone after a long day of overland travel at high altitude. Indeed, although the two artists traveled together, Mignot seemed less drawn to the majestic peaks of the Andes than to the tropical lowlands. Upon returning to New York, both Mignot and Church commenced work on tropical paintings based on their Ecuadorian journey, with Church beginning his monumental *Heart of the Andes*. Mignot’s early efforts mimicked his travel companion’s compositional formulas. In his 1859 *Landscape of Ecuador*, a foreground dense with botanical detail opens gradually to rising highlands and a distant snowcapped peak (fig. 1.9). It recalls the structure of Church’s tropical paintings, which the older artist had already been rehearsing for several years. Critics even called Mignot “a young artist” who “succeeds in happily combining Church’s style with his own.”⁷⁰

Despite favorable reviews, the subject of Mignot’s South American paintings shifted after 1859 toward riverscapes, perhaps in the painter’s attempt to carve out his own artistic arena. Leaving the high altitudes to Church, Mignot turned to the lowland terrain along the Guayas River, which the pair traveled along when moving to and from Quito. The Guayas region is so distinct from the Andean highlands to the east that a dispatch from a scientific expedition in 1857 described the transition from one to the other in extremely dramatic terms. Not only did a traveler have to abandon water transport for horses and mules at the point where the mountains meet the river but “he will prepare to leave the hitherto flowery world of the birds and fruits for the barren pyramids of ice and snow, where the condor is fanned to sleep by the chilling blasts of perpetual Winter.”⁷¹ For Mignot, it was the “flowery world of the birds and fruits” that proved artistically generative. Whatever the reason—whether personal sensibility or artistic rivalry—Mignot’s typical South American subject, which he painted for the remainder of his ca-



Figure 1.10 Louis Rémy Mignot, “Ave Maria,” Ecuador, 1862, oil on canvas, $8\frac{1}{8} \times 14\frac{1}{8}$ in. (20.6 × 35.9 cm). Collection of Arthur and Eileen Newman, bequest of Eileen Newman, 2015, New-York Historical Society, 2015.33.3. Photography © New-York Historical Society.

reer, was the lowland riverscape punctuated by figures and details of local architecture.

In the first comprehensive study to be published of Mignot’s work, art historian Katherine Manthorne characterized the painter, a Southern Catholic of French ancestry, as a religious man who was drawn to the “slow paced and devout” life he observed along the Guayas.⁷² Mignot’s most enduring artistic motif is that of the church in the tropics. Over the decade of the 1860s, he painted at least four versions of “Ave Maria,” Ecuador. Each depicts the glowing stone facade of a waterfront chapel at sunset with worshippers passing through the large arched entryway (fig. 1.10). In each variation a differing volume of green vines climbs the ecclesiastical structures, particularly along the back and left side of the main church building.

In the antebellum era, the ruin was a popular subject of travel literature and artistic representation. Travelers to the Old World sought out the ruins of classical antiquity as picturesque reminders of a long and heroic past. In the allegorical landscapes of Thomas Cole, ruins allowed US Americans to contemplate the fall of empires and the triumph of nature over culture (fig. 1.11). The tropical ruin of the New World did not hold the same meanings.

For Protestant North Americans, Ecuador’s ruined churches were probably seen as signs of the fading decadence of the Catholic Spanish Empire. Such views helped justify US entrepreneurial ambitions to expand industrial



Figure 1.11 Thomas Cole, *The Course of Empire: Desolation*, 1836, oil on canvas, 39¼ × 63 in. (99.7 × 160 cm). Gift of the New-York Gallery of the Fine Arts, 1858.5, New-York Historical Society. Digital image created by Oppenheimer Editions.

development into Latin America. Mignot, however, who was raised a Catholic, may not have shared such views. According to Manthorne, Mignot's upbringing structured his vision of Ecuador, a majority Catholic country. She contends that the painter sympathetically portrayed the tropical church as an "oasis in the midst of an increasingly fast-paced modern capitalist society."⁷³ She further declares Mignot's paintings a form of "resistance to manifest destiny," which in the 1850s led many US expansionists, including a contingent of powerful Southerners, to declare South America a natural extension of national territory and influence.⁷⁴

While intention is impossible to discern with certainty without Mignot's own voice (which does not survive in archival documents), his very taste for a "slow paced and devout" life, I argue, *was* political, particularly in light of his Southern identity, which in the Civil War era was deeply invested in the meaning of the ruin. We know little about Mignot's views on US expansionism to Latin America or about the earnestness of his Catholic religiosity, but we do have a strong sense of his connections and sympathies with the American South before and during the Civil War. These are essential clues that can help us come to a more nuanced understanding of the artist's perceptions of the tropics.

Mignot was born in Charleston, South Carolina, in 1831, when it was the wealthiest city in the United States and well known for its cosmopolitanism. He was the son of a successful merchant who had immigrated to the city from Normandy. His father ran a coffee house and confectionary, did business in luxury trades and real estate, and by the time Mignot came of age, had made enough money to own a dozen slaves and a plantation. The Mignot family was part of a community of French Catholics in the port city, many of whom (including the artist's stepmother) arrived there a generation earlier as planter-class refugees following the revolution in Saint Domingue (Haiti), where an insurrection of self-liberated slaves ended French colonialism in 1791.

In 1848, after the death of his father, Mignot left Charleston for Europe, then New York, to pursue his artistic career, and he never returned. By then, the city of his birth had experienced a decade of economic decline and had recalibrated its identity as not just Carolinian but Southern, aligned with states to its west—a regional identity that would cling to Mignot for the rest of his career. In a biographical sketch written by Henry Tuckerman in his 1867 *Book of the Artists*, Mignot is described as a “Southerner not only in color and subjects, but in sympathy.”⁷⁵ Fellow New York landscapist Jasper Cropsey was more definitive in his judgment, calling Mignot a “secessionist” outright.⁷⁶ Accounts of Mignot's life after his premature death in 1870 (at age thirty-nine) were filled with discussions of his connection to the Confederacy during the Civil War. According to the *Chicago Daily Tribune*, Mignot “left New York for London” at “the outbreak of the Rebellion” on account of “his sympathies being Southern.”⁷⁷ Some years later in 1887, the *New York Times* offered a more nuanced account: “Mignot was 30 when the war broke out, and having been long away from his native State . . . he could not sympathize with the narrowness, the provinciality which precipitated the rebellion. But he was no lover of the Union, and as the times were bitter and war had closed the way to his old home, he set forth on his travels again, having India in his mind.”⁷⁸ Though intended, the artist's travel to Britain's most famous tropical colony never materialized.

Mignot's Southern affiliation began to color his artistic practice as the Civil War approached. In the very years that he was developing an independent style for his tropical landscapes, Mignot undertook a major project of national significance. In collaboration with the figure painter Thomas Rossiter, he produced a monumental history painting entitled *Washington and Lafayette at Mount Vernon, 1784 (The Home of Washington after the War)*, which debuted in New York City in November 1859 (fig. 1.12). At seven by twelve feet with life-size figures (added by Rossiter), the theatrical painting seemed designed to rival Church's *Heart of the Andes* (which debuted just months earlier) in monumentality. A critic for the *Albion* praised Mignot for his “skillful management of . . . the grounds and distant view” and con-

cluded that the picture was “sure to be popular” on account of its subject matter.⁷⁹

Mignot and Rossiter’s painting was one of numerous efforts to celebrate Washington in national history in the mid-nineteenth century. While Washington himself was a national hero to Northerners and Southerners alike, his identity as a slave-owning plantation owner from Virginia had to be navigated with care on the eve of the Civil War. While many artists, such as Emmanuel Leutze, who famously commemorated Washington leading the Continental Army across the Delaware River in 1851, avoided the issue of slavery to celebrate Washington’s military deeds and imagine him as an abstract embodiment of national ideals, Mignot and Rossiter did not.⁸⁰

Their painting, which represents the Marquis de Lafayette visiting Mount Vernon after the Revolutionary War, unapologetically depicts Washington as both planter and enslaver. The major figures in the foreground include not just portraits of Lafayette and the Washington family but an anonymous bondswoman entertaining a child on the lawn. A pamphlet written by Rossiter and published to accompany the painting’s exhibition was even more direct, describing Washington as “an opulent planter” in “the palmy days of the Old Dominion.” Repeating proslavery rhetoric characterizing plantation masters as benevolent father figures, Rossiter wrote that at Mount Vernon,



Figure 1.12 Louis Rémy Mignot and Thomas Pritchard Rossiter, *Washington and Lafayette at Mount Vernon, 1784 (The Home of Washington after the War)*, 1859, oil on canvas, 87 × 146½ in. (221 × 372.1 cm). Metropolitan Museum of Art, bequest of William Nelson, 1905.

the “negros were treated with peculiar kindness” and that Washington was known for “visiting them in sickness and in health.”⁸¹

