In 1865, when he arrived in Jamaica to begin the series of sketches that would in time become his monumental painting, *The Vale of St. Thomas*, the celebrated Hudson River painter Frederic Edwin Church had already made a name for himself by painting hugely successful canvases of Latin American landscapes, which included *The Heart of the Andes* (1959) and *Chimborazo* (1864). For Church, painting *The Vale of St. Thomas* did not constitute a new venture — that of painting “the Caribbean” — but rather a continuation of his project of seeking to copy onto canvas the great American landscapes that exemplified the grandeur of the world’s creation. In Church’s eyes, Jamaica was America, part of the virginal territory where one could still feel the awe of the birth of the world. Indeed, when painting *The Vale of St. Thomas, Jamaica*, in the months following the Morant Bay rebellion — the savagely repressed Jamaican peasant revolt of 1865 — Church erased all obvious signs of human presence or habitation (save for a small church perched high in the hills), the better to convey what Alexander von Humboldt had called “the grand and beautiful form[s] of nature.”¹

This intriguing erasure is open to a multiplicity of readings closely tied to the redefinitions of borders and spheres of national and colonial power in the Americas in the period between the U.S. Civil War of 1865 and the Spanish American War of 1898, which consolidated the presence of the United States in the Caribbean and marked the start of the “American century” in Latin America. The brutal repression of the Morant Bay rebellion, the most blatant episode of European colonial mismanagement in the Caribbean in the late 19th century, grabbed headlines around the world as a symbol of the evils of colonial repression and led to charges of murder against Jamaica’s governor, Edward John Eyre. Coming just months after the end of the

war for the emancipation of slaves in the United States – that “devastating cultural event,” as José Martí had called it – it drew the gaze of the triumphant North to a South beyond its borders, a racially hybrid space of proto-nations seeking to define themselves against both a colonial past and a looming empire to its north. Throughout the 19th century, and particularly after 1850, “North American cultural patronizing” of young Latin American republics, as Angela Miller argues, “became increasingly proprietary with developing interest in commercial and trade relations and, among southern slave interests at least, in outright colonization.”

The growing power of the United States, against which Martí so eloquently warned his readers in his 1891 essay “Our America,” had led many to envision one symbiotic America in which the resource and labor-rich undeveloped nations of South America would benefit from the leadership of the modern and democratic United States in the north. The encounter between this increasingly imperialistic North and a resistant South would be full of erasures and recoveries that vied against each other in a complex, tension-ridden power play.

The Vale of St. Thomas is my point of departure for a discussion of forms of representation (of inclusions and erasures) and how they seek to define geographical classifications, national boundaries, and territorial alignments in the period between the U. S. Civil War and the Spanish American War. I am particularly interested here in how, through the nuances of representation of Caribbean landscapes and peoples during this period, we can read the complexities of responses to a rapidly changing political and economic landscape as the United States begins to encroach onto Caribbean territories still precariously controlled by European powers. The multiplicity of gazes through which we come to view the Caribbean during these years reveals how wrought with discord, how laden with significance representation became during this crucial period. Each reflects a view of the Caribbean as a portal to “America,” a vision that could encompass virginal landscapes, exotic peoples, flora, and fauna, and prodigious mineral and agricultural wealth while reflecting the local need to

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'American’ Landscapes and Erasures

concretize borders, to carefully balance extra-territorial alliances, and narrow their definitions of local space so as to foment the development of a national consciousness – in the North as well as the South.

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The Vale of St. Thomas, like its South American counterparts among Frederic Church’s work, drew its initial inspiration from German naturalist and explorer Alexander von Humboldt (1769-1859), whose numerous volumes on South America provided the first comprehensive scientific description of the continent. Church, an eager admirer, retraced Humboldt’s steps through Colombia, Ecuador, and later Mexico. His paintings and oil sketches reveal the accuracy with which he followed the latter’s route, building upon Humboldt’s own sketches and descriptions to create the imposing landscapes through which he sought to convey the natural greatness of the American continent (see Baron).

Church’s travels through South America in 1853 and 1857 were initially proposed by his friend and patron Cyrus Field, the American financier who led the Atlantic Telegraph Company (which successfully laid the first trans-Atlantic cable in 1858) and came at a moment when “his search for nationally representative landscapes had moved . . . to embrace the hemisphere” (Miller 200). Field had encouraged Church’s expedition in part as a search for investment opportunities in South America, signaling the growing interest by American companies in developing economic projects in the new nations to the south. Church’s accomplishment in South America quickly overshadowed Field’s investment agenda, as the exhibit of his canvases “established him as one of the most successful artist-entrepreneurs his country had ever seen.” As crowds flocked to the public exhibitions of his Latin American paintings (the 1859 American and European tour of The Heart of the Andes exhibit being perhaps the most famous among these), critics extolled his having “realized the climax and acme of all that is grandest and most epical in

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4 Howat, John. Frederic Church (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), p. 54. Further references to this work will be given in the body of the text.
his own great twin continent”; he had, they assured the viewing public, created “a pictorial poem upon the immovable mountain-majesty of the great South American Cordilleras” (NYT 21 July 1859). Paintings like The Heart of the Andes seemed to encapsulate for American audiences the allure of tropical landscapes and peoples who were, as St. Lucian poet Derek Walcott described them a century later, """blest with a virginal, unpainted world / with Adam's task of giving things their names . . .",5 a task the United States was quite ready to usurp if given the chance. John Howat argues that “the scientifically precise, outward looking, and meticulously painted canvases of abnormal size Church went on to produce” after his trips to South America “seized the fancy of a people held in uncertainty between the threat of civil upheaval and the perhaps unrealistic hopes for continued national expansiveness” (54). As such, they were linked to the late 19th-century Usonian proto-imperial mission and read by an admiring public as emblems of that aspect of the national project.

Thus by the time he sailed for Jamaica in April of 1865, Church had become known for Humboldt-inspired work like The Heart of the Andes, which “combined carefully studied details from nature in idealized compositions that had a grandeur and seriousness beyond the usual efforts of his contemporaries.”6 Following almost to the letter Humboldt’s advice to produce multiple colored sketches and photographs of sites in order to “reproduce the character of distant regions in more elaborately finished pictures,”7 Church sought to bring “the sensuous, visual qualities of fecund and diverse tropical nature before the eyes of people in the middle latitudes” (Bunkse 23). These paintings, Nancy Stepan has argued, “were Humboldtian in their mix of scientific detail and romantic idealism; they recreated, in painterly terms, Humboldt’s vision of the tropics as a scene of sublime nature, exemplifying the dynamic and creative forces responsible for producing the natural world.”8 I would argue, however, that Church’s

8 Stepan, Nancy Leys. Picturing Tropical Nature (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001), 43. Further references to this work will be given in the body of the text.
Jamaica painting, *The Vale of St. Thomas*, painted against the background of political turmoil like none the painter had encountered in his travels before, shakes the Humboldtian complacency of earlier canvases like *The Heart of the Andes* and *Chimborazo*, engaging the reader in multiple possible readings that problematize the scientific realism that had characterized Church’s paintings to that date. The placid tropics of his earlier canvases become awkward in Jamaica, where intense local resistance to colonial mismanagement warned of the perils of southward expansion for the United States.

Church and his wife arrived in Jamaica on May 1st, 1865, in the steamer *Montezuma*, looking for a change of scene that would aid their recovery from the death of their two young children from diphtheria. “I am about taking Mrs. Church to the mountains of Jamaica for the summer for the change of scene, air, and life,” he wrote to his friend Mr. Field on April 22, “believing that we both will be much benefited by the journey” (Huntington Library). Their depression exacerbated by the assassination of Abraham Lincoln on April 15 (the *Montezuma* brought the first news of the assassination to Jamaica), after a couple of months in a villa near Kingston they settled at Galloway Hill, a property adjacent to Governor Eyre’s famous summer residence, Flamstead, where their host was Mr. Charles Fyffe, a widowed clergyman and “the most hospitable man on the Island” (FC to Austin/OL.1985.63). Fyffe, the Island Curate at the Parish Church at Port Royal, had sold part of his property to Governor Eyre upon his arrival in Jamaica in 1863.