In painting *Washington and Lafayette* during a nationally divisive era, Mignot made his allegiance clear. Despite the painting’s collaborative nature, the conception was probably Mignot’s. The project began in the summer of 1857, when he and the genre painter Eastman Johnson, a longtime friend he met when studying in The Hague, stayed at Mount Vernon at the invitation of John Augustine Washington III, the former president’s great-nephew. Johnson recalled later in his career that he made a number of studies during the visit, “mainly in view of painting a larger picture of Washington himself at Mount Vernon, with his people about him and Lafayette as his guest.”⁸² He and Mignot had collaborated before on the urban scene *Street View in Guayaquil, Ecuador* (fig. 1.13). Johnson’s decision to not follow through with Mignot’s vision of Mount Vernon was undeniably political. His own paintings of Washington’s estate focused instead on the dozens of enslaved men and women who still lived and worked there. Johnson’s up-to-date images of the estate, such as *Washington’s Kitchen at Mount Vernon* (fig. 1.14), unlike



Figure 1.13 Louis Rémy Mignot and Eastman Johnson, *Street View in Guayaquil, Ecuador*, 1859, oil on canvas, 24 $\frac{1}{8}$ × 36 $\frac{1}{8}$ in. (61.3 × 91.8 cm). The Robert L. Stuart Collection, the gift of his widow Mrs. Mary Stuart, S-188, New-York Historical Society. Photography © New-York Historical Society.



Figure 1.14 Eastman Johnson, *Washington's Kitchen at Mount Vernon*, 1857, oil on canvas 14 × 21 in. (35.6 × 53.3 cm). Private collection. Photo © Christie's Images / Bridgeman Images.

Mignot's historical one, shows the house in disrepair, with plaster peeling off the kitchen walls, the lawn overgrown, and the fences in need of mending.

In 1857 Mount Vernon was indeed in a state of ruin. Rossiter lamented in the *Crayon* in 1858 that “the soul sickens to witness the dilapidation and utter neglect” of the property. The house, Rossiter continued, had “nearly sixty years to waste and corrode into a ruin without the nation’s taking cognizance of it, or caring enough for its hallowed walls to rescue them from the spoils of Time.”⁸³ The implication, of course, was that the plantation fell into disrepair upon the death of its white master, and another was now needed to restore it to its former glory. In 1859 a new “master” did emerge. The Mount Vernon Ladies Association, a group led by a South Carolina woman who called herself “a Southern Matron,” purchased the property to restore it to its appearance when Washington was at its helm. Before the society’s fundraising effort became a national project, it was a Southern campaign described in the press as vital for “Southern feeling and honor.”⁸⁴

Mignot’s painting of the house and grounds shares a similar impulse of restoring “Southern feeling and honor” to the plantation landscape. In Rossiter’s descriptive pamphlet for the painting, this process is specifically

called out. "Topographical features are delineated as far as possible in accord with the date of the picture," Rossiter reported, "and the house restored to the condition which it must have possessed when the great Chief made it renowned."⁸⁵ In an effort to maintain the Southern plantation culture of the past, Mignot erased the ruins he observed in 1857, turning back time in both architectural and botanical terms.

Ruins within the North American landscape, unlike those of the Old World, had less stable meanings, since they originated in a much more recent past. They were not remnants of antiquity but more probably a form of decay precipitated by the rapid abandonment of recently built structures, natural disaster, and war. They had the quality of what historian Nick Yablon has called "untimeliness"—a modern temporality linked to the rapid pace of industrial modernity.⁸⁶

One common type of US ruin was the Southern plantation. While some plantations like Mount Vernon had already fallen into disrepair on the eve of the Civil War, many others became ruins during the war itself. Union military campaigns in the South made plantations typical targets. Sometimes they were deliberately razed for strategic military purposes, and other times they were burned as a form of revenge (fig. 1.15). In the very years that Mignot was painting tropical ruins, dilapidated and decaying plantations were becoming a fixture of the Southern landscape. As these structures fell into ruin, potent meanings were ascribed to them—meanings that persisted well beyond the nineteenth century.

Plantation houses were aligned with Southern domesticity and with women, so their destruction was understood as a deliberate and pointed invasion of spatial and corporeal privacy. Union soldiers, for instance, often burned personal items like letters and portraits even though these held little value either monetarily or strategically. Such acts of destruction became powerful symbols of domestic violation for both perpetrators and victims. When white Southerners returned to confront their ruined homes, they established a narrative that cast plantation ruins in a melancholic light—a mode that demonized Union soldiers while celebrating Southern pride, patriotism, and chivalry. The postwar rebuilding of the plantation home went hand in hand with the invention and celebration of the mythology of the Lost Cause.⁸⁷ For Southerners, restoring the plantation was a political project, just as it had been for Mignot when painting Mount Vernon. Mignot's pictorial restoration was, much like actual postwar rebuilding, a form of nostalgic return to an untenable past—a time when "each estate was a small empire," in Rossiter's words. In the guise of historical preservation, Mignot's Mount Vernon idealized plantation slavery while obscuring Washington's complicity. The same impulse continues to transform plantations of the South into enchanting, romantic getaways today, where the atrocities of slavery are often erased or filtered.



Figure 1.15 Mannsfield Plantation, Fredericksburg, in ruins, ca. 1870. Hoffman Collection, National Park Service, Fredericksburg, Virginia.

Though associated with the Civil War South, the plantation ruin was, in fact, a marker of the postemancipation Americas more generally. The Jamaican hills, as we know, were littered with abandoned estates covered in overgrown vegetation. Accordingly, Mignot's simultaneous engagement with two landscapes of empire, rural Virginia and lowland Ecuador, was not a random coincidence. In the mid-nineteenth century, the semitropical Southern states were gaining an association with the geographical tropics in travel narratives and medical discourse. As Natalie Ring has shown, the advent of tropical medicine in the late nineteenth century firmly tethered the US South to the country's tropical possessions abroad by way of shared pathologies, the study of which sanctioned both imperialism abroad and racial segregation in the Southern states.⁸⁸

Even before the advent of tropical medicine as a field of study, US Americans were keen to lump the two Souths together, giving the domestic region an exotic foreignness then associated with farther reaches of the hemisphere. Northern travelers in the US South during the Civil War used terms associated with tropicality to describe the unfamiliar landscape of the region. Not only was the plantation a novel architectural form for Northerners, but the

native plants and cash crops of the South seemed strange and exotic. In his 1864 travel memoir, *From Cape Cod to Dixie and the Tropics*, John Milton Mack marveled at the “primeval aspect of things” in Mississippi. He applied ideas of tropical exuberance and menace to both landscapes near New Orleans and those along a railroad in Cuba, describing the former as having “the beauty of the garden and the desolation of the waste combined” and the latter as a place where “the grace of parasitical plants . . . hung like a veil over the deformity of nature.”⁸⁹ On his 1867 travels, the naturalist John Muir dubbed Cuba “our American ‘South’ . . . rich in flowery vines.”⁹⁰ Such associations probably led critics to describe Mignot as a painter “excelling in Southern and tropical scenery” even though the vast majority of Mignot’s non-Ecuadorian landscapes depict the northeastern states and western Europe.⁹¹

It is in Mignot’s Ecuadorian scenes that he confronts the ruin as a tropical trope. In *South American Scene (Vespers, Guayaquil River, Ecuador)*, painted in 1862, the very year Mignot departed for London (a city that harbored many Confederate sympathizers during the Civil War), a ruin is the main feature of the scene (fig. 1.16). Dominating the riverfront foreground is a church belltower overtaken by flowering vines. Their tendrils wrap around the structure’s stone columns, cover the roof, and cascade off the corners of the building and across its windows like a curtain. The inclusion of the ruin fits certain nineteenth-century expectations of a picturesque landscape. Thomas Cole’s *Desolation* from his 1836 *The Course of Empire* series, for instance, similarly juxtaposes an ivy-covered ruin with a calm river (see fig. 1.11). But whereas Cole’s ruins, shown crumbling into the water and without signs of human habitation, suggest the long-ago downfall of a grand empire in the temperate world, Mignot’s ruins are of the present. Not only are the metal bells and cross orb still fixed in place, but the title “Vespers” suggests the building is still used for worship. Passing by the structure, meanwhile, is a vessel with three Ecuadorians ferrying agricultural cargo across the water, perhaps heading toward the glimmering, white town on the opposite shore.

In other paintings by Mignot, such as the *Ave Maria* variations, vines encroach on a building that is far from abandoned. Even as worshippers stream into the glowing church for services, plants loom nearby, slowly climbing the complex. Like the plantation suddenly ravaged by war, the vine-covered churches of Ecuador are also untimely. They, too, are a marker of accelerated time—not the fast pace of industrial life but of tropical abundance. This same fecundity of tropical nature had led Church to ascribe humanlike aggressiveness to Jamaica’s parasitic vines. Such botanical exuberance also went hand in hand with the trope of the “lazy native,” supposedly doomed by his inability to harness the excess energies of nature in the face of the industriousness of his white counterparts from the temperate north.⁹² Whether or not Mignot viewed the Ecuadorians he painted in such terms did not stop his US viewers from absorbing such stereotypes. Critics described Mignot’s



Figure 1.16 Louis Rémy Mignot, *South American Scene (Vespers, Guayaquil River, Ecuador)*, 1862, oil on canvas, 14¾ × 22¼ in. (37.5 × 56.5 cm). Princeton University Art Museum, gift of Stuart P. Feld, class of 1957, and Mrs. Feld.

paintings as having a “sense of languor . . . connected with the tropical climate.”⁹³ His *Street View in Guayaquil* (see fig. 1.13) was described by a critic as populated by a “few lazy monks and lounging natives.”⁹⁴

Mignot’s tropical churches, covered in vegetation, are the counterpoint to Mount Vernon, where the artist avoided even a hint of decay. Part of the project of restoring the plantation, in both paint and mortar, was to cut back and arrest nature’s advance—to remove, in the words of Mignot’s collaborator, “the weeds . . . [that] grow over [Washington’s] footprints and his door-sill.”⁹⁵ Mignot’s Ecuadorian landscapes visualized an organic decay of the built environment that the artist refused to imagine for the subtropical landscape of the Southern states. The fiction of Mignot’s Mount Vernon makes clear that only in the slave-based economy of forced labor could the plantation avoid a state of ruin—the ravages of botanical degeneration so evident in the tropics.

Mignot’s broader engagement with ruination places his Ecuadorian landscapes in an interconnected set of political frameworks, national and global. While we may not know Mignot’s stance on US expansionism with certainty, it does appear that the tropical ruin was for him (as it was for so many south-bound US travelers) a marker of European imperial decline. Like Jamaica,

Ecuador was beset by economic vulnerability in the mid-nineteenth century. A newly independent republic, it was struggling to defend itself against encroachments on its territory from neighboring states and overseas powers. Deep in national debt, the country ceded territory claimed by Peru to British creditors in 1855. That same year, the United States negotiated a treaty that never came to fruition to make the Galapagos a US protectorate based on false rumors that the islands were rich in guano, the fertilizer then driving a “speculating mania” around the world.⁹⁶ In late 1856 Ecuador formed an alliance with its neighbors Peru and Chile to secure territorial sovereignty against US expansion. The news was reported in US newspapers in early 1857, just before Mignot and Church headed south. A major part of the Continental Treaty, as it was called, which other South American nations would join in the months to come, was a pledge “not to cede or alienate to any foreign Power any part of their territory” and “to act together, offensively and defensively, in any case of filibuster invasion.”⁹⁷

Filibuster invasions, or nonstate sanctioned military expeditions led by US expansionists and their privately assembled armies, were then at a peak in the Caribbean and Central and South America. The most successful of them had installed the Tennessean adventurer William Walker as president of Nicaragua in 1856.⁹⁸ While in Ecuador in 1857, Church received a letter from his friend, the writer Theodore Winthrop, asking him to “ascertain . . . whether the chance for an individual and gentlemanly filibuster are good in Ecuador or New Granada.” Having worked for William Aspinwall on the US development of Panama earlier in the decade, Winthrop, then residing in St. Louis, seemed eager for a change of scene. He portrayed himself to “be more or less desperate” for some adventure, perhaps of the imperialist sort.⁹⁹ For Ecuadorians, the economic and social challenges of independence were linked to a threat of US occupation. For the eager filibusterer, a landscape of ruin was alluring.

In a tropical landscape, the ruin was both timely and out of time. In a period of US expansionism, it signaled, on the one hand, a timely and immediate need for outside intervention, much as Mount Vernon and other derelict plantations called for the “Ladies of the South” to come to their rescue.¹⁰⁰ On the other hand, the tropics were perceived as a space out of time, where the ruin stood in for a nonspecific, distant past. Nowhere was this more visible than in the living correlate to tropical landscape painting, the Wardian case, where plants and ruins mingled.

Faux ruins had since the eighteenth century been considered an attractive feature of garden design. In the mid-nineteenth-century United States, in the context of tropical expansionism, such ruin follies, as they were called, took on new life. Along the Hudson River, not far from Church’s Olana, was a popular tourist attraction called Cruger Island, where visitors, beginning in the 1840s, took moonlit tours of ruins picturesquely arranged along the

shore. The riverside ruinscape featured both faux ruins constructed by the property's owner, John Church Cruger, to mimic Thomas Cole's paintings, and authentic Mayan antiquities plundered from the Yucatán by John Lloyd Stephens and Frederick Catherwood in 1840.¹⁰¹ On Cruger Island, the haphazard mixture of twelfth and thirteenth-century antiquities with fake, modern ruins rendered a visitor's visual experience out of time. The deliberate transplantation of antiquities from the Yucatán to the Hudson not only erased the specific temporalities of Mayan history but also rendered the ruin powerless and mute.

Similar slippages in historical time were at work in the Wardian case, particularly when ferns were featured. By the nineteenth century, ferns were already known to be ancient plants that flourished at their fullest during the Carboniferous period three hundred million years ago. A botanist in 1878 reported that ferns had undergone "no apparent change since the prehistoric days." Those prehistoric conditions, in which ferns thrived, consisted of a moist, warm, "insular climate . . . with less rapid movement of general circulation" than the present. Such conditions, the botanist noted, were precisely "the climate which we seek to create in our hot-houses" as well as the conditions found on "some of the tropical islands . . . [where] the finest ferns, and in the greatest variety" were sought.¹⁰²

Fern ecology helped to define the tropics, along with hothouses and glass cases that mimicked them, as spaces located in a distant past. It is hardly surprising, then, to find that ruins found their way into the fernery. In the Churches' book on fern culture, Shirley Hibbert advised advanced gardeners to create "a grand fernery" with "a model of a ruin for the main feature of the scheme." Hibbert's ideal fernscape was the kind of overabundant scene that would have pleased Church and Mignot. The ideal fernery, complete with model ruin, was an unkempt space that in his words "affords more than a suggestion of the Negligence of nature, wild and wide." Such exuberant growth may well have conjured the landscapes in which Stephens and Catherwood encountered Mayan antiquities, particularly when considering that earlier in the book, Hibbert classed fern hunting as among a set of outdoor leisure activities that included what he called "archeologico-exploring."¹⁰³

In 1867, after completing *Vale of St. Thomas*, Church painted a smaller canvas entitled *The After Glow* that combined a scene he observed in Jamaica with fictional ruins (fig. 1.17). The picture's main feature is a sunset that radiates thick golden rays from a low cluster of purple clouds. Church sketched several similar sunsets when in Jamaica, describing one he drew as "so extraordinary that I might not see similar again."¹⁰⁴ In *The After Glow*, which Church deemed "the best Twilight I have ever painted," he replaced the misty mountains and trees that he had sketched in situ with an imagined waterside ruinscape—a church overgrown with vines, not unlike those in Mignot's Ecuadorian scenes. The addition may have been related to the painting's



Figure 1.17 Frederic Edwin Church, *The After Glow*, 1867, oil on canvas, 31¼ × 48¼ in. (79.4 × 121.9 cm), OL.1981.48.a. Courtesy of Olana State Historic Site, New York State Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation.

intention as a memorial to the artist's younger sister, Charlotte, who died in January 1867, since it features a cross much like Church's 1848 memorial picture, *To the Memory of Cole*, with its cross-shaped tomb in the center.¹⁰⁵ In *The After Glow*, Church's addition of a plant-covered ruin is as much a fiction as a fernery with a ruin folly, for no such ruins appear in any sketches Church did in Jamaica. The dark side of tropicality figures not only in the decay of the building overrun by aggressive plants but in the function of the painting as a personal, familial memorial. Set at twilight, the very hour he relished watching murderous plants in Jamaica, Church forged a link between the tropical ruin and death itself.

Both Church and Mignot saw ruination as a threat to life and livelihood, whether human or botanical, suggesting that the ruin was also a figure of subaltern agency, a source of power that had to be suppressed by temporal or geographic displacements like on Cruger Island and in the fernery. When Church described "fiendish" plants committing parricide, he also evoked ideas of ruination that permeated Southern anxieties around slave rebellion, a system based in false notions of benevolent paternalism. Indeed, in the Civil War South, acts of ruination and the ruin itself were apt to reverse the power dynamics between bondspeople and their enslavers.