Flamstead features prominently in both the tale of Church’s stay in Jamaica and the events leading to the Morant Bay revolt, although the degree of Church’s acquaintance with Eyre warrants further investigation. There is little doubt that there was interaction between the Churches and the governor, who was famous for the balls and lawn parties he hosted at the property, especially during the summer preceding the October revolt, during which Eyre was accused of neglecting his duties by remaining and entertaining at Flamstead. Church had sketched at the governor’s property on various occasions, producing at least two of the pencil sketches now at the Cooper Hewitt collection at Eyre’s coffee plantation, “Flamstead in Blue Mountains” (1917-4-440) and “Kitchen at Flamstead Cottage” (1917-4-411). Fritz Melbye, the Danish painter who had earlier been a friend and
companion to Camille Pissarro and who had gone on to share studio space with Church in New York, had spent time at the governor’s house during his sojourn with the Churches in Jamaica: “Melby (sic) has been visiting all about,” Church writes, “last he was visiting the governor at Flamstead – a part of Mr. Fyffe’s property” (FC to Austin/OL, 1985.63). That Church, his wife and guests partook of the local entertainment provided by the likes of Fyffe and Eyre is evident from a letter he wrote in 1888 to a friend who had just returned from a disappointing trip to Jamaica: “If you have only been to Mandeville and such places as you can reach on wheels you have seen nothing of the scenery which is really so captivating and imposing among the mountains of the East – and which is only accessible by bridle paths at distances varying from ten to twenty miles from Kingston – formerly there were perched on commanding sites, lovely homes where hospitable hosts entertained royally” (FEC to Osborn, 15 April 1888, my emphasis).

The connection between Church and the infamous Governor Eyre is an intriguing one, insofar as it speaks to Church’s possible degree of awareness of the turmoil surrounding the political situation in Jamaica during those tense months leading to the Morant Bay revolt. Of Eyre’s lack of popularity he would have been cognizant from the press, which did not spare the governor its wrath. The Kingston Morning Journal of June 12, 1865, for example, spoke of how “this fine island is being ruined whilst the Governor sits down at his mountain home, far away from the seat of Government and from the complaints of the colonists, apparently indifferent to all that is passing around him, save, perhaps, the stipend and the warrant that secures him to that stipend – indifferent to the growns (sic) which that stipend and the stipends of certain well pampered officials wring from the hearts of the taxpayers.”

The events leading to the Morant Bay Rebellion – a pivotal moment in Jamaica’s colonial history – can be traced back to unresolved issues stemming from the British Emancipation Act of 1834, which granted freedom to the slave population of the West Indies. Emancipation had left the former slaves mired in poverty, with little capital to purchase land, and unable to meet the high fees

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9 Morning Journal, June 12, 1865: 2.
required to exercise their voting franchise. Elections had been held in 1864, but less than one percent of the black or mixed-race population of nearly half a million people had been eligible to vote. By April of 1865, when Church and his wife sailed for Jamaica, discontent was on the rise, exacerbated by a prolonged drought that had severely impacted the easternmost parishes of the island, particularly that of St. Thomas in the East, whose chief town was Morant Bay. Amid rumors of a plan to restore slavery, the colony’s black and colored leadership sought the help of the Colonial Office, bypassing Governor Eyre, who had lent a deaf ear to their pleas for help. Led by Edward Underhill, Secretary of the Baptist Missionary Society, the leadership and the peasantry appealed to both the Colonial Office and directly to the Queen, seeking help in mitigating the impact of the drought and requesting access to Crown Lands for peasant cultivation and a greater role in the political process. Governor Eyre recommended against the petitions, and when the Queen replied exhorting the peasantry to work harder, her seeming indifference was blamed on his influence.

When Church arrived in Jamaica in May, he found the island in the midst of a worsening political situation. George William Gordon, a colored landowner in St. Thomas in the East and one of the founders of the Native Baptist – who was also a bitter critic of Governor Eyre – had been encouraging the peasantry to air its grievances through every possible means. Protests and manifestations had ensued, with elements of the local press voicing these protests in every issue of their newspapers. The embattled governor fled to his summer estate at Flamstead, in the Parish of St. Thomas in the Vale in the Blue Mountains, a retreat that drew the ire and contempt of Gordon and his followers, chief among them Paul Bogle, one of his deacons in the Native Baptist Church.

On October 7, 1865, just over a month after Church and his wife departed form the island, Bogle led two to three hundred men into Morant Bay to protest the trial and imprisonment