During Union sieges of Confederate strongholds, bondspeople participated in the destruction of their owners' property, whether the burning of buildings or the destruction or reappropriation of their belongings. Such acts (described in letters and diaries of planter families and reports of Union soldiers) have too often been misconstrued as vandalism. A more appropriate term is *iconoclasm*, which, according to Jennifer Van Horn, allows us to see ruination as a form of resistance—as an assertion of agency and as part of a larger project of political agitation in the Confederate states. The destructive actions of the enslaved targeted images and objects that were key to identity construction, such as portraits of plantation owners and their ancestors. Black acts of ruination, in other words, disrupted and overturned the markers of their enslavers' cultural hegemony.¹⁰⁶

Ruins themselves could also serve as the material means of Black empowerment. The first large-scale ruination of the Civil War transformed the port of Hampton, Virginia, from a town built to support the Atlantic slave trade into a haven for fugitive slaves. In the summer of 1861, with most of the city deserted and under Union occupation, Confederate soldiers started a fire that reduced the city to rubble, supposedly to prevent Union soldiers from utilizing the town's buildings. By 1862 some one thousand bondspeople, locals joined by others arriving from elsewhere, took over the burned district, using the rubble—including fragmented brick and stone and charred wood—to cobble together modest homes and later civic buildings and businesses. In 1863 a Northern abolitionist described the transformation as ironic and triumphant: "The ruins of the houses of the First Families of Virginia are now covered with the cabins of their former Slaves."¹⁰⁷ Such reconstruction was an act of appropriation that repurposed materials of white supremacy into structures symbolizing freedom and power.¹⁰⁸

Ruins can also have an ambivalent power in the distant tropics and in the home garden. As markers of colonial failure in the American tropics, ruins also harbor anticolonial agency. In the Wardian case, as in the landscape picture, ruins were made safe and inert, transplanted into a fictional, managed world of the distant past filled with ancient plants and structures. As twin emblems of tropicality, the fern and the ruin partnered to make the American tropics into a colonial space that required cultivation and management. But actual ruins often threatened such orchestrated transplantations, both temporal and geographic. On the ground, both in Jamaica and in the Southern states, ruins signaled the destruction and deterioration of colonial power bound up with white supremacy; they served as the building blocks of anticolonial freedom.

Mignot and Church may have hinted at their recognition of the ruin's dark power, but they shied away from facing the contemporary social problems of postemancipation Jamaica and postindependence Ecuador. Their paintings, like the Wardian cases filled with fictional junglescapes, imagined

the tropics as out of time and out of place, a landscape of colonialism beautifully encapsulated but blurred by a glassy sheen. In their hemispheric visions of tropicality, tendrils and vines linked foreign jungles to the plantations of the American South.

Ruins were dangerous, but plants, too, as we shall see, have the power to decolonize.



Figure 1.18 Maria Thereza Alves, *Seeds of Change: New York—A Botany of Colonization*, installation view, Vera List Center/Sheila C. Johnson Design Center, The New School, November 2017. Photo credit: David Sundberg, courtesy Vera List Center for Art and Politics.

INTERVENTION

Germinating

For the Brazilian-born, Berlin-based multidisciplinary artist Maria Thereza Alves, plants are storytellers. In 2017 she installed the latest iteration of her ongoing artistic project *Seeds of Change* in Manhattan (fig. 1.18), where some sixty species of newly germinated ballast flora accomplished what the artist called a “displanting” of New York. Ballast flora refers to the botanical remnant of the historic shipping industry. Today, ships take on water as ballast for stability when unloaded, but before the twentieth century, the ballast used to weigh down transoceanic vessels consisted of earth, stones, and sand from their ports of departure. When these ships arrived at their destinations, the ballast, along with any seeds that it may have contained, was dumped to make room for the next load of cargo, thereby introducing traveling plants to a new ecosystem. “When we are walking in New York,” Alves explains, “we do not know if we are stepping on New York or Bristol, Kingston in Jamaica, Lisbon, Rio de Janeiro or Oslo.”¹

Seeds of Change attempts to locate these geographic displacements through the transit of plants. Through archival research, Alves identifies ballast dump sites in onetime colonial centers, then takes core soil samples and germinates the dormant seeds contained within them.² After germination, the plants can be identified on the basis of their leaf and flower morphology and their origins traced. The resulting ballast flora gardens, grown in collaboration with local communities, are filled with a global array of nonnative plants, each revealing a hidden, often dark, history of global trade. Before bringing the project to New York,

Alves created versions of *Seeds of Change* in various European port cities—including Marseilles, the Finnish port of Reposaari, Liverpool, and Bristol—that had once been active in the slave trade. By researching ballast, Alves discovered that the economics of slavery increased the amount of ballast (and accordingly the volume and variety of plants) arriving in Europe from the Americas.³ Plants, in other words, harbor secrets about human trafficking. Trying to make sense of Alves's discoveries, art critic Max Andrews has asked, "Could slavery be described as an environmental issue?"⁴

My interest in Alves's gardens, cultivated from the waste of global exchange, lies in their ability to excavate buried histories of colonialism much as the proceeding chapter (and this book more broadly) aims to do. Though Alves engages central elements of the colonial past—slavery, plantation agriculture, and Indigenous exploitation—*Seeds of Change* is no traditional history of empire. Dormant seeds are hard to tether to the specificity of the nation-state since plants do not respect borders. They also cannot be dated in human scales of time, meaning that their presence cannot be mapped onto the lives of individual political figures or the unfolding of definite historical events. Instead, *Seeds of Change* tells stories of empire by tracing patterns of commerce, migration, and other global movements that connect humans and things. By germinating, they make visible an infrastructure of colonialism. That infrastructure, which I argue in this book is the means through which nineteenth-century US painters engaged with empire, was often environmental—invested, as we have already seen, in technologies and systems for moving organic matter, notably plants and their ecosystems.

Like Frederic Church's and Louis Mignot's paintings of the tropics, Alves's ballast gardens engage a transplantation of "exotic" flora. Informing Church's and Mignot's landscapes was a botanical culture of collection, display, and propagation that reinforced empire. Alves's transplantation, or *displanting*, to use her term, engages the environmental infrastructures of colonialism in order to turn them inside out and upside down. Her ballast gardens are marked by dormancy, dispersal, and a reclaiming of temporality.

Reverse Colonization

It is obvious, even at a glance, that *Seeds of Change* uses plants to problematize human migrations, both past and present. Critics and scholars have fittingly called Alves's ballast flora "illegal immigrants," "aliens," and "descendants" to highlight the allegorical dimensions of the project.⁵ Plants, like humans, have acquired national identities, which *Seeds of Change* both highlights and challenges. This is hardly a new idea. In the Civil War era, US botanists were lamenting the "impertinent, intrusive character" of Old World plants overtaking domestic farms, which they noted had "followed the steps of the white man" and "crossed the oceans with him."⁶ Though the writers themselves

were of European descent, they had adopted the perspective of Indigenous Americans to portray plant invasion as an ongoing form of colonialism.

The racial and ethnic implications of the foreign-versus-native plant has been a key theme in Alves's work across mediums. In a video piece entitled *What Is the Color of a German Rose?* from 2005, a female performer of indeterminate ethnicity (perhaps Mediterranean or Latina) repeatedly enters the screen, showing off flowers and produce common to Europe in the manner of a game show presenter while off-screen an English speaker with a hard-to-place accent announces the plant's foreign origin. Beyond serving as a campy infomercial educating an ignorant European public that apples, tomatoes, tulips, and the like are naturalized, foreign plants, Alves deliberately deploys racial and linguistic ambiguity to suggest that a similar murkiness applies to human migration and belonging. The connections are not just metaphorical either. The now-naturalized plants of the video, after all, trace their origins to the exploitation of Indigenous resources and horticultural knowledge.

In Alves's words, *Seeds of Change* uncovers a "borderless history" that gives voice to "the diaspora of enslaved and indigenous peoples working in the colonies."⁷ Alves, who was born in São Paulo and has Indigenous Guaraní ancestry but who has lived most of her life abroad (in the United States, Mexico, France, Italy, and Germany) has always been vocal about the borderlessness of her own identity. She sees the very concept of nationality as fabricated and dangerously divisive.⁸ In her writings about Brazil, she outlines the extent to which the concept of nationality is politically charged. In her home country, she argues, elite European-descended Brazilians have long appropriated aspects of Indigenous and Black culture as their own brand of nationalism, all the while continuing to colonize those populations through their economic and political dominance. "From an indigenous perspective," she writes, "there has not been an end to colonization anywhere in the Americas."⁹ Given her stance on colonialism and nationality, Alves would reject a common characterization of her work as "postcolonial." The very term, to her, is a utopian fantasy created by colonizers after the loss of their overseas territories. Rather, we might see *Seeds of Change* as enacting a reverse colonization.

Alves's project references a long history of botany in service of colonialism and replaces it with a subversive ecological narrative. The conventional history, which centers on aesthetically or economically valuable exotic flora, is the one that informed Church and Mignot in the tropics. Ferns, like those that fascinated the Churches in Jamaica, for instance, were endlessly transported across oceans to satisfy a demand for exotic plants as living ornaments. In the nineteenth century such desirable exotics traveled in luxury, encased in glass on ship decks. They were destined for display, whether in the public botanical garden or the private home, where they were carefully acclimated to a new ecosystem, sometimes with the aid of purposefully designed housing to keep them alive and well.

Despite sharing a common geography of transit, Alves's ballast seeds are the undesirable or unintentional counterpart to the coveted exotic plants of the past. The Wardian case was, in fact, invented precisely to transport those plants of value that could not be successfully propagated from seed. Alves's project also centers on an exceptional set of seeds, ones that according to the botanist Heli Jutila, who advised the artist, "can remain vital in soil for decades, even hundreds of years in a state of dormancy."¹⁰ Unlike its coddled counterpart, ballast seeds did not travel in a special container on deck but in the dank darkness of ship holds, mixed with heavy materials selected precisely for cheapness and disposability. Ballast flora is the shadow plant of the collectable exotic, an incidental specimen mistreated, ignored, then left for dead.

Alves elevates these discarded "others" to the status of their more visible counterparts, in part by drawing on the visual language of nineteenth-



Figure 1.19 Maria Thereza Alves, "Ballast Indicator: *Atriplex rosea*," 2017, watercolor on paper, an element in *Seeds of Change: New York—A Botany of Colonization*, by Maria Thereza Alves, commissioned by the Vera List Center of Art and Politics at The New School. Courtesy of the artist and Michel Rein, Paris/Brussels. Migros Museum collection. Photo credit: Nick Ash.

century botany. Installations of *Seeds of Change* tend to be as archival in style as the research process involved in their realization. The living plants are typically just a small portion of the gallery display, which includes artist-made maps, text panels, and scientific illustrations. For the New York installation of *Seeds of Change* at the Vera List Center, Alves created a series of watercolors of plant specimens set against white backgrounds labeled with scientific nomenclature in imitation of botanical illustration (fig. 1.19). Alves's alternative archive of graceful plants on paper resembles the pages of pressed fronds in Isabel Church's fern album (see fig. 1.3), located in the archives at Olana just a hundred miles up the Hudson River, a once bustling shipping corridor.

Beyond the exhibition, Alves intends for *Seeds of Change* to always live on in the form of community-supported gardens, where ballast flora is showcased in conservatory-worthy displays. In Bristol, Alves was able to collaborate with German architect Gitta Gschwendtner to design a permanent ballast garden on the English harbor. Gesturing to the maritime history that brought the seeds to Bristol, the garden occupies a floating, abandoned grain barge that Gschwendtner transformed into a botanic garden in miniature. Among the raised beds lush with nonnative plants are sunken paths and seating for contemplative visitors (fig. 1.20). A curator from the local botanical garden was brought in to arrange the plants, which are differentiated by species.

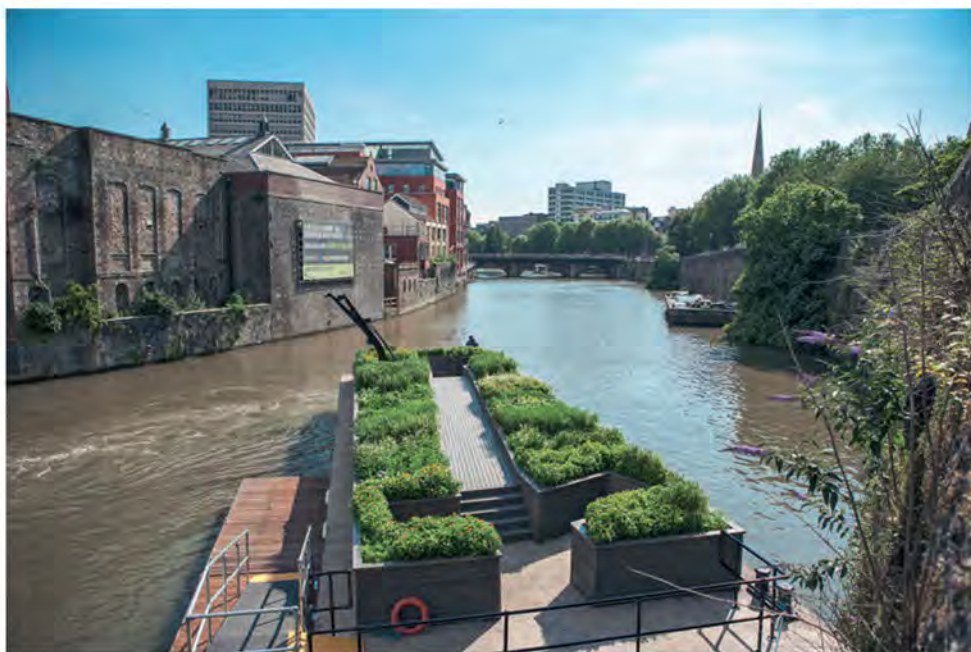


Figure 1.20 Maria Thereza Alves, *Seeds of Change: A Floating Ballast Seed Garden* (Bristol), 2012–16. Courtesy of Bristol City Council, Arnolfini and University of Bristol Botanic Garden. Photo © Max McClure.

For Alves the visual and procedural practices of colonial botany are lavished on plants otherwise deemed disposable. The distinction between value and waste in horticulture is a particularly fraught one that Alves engages most directly in another work, *Unrejected Wild Flora*, a series begun in 2013. The project, which the artist terms a “performance,” involved using discarded plants as paintbrushes to produce a series of brightly colored acrylic paintings that suggest abstracted wildflowers (fig. 1.21). The plant brushes used were wild cultivars that Alves had allowed to flourish in her terrace garden. In her absence, someone had identified the plants as weeds and uprooted them. By painting with these discards, Alves signals her rejection of the value system that marks some species as desirable and others as threatening—a system that makes the very category of “weed” necessary.

Historically, such value systems determined not just practices of specimen collection but also plant eradication. Pteridomania once transformed ferns from trivial wayside greenery to prized possessions, setting off a robust industry that exploited the biodiversity of the tropics and sent a glut of world travelers on hunts for novel varieties in places like Jamaica. It is telling that in the same period, accounts of abandoned plantations, from Mount Vernon to Jamaican sugar estates, use the trope of overgrown “weeds” to indicate states of ruin. Plantation monoculture pitted imported cash crops that depleted the ecosystem against native plants that might restore it. Fashioning imperial order may have involved collecting, but maintaining that order required constant weeding.

“Unrejecting” discarded plants, which *Seeds of Change* also accomplishes, evokes the real-world dangers associated with propagating invasive species, a source of serious environmental damage since the nineteenth-century acceleration of plant importation. This, too, is an issue close to Alves’s concerns. Alves is a founding member of Brazil’s Green Party in 1987, and her art has always been shaped by her environmental activism, particularly on behalf of Brazil’s Indigenous communities. Her 2014 sculptural work “*When they come, flee,*” *Said My Grandmother to My Mother*. “*When they come, flee,*” *Said My Mother to Me*, is about the colonial history of one invasive species: the jackfruit. The plant, which is native to the Asian tropics, was introduced by Portuguese colonizers in the nineteenth century as a food source for enslaved people in Brazil. In the centuries since, it has displaced native trees in Brazil’s forests and detrimentally altered the local ecosystem for mammals and birds. This environmental history informed Alves’s installation of two oversized bronze jackfruit seeds in the garden of a monastery turned art center in Seville, Spain. Unassumingly placed in the dirt under the canopy of a South American ombú tree supposedly planted by the son of Christopher Columbus, the sculptures evoke an uncanny transatlantic cross-pollination. Alves’s title, meanwhile, has little to do with plants but rather asks us to imagine this cross-pollination as a form of genocide. The very terminology of “invasion”



Figure 1.21 Maria Thereza Alves, *Unrejected Wild Flora*, 2017, acrylic painting performed on paper, 39½ × 25½ in. Courtesy of the artist and Michel Rein, Paris/Brussels.

has a militant whiff to it, which links the plant world to projects of human colonization by force.¹¹ In the horticultural sphere, the dark history shadowing the promise of colonial botany has always been the menace of an “escape” from containment, the transformation of a plant from crop or ornament to weed. Such botanical slippages of control also map onto invasions of a more violent and human nature.

Alves harnesses the natural reproductive power of seeds at a time when seeds have themselves been subject to colonization. According to Vandana Shiva, seeds are a major target of biopiracy. When corporations like Monsanto trademark, patent, and bioengineer seeds, rendering them sterile and farmers dependent, they are engaged in a “colonization of life itself.”¹² Shiva contends that seeds can be a small yet powerful object of colonial resistance, that building and strengthening seed banks in communities around the world helps to maintain the rights of those communities over their own intellectual property and local biodiversity. Awakening the ballast seed from dormancy highlights the self-regenerative properties of seeds and their rogue behaviors despite colonial efforts to control nature.

Time Travel

A ballast seed is not just an allegory but also a material index of colonization.¹³ Alves has insisted that her ballast garden “bears witness to slavery.” Put another way, Alves’s intervention of bringing dormant seeds to life activates botanical memory. To be clear, I am not making a claim about the sentience of plants, and neither is Alves. Rather, Alves challenges the ways in which the temporality of botany is also a colonial construct—one that diminishes and erases Indigenous knowledge.

Plant time is not human time, but germinating old seeds does, indeed, allow us access to a botanical past frozen in temporal suspension. In 2005 Israeli scientists successfully grew a date palm from the oldest seed ever germinated. The two-thousand-year-old seed had been excavated from an archeological site called Masada, an ancient fortress known for the mass suicide of Jews during a Roman siege in AD 73. The seed belonged to the Judean date palm or *Phoenix dactylifera* L., which has been extinct since the Middle Ages, so its revival accomplished a form of botanical time travel. On another level, the germination of the palm gave modern Israelis a way to connect to the biblical past, since Judean date palms (much praised in the Bible) were once a common plant. The ancient sapling was fittingly nicknamed “Methuselah” after the oldest person in the Bible.¹⁴ Since then other Judean date palm seeds from archeological caches have been germinated (each with its own biblical name), and in 2020 one even bore fruit, allowing the plants’ modern caretakers to share a taste experience with the besieged Jews at Masada.

Plants, we might say, are uniquely archival. Even Isabel Church's fern herbarium is an index of human history in its own way. The fronds she pressed are no longer viable (fern spores last a year at most), but they nevertheless preserve time, even if inadvertently. In her collection Jamaican ferns were sandwiched between leaves of the *New York Times* dating from 1865.¹⁵ The newspaper's presence in the collection is accidental. Pressing plants required a good deal of absorbent paper, and the newsprint must have been on hand. She probably meant to discard the sheets later, in the process cleansing the album of textual clutter and giving her specimens pride of place. But her absentmindedness has left her ferns with a precise time stamp, a historical identity.

The herbarium—as an instrument of natural history—was meant to be more or less timeless, particularly with the globalization of botany in the age of imperialism. Around the time that Isabel collected her ferns, botanists were establishing a system by which each observed plant species could be linked to a particular herbarium specimen, pressed and held in a public collection. These so-called type specimens, usually the first known example of a species collected and described, would for perpetuity serve as a material touchstone for resolving questions of classification, which inevitably arose as scientific fieldwork spread farther across the globe. In essence, the herbarium type specimen, though collected at a particular moment in history, was rendered timeless by its status as the reference to which all specimens of the species could be compared and identified in the future.¹⁶ In the Olana fern collection, the newspaper remnants, and the now-uneventful gossip and news they record, are a jarring and unexpected oddity precisely because they transform the timelessness of the herbarium genre into a historical archive of the Churches' Jamaica trip and its botanical activities.

Using more deliberate methods, Alves's *Seeds of Change* recovers historical time in a similarly mundane sense. Because each ballast seed is a unique individual, its germination is a time machine of sorts, bringing to life a specific oceanic route and a particular sailing vessel. Like the random page of the *Times*, this is a routine history: one ship is like so many others. And for that very reason, some of the specificity of the seed's journey is lost beyond recoverability. Even so, ballast flora offers a corrective to empire's temporal dislocations. The recovery of historical time is particularly relevant to the tropics and to its often primitivized Indigenous populations. In the nineteenth-century United States, the imagined tropics—materialized in Mignot's landscapes or its decorative correlate, the Wardian case—was a space out of time, where ruins covered in overgrowth signaled not historical particularity but a primeval timelessness.

As a longtime advocate for Brazil's Indigenous groups, Alves has tackled issues of historical memory in both her art and her advocacy. She has lamented, for instance, the disappearance of Indigenous languages under



Figure 1.22 Maria Thereza Alves, “Endopleura urchi,” detail of Maria Thereza Alves, *This Is Not an Apricot*, 2009, watercolor on paper. Courtesy of the artist and Michel Rein, Paris/Brussels. Private collection, Mullhouse, France. Photo credit: Pablo Ballesteros.

generations of colonial suppression. Her humorously titled artwork *This Is Not an Apricot* is not about semiotic play as the title suggests; rather, it supplies evidence of botanical forgetting.¹⁷ Each of Alves’s dozen watercolors depicts a different Amazonian fruit whose name has been lost (fig. 1.22). At the Manaus market where Alves encountered them for sale, vendors referred to each fruit using the Portuguese word for “apricot.” While making this artwork, Alves was also working to revitalize Indigenous language. At the request of members of the Krenak tribe of the State of Minas Gerais, Alves had a century-old German-Krenak dictionary translated into Portuguese so that the Krenaks could relearn their own language.¹⁸

In Alves’s work, time lost to colonialism’s violence can also, in some sense, be returned. *Seeds of Change*, which ultimately creates beautiful public gardens for diverse, contemporary communities might be understood as a botanical form of repatriation. As much as the garden of exotic flora is born of a history of colonial extraction and oppression, Alves’s practice transforms these reverse-colonized gardens into a space for the recovery of history and memory.

36. Isabel L. Taube, "William Merritt Chase's Cosmopolitan Eclecticism," *Nineteenth-Century Art Worldwide* 15 (Autumn 2016), <https://www.19thc-artworldwide.org/autumn16/taube-on-william-merritt-chase-cosmopolitan-eclecticism>.
37. Alexis Clark, "Impressionism as Erasure: Whistler and the Chinha Islands War," in *Mapping Impressionist Painting in Transnational Contexts*, ed. Emily C. Burns and Alice M. Rudy Price (New York: Routledge, 2021), 34–48.

Chapter 1

1. It was common for artists in the Tenth Street Studio Building, where Church worked, to decorate their studios in connection with the themes of their work. On studio culture there, see Annette Blaugrund, *The Tenth Street Studio Building: Artist-Entrepreneurs from the Hudson River School to the American Impressionists* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1997).
2. Key studies in the life and work of Frederic Edwin Church include Jennifer Raab, *Frederic Church: The Art and Science of Detail* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2015); John K. Howat, *Frederic Church* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2005); Gerald L. Carr, *Frederic Edwin Church: Catalogue Raisonné of Works of Art at Olana State Historic Site*, 2 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994); and Franklin Kelly, Stephen Jay Gould, James Anthony Ryan, and Debora Rindge, *Frederic Edwin Church* (Washington, DC: National Gallery of Art, 1989).
3. Henry T. Tuckerman, *Book of the Artists: American Artist Life, Comprising Biographical and Critical Sketches of American Artists* (New York: G. P. Putnam & Son, 1867), 386.
4. Horace Wolcott Robbins to Mary Eldredge Hyde Robbins, May 18, 1865, Olana State Historic Site (hereafter OSHS).
5. Frederic Edwin Church to Mr. Field, April 22, 1865, OSHS.
6. Frederic Edwin Church to Theodore Cole, July 28, 1865, OSHS.
7. Frederic Edwin Church to Elizabeth Colt, October 20, 1866, Wadsworth Atheneum, transcript at OSHS.
8. Church advised Colt on lighting, furnishings, wall construction, and framing. On their relationship, see Elizabeth Kornhauser, "Daniel Wadsworth and Elizabeth Hart Jarvis Colt: Collecting American Landscape Art in the Nineteenth Century," in *New World: Creating an American Art*, ed. Ortud Westheider, Karsten Müller, and Winfried Fluck (Munich: Hirmer, 2007): 26–40.
9. [Henry Barnard], *Arms, the Home, the Arm, and the Armory of Samuel Colt: A Memorial* (New York: Alvord, 1866), 82, 89.
10. On the Morant Bay Rebellion, see Gad J. Heuman, *The Killing Time: The Morant Bay Rebellion in Jamaica* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1994).
11. Raab, *Frederic Church*, 123–45, and Tim Barringer, "Picturesque Prospects and the Labor of the Enslaved," in Tim Barringer, Gillian Forrester, and Barbaro Martinez-Ruiz, *Art and Emancipation in Jamaica: Isaac Mendes Belisario and His Worlds* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2007), 60. It is also important to note that the St. Thomas referenced in Church's painting is not the same as the parish St. Thomas-in-the-East, where the Morant Bay rebellion took place.
12. Kornhauser, "Daniel Wadsworth and Elizabeth Hart Jarvis Colt," 37–38.
13. The most sustained discussion of Isabel's collecting can be found in Elizabeth Mankin Kornhauser and Katherine E. Manthorne, *Fern Hunting among These Picturesque Mountains: Frederic Church in Jamaica* (Hudson, NY: Olana Partnership, 2010).
14. Frederic Edwin Church to Joseph B. Austin, August 15, 1865, OSHS.
15. Frederic Edwin Church to Charles de Wolf Brownell, November 6, 1893, OSHS.

16. Horace Wolcott Robbins to Mary Eldredge Hyde Robbins, June 30, 1865, OSHS.
17. On fern fever's origins and development, see Sarah Whittingham, *Fern Fever: The Story of Pteridomania* (London: Frances Lincoln, 2012), and David Elliston Allen, *The Victorian Fern Craze* (London: Hutchinson, 1969).
18. *Gardeners' Chronicle* (1856) quoted in Whittingham, *Fern Fever*, 33.
19. Shirley Hibberd, *Rustic Adornments for Homes of Taste* (1856) quoted in Whittingham, *Fern Fever*, 33.
20. John Robinson, *Ferns in Their Homes and Ours* (Salem, MA: S. E. Cassino, 1878), 31.
21. Molly Duggins, "'The World's Fernery': New Zealand, Fern Albums, and Nineteenth-Century Fern Fever," in *New Zealand's Empire*, ed. Katie Pickles and Catherine Coleborne (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2015), 118–40.
22. Whittingham, *Fern Fever*, 15.
23. The key text on the Wardian case and its links to imperialism is Luke Koegh, *The Wardian Case: How a Simple Box Moved the Plants and Changed the World* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2020).
24. A vessel fern on display in the US Botanic Garden today is a clone of one brought back by the Wilkes Expedition.
25. Lucile H. Brockway, *Science and Colonial Expansion: The Role of the Royal Botanic Gardens* (New York: Academic Press, 1979).
26. Nathaniel Bagshaw Ward, *On the Growth of Plants in Closed Glazed Cases* (London: John Van Voorst, 1842), 42.
27. Shirley Hibbert, *The Fern Garden: How to Make, Keep, and Enjoy It*, 2nd ed. (London: Groombridge, 1869), 42.
28. John Smith, *Ferns British and Foreign: Their History, Organography, Classification and Enumeration* (London: Robert Hardwicke, 1866), 2.
29. Hibbert, *The Fern Garden*, 95, 101, 102.
30. Jill H. Casid, *Sowing Empire: Landscape and Colonization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005).
31. Hibbert, *The Fern Garden*, 1.
32. Church quoted in Pablo Navas Sanz de Santamaría, *Journey of Frederic Edwin Church through Colombia and Ecuador, April–October 1853* (Bogotá: Villegas Asociados; Universidad los Andes; Thomas Greg & Sons, 2008), 70.
33. Isabel Field Judson, *Cyrus W. Field: His Life and Work* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1896), 56.
34. Benjamin Kidd, *The Control of the Tropics* (New York: Macmillan, 1898), 1, 54–55.
35. David Arnold, "Inventing Tropicality," in *The Problem of Nature: Environment, Culture and European Expansion*, ed. David Arnold (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), 141–68.
36. Agassiz and Church were acquainted enough to socialize when they happened to meet on a steamer in 1859 on route to Halifax, a trip discussed at length in chapter 2. Agassiz also worked closely with Church's artist friend Martin Johnson Heade, who corresponded with the Harvard scientist and helped him to acquire specimens in Brazil in the 1860s.
37. On monogenism and polygenism, see George M. Frederickson, *The Black Image in the White Mind: The Debate over Afro-American Culture and Destiny, 1817–1914* (New York: Irvington, 1971); Nancy Stepan, *The Idea of Race in Science in Great Britain, 1800–1960* (London: Macmillan, 1982); and Colin Fisher, "Antebellum Black Climate Science: The Medical Geography and Emancipatory Politics of James McCune Smith and Martin Delany," *Environmental History* 26, no. 3 (July 2021): 461–83.
38. Ikuko Asaka, *Tropical Freedom: Climate, Settler Colonialism, and Black Exclusion in the Age of Emancipation* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017).

39. On the American Colonization Society in relation to imperialism, see Brandon Mills, "Situating African Colonization within the History of US Expansion," in *New Directions in the Study of African American Recolonization*, ed. Beverly C. Tomek and Matthew J. Hetrick (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 2017), 166–83; and Nicholas Guyatt, "'The Outskirts of Our Happiness': Race and the Lure of Colonization in the Early Republic," *Journal of American History* 95, no. 4 (March 2009): 986–1011.
40. On the varied proposals for Black resettlement in the tropics, see Phillip W. Magness and Sebastian N. Page, *Colonization after Emancipation: Lincoln and the Movement for Black Resettlement* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2011). For the quote, see "Abraham Lincoln, Remarks on Colonization to African-American Leaders, August 14, 1862," online at House Divided: The Civil War Research Engine at Dickinson College, <https://hd.housedivided.dickinson.edu/node/40448>.
41. Paul S. Sutter, "The Tropics: A Brief History of an Environmental Imaginary," in *The Oxford Handbook on Environmental History*, ed. Andrew C. Isenberg (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014): 178–98.
42. Frederic Edwin Church diary, October 15, 1853, OSHS.
43. On Humboldt's influence in the United States, see Laura Dassow Walls, *The Passage to Cosmos: Alexander von Humboldt and the Shaping of America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), and Eleanor Jones Harvey, *Alexander von Humboldt and the United States: Art, Nature, and Culture* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian American Art Museum, 2020).
44. Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Writing and Transculturation*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2007), 109–40.
45. Horace Robbins to Mary Robbins, June 30, 1865.
46. Church to Austin, August 15, 1865.
47. Church to Colt, September 16, 1866, quoted in Kornhauser, "Daniel Wadsworth and Elizabeth Hart Jarvis Colt," 37.
48. Louis Legrand Noble, *Church's Painting: The Heart of the Andes* (New York: D. Appleton, 1859), 9. On the middle ground of Church's tropical landscapes, see Maggie M. Cao, *The End of Landscape in Nineteenth-Century America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2018), 68–110.
49. Raab, *Frederic Church*, 123.
50. Kevin J. Avery, *Church's Great Picture: The Heart of the Andes* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1993), 35.
51. Samuel L. Clemens to Orion Clemens, March 18, 1861, Mark Twain Papers, University of California, Berkeley.
52. Alfred Russel Wallace, *A Narrative of Travels on the Amazon and Rio Negro*, 2nd ed. (London: Ward, Lock, 1889), 2.
53. Arnold, "Inventing Tropicality," 145.
54. Horace Robbins to Mary Robbins, June 30, 1865.
55. Arnold, "Inventing Tropicality," 150–51.
56. "The Island of Jamaica," *Flag of Our Union*, December 4, 1858, 388.
57. Frederic Edwin Church to Charles DeWolf Brownell, December 11, 1893, OSHS.
58. Horace Robbins to Mary Robbins, May 18, 1865.
59. Church to Theodore Cole, July 28, 1865.
60. "The 'Ruin of Jamaica,'" *Chicago Press and Tribune*, August 16, 1860, 2.
61. James Linen, "Island Sketches: Impressions of Jamaica, and of Kingston in Particular," *Knickerbocker* 43, no. 4 (April 1854): 374, emphasis in the original.
62. "Emancipation In Jamaica-II," *New York Times*, February 3, 1860, 2.
63. Frederic Edwin Church to Charles de Wolf Brownell, March 24, 1879, OSHS.

64. On prints and the picturesque in Jamaica, see Charmaine A. Nelson, *Slavery, Geography and Empire in Nineteenth-Century Marine Landscapes of Montreal and Jamaica* (New York: Routledge, 2016), 195–340.
65. “Jamaica in 1850,” *Living Age* 29 (1851): 427.
66. Elizabeth Mankin Kornhauser, *American Paintings before 1945 in the Wadsworth Atheneum* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1996), 208.
67. Church to Brownell, December 11, 1893.
68. Only later in the 1870s did he engage with the ruin in the landscape, and then only in paintings of the Middle East.
69. The best account of Mignot’s career is Katherine E. Manthorne with John W. Coffey, *The Landscapes of Louis Rémy Mignot: A Southern Painter Abroad* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1996).
70. “Studios of American Artists,” *Home Journal*, February 9, 1856, quoted in Manthorne, *Louis Rémy Mignot*, 14.
71. “Scientific Exploration in Ecuador,” *New York Daily Tribune*, February 24, 1857, 3.
72. Manthorne and Coffey, *Landscapes of Louis Rémy Mignot*, 81.
73. Manthorne and Coffey, 96. The meaning of the church is complicated by the fact that Catholicism was a political battleground in Ecuador during the mid-nineteenth century, when religious ritual and belief were seen by some as foreign and imperial and by others as national and republican. The era was dominated by regional division between Guayaquil-based liberals and Quito-based conservatives led respectively by José María Urbina, president from 1851 to 1856, and García Moreno, who came to power in 1861. The decidedly anticlerical Urbina sought to expel all clerics from positions of power despite significant pushback, while the extremely devout Morena championed religion as a basis for national identity and eventually required all citizens of the country to be Catholic.
74. Manthorne and Coffey, *Landscapes of Louis Rémy Mignot*, 86. On manifest destiny and Southern politics, see Matthew Karp, *This Vast Southern Empire: Slaveholders at the Helm of American Foreign Policy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016).
75. Tuckerman, *Book of the Artists*, 564.
76. Quoted in Maurie D. McNinnis, “The Most Famous Plantation of All: The Politics of Painting Mount Vernon,” in *Landscape of Slavery: The Plantation in American Art*, ed. Angela D. Mack and Stephen G. Hoffius (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2008), 103.
77. “The Fine Arts,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, January 23, 1876, 8.
78. “Paintings by Louis R. Mignot,” *New York Times*, May 7, 1887, 5.
79. “Fine Arts: Rossiter and Mignot’s *Home of Washington after the War*,” *Albion* 37, no. 48 (November 1859): 573.
80. McNinnis, “Most Famous Plantation of All,” 86–114.
81. T. P. Rossiter, *A Description of the Picture of the Home of Washington after the War Painted by T.P. Rossiter and L.R. Mignot 1859* (New York: D. Appleton, 1859), 3, 20, 21.
82. Eastman Johnson to Mrs. Doud, December 12, 1895, quoted in Manthorne and Coffey, *Landscapes of Louis Rémy Mignot*, 67.
83. Thomas P. Rossiter, “Mount Vernon, Past and Present: What Shall Be Its Destiny?” *Crayon* 5, no. 9 (September 1858): 243.
84. McNinnis, “Most Famous Plantation of All,” 101.
85. Rossiter, “Description of the Picture,” 6.
86. Nick Yablon, *Untimely Ruins: An Archaeology of American Urban Modernity, 1819–1919* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010).
87. Megan Kate Nelson, *Ruin Nation: Destruction and the American Civil War* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2012).

88. Natalie Ring, "Inventing the Tropical South: Races, Region, and the Colonial Model," *Mississippi Quarterly* 56, no. 4 (Fall 2003): 619–31.
89. J. Milton Mack, *From Cape Cod to Dixie and the Tropics* (New York: G. P. Putnam, 1864), 169, 315.
90. John Muir, *A Thousand Mile Walk to the Gulf*, ed. William Frederic Badè (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1916), 25. While the book was published later, Muir completed the journey his text recounts in 1867.
91. "The Fine Arts," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, January 23, 1876, 8.
92. Sutter, "The Tropics," 178–98.
93. "The Fine Arts," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, January 23, 1876, 8.
94. "Fine Arts: National Academy of Design," *Albion*, May 14, 1859, 237.
95. Rossiter, "Mount Vernon, Past and Present," 252.
96. "Latest Intelligence," *New York Daily Times*, October 22, 1855, 1.
97. "The Spanish American Union," *National Era*, April 9, 1857, 59.
98. Michel Gobat, *Empire by Invitation: William Walker and Manifest Destiny in Central America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018).
99. Theodore Winthrop to Frederic Edwin Church, April 25, 1857, OSHS.
100. Ann Cunningham used this term in her fundraising efforts to restore Mount Vernon. On Cunningham's campaign, see McInnis, "Most Famous Plantation of All," 86–114.
101. Yablon, *Untimely Ruins*, 44–45. Cruger had access to the Mayan artifacts as a financier of the Stephens–Catherwood expedition to Mexico. When the Cruger property was sold in 1919, the Mayan statuette was sold to the American Museum of Natural History in New York, where it remains today. Descriptions of the island can be found in Herbert J. Spinden, "The Stephens Sculptures from Yucatan," *Natural History* 20 (1920): 381.
102. Robinson, *Ferns in Their Homes and Ours*, 31.
103. Hibbert, *The Fern Garden*, 4, 12, 37.
104. Frederic Church to Joseph Church, October 3, 1867, OSHS.
105. Gerald L. Carr, *Frederic Edwin Church: Catalogue Raisonné of Works of Art at Olana State Historic Site*, vol. 2 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 211–17. The painting was sold to Church's father, then purchased back by the artist decades later, following the death of another sister.
106. Jennifer Van Horn, *Portraits of Resistance: Activating Art During Slavery* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2022), 218–61.
107. Quote from Nelson, *Ruin Nation*, 25.
108. Nelson, 11–29.

Intervention: Germinating

1. Alves quoted on "Maria Thereza Alves, Seeds of Change: New York—A Botany of Colonization Nov 3–Nov 27, 2017," exhibition page, Vera List Center, <https://veralistcenter.org/exhibitions/imaria-thereza-alves-seeds-of-change-new-yorkmdasha-botany-of-colonization/>.
2. Alves's method was adapted for the New York iteration of the project. Because the city's ballast dump sites have been covered over or relocated as fill for other parts of the city, Alves turned to archival documents from the nineteenth century to identify the species of nonnative flora observed to have emerged from ballast dumps. On her process in New York, see Pat Binder and Gerhard Haupt, "Maria Thereza Alves: Machine Désirante & Seeds of Change," *Universes in Universe* (April 2017), <https://universes.art/en/magazine/articles/2017/maria-thereza-alves>.

3. Richard W. Hill, "Borderless Histories: The Botanical Art of Maria Thereza Alves," *Third Text* 32, no. 2/3 (2018): 273–28.
4. Max Andrews, "The Whole Truth," *Frieze*, June 6, 2007, <https://www.frieze.com/article/whole-truth>.
5. Pedro de Llano, "The Return of Quetzalcoatl," in *El largo camino a Xico—The Long Road to Xico: Maria Thereza Alvez, 1991–2015*, ed. Pedro de Llano (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2015), 37; Jean Fisher, "The Importance of Words and Actions," in *Maria Thereza Alves* (Nantes: École supérieure des beaux-arts de Nantes métropole, 2013), 9; and Hill, "Borderless Histories," 274.
6. Susan Fenimore Cooper, *Rural Hours* (1850), quoted in Peter A. Coates, *American Perceptions of Immigrant and Invasive Species: Strangers on the Land* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 72.
7. Alves quoted in Hill, "Borderless Histories," 273.
8. Fisher, "Importance of Words and Actions," 7–15.
9. Maria Theresa Alves, "Cannibalism in Brazil since 1500," in de Llano, *El largo camino a Xico*, 179.
10. Jutila quoted in Maria Theresa Alves, "Seeds of Change, 1999–ongoing," artist website, <http://www.mariatherezaalves.org/works/seeds-of-change>.
11. Harriet Ritvo makes this connection with regard to the etymology of the term *invasive species* in "Invasion/Invasive," *Environmental Humanities* 9, no. 1 (May 2017): 171–72.
12. Vadana Shiva, *Biopiracy: The Plunder of Nature and Knowledge* (Boston: South End Press, 1997), 5.
13. Hill, "Borderless Histories," 273–28.
14. On this connection, see Rahel Aima, "Secret Gardens," *Artforum* 56, no. 10 (Summer 2018): 99–100. On the cultivation of the Judean date palm, see Steven Erlanger, "After 2,000 Years, a Seed from Ancient Judea Sprouts," *New York Times*, June 12, 2005, sec. 1, 3, and Isabel Kershner, "Aided by Modern Ingenuity, a Taste of Ancient Judean Dates," *New York Times*, September 7, 2020, sec. A8.
15. I am grateful to Allegra Davis and Ida Brier at the Olana State Historic Site for sharing this information with me.
16. Lorraine Daston, "Type Specimens and Scientific Memory," *Critical Inquiry* 31, no. 1 (Autumn 2004): 153–82.
17. The title references René Magritte's iconic 1929 modernist painting *The Treachery of Images*, better known as *This Is Not a Pipe*, which concerns the linguistic and philosophical paradoxes of reconciling word, image, and object.
18. Six hundred copies of the dictionary were printed, one for each of the surviving Krenaks. At their request, the dictionary is not disseminated beyond their community. As an artwork, the dictionary has been exhibited, but always in a locked box.

Chapter 2

1. "A Visit to the Studios," *New York Evening Post*, February 16, 1865, 1.
2. David C. Huntington, "Church and Luminism: Light for America's Elect," in *American Light: The Luminist Movement 1850–1875*, ed. John Wilmerding (Washington, DC: National Gallery of Art, 1980), 159. Huntington calls one of Church's Jamaican sunset sketches an aurora, an easy mistake given that both sketches feature strong rays of light extending from the horizon outward. The error is noted in Gerald L. Carr, *Frederic Edwin Church: Catalogue Raisonné of Works of Art at Olana State Historic Site*, vol. 2 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 293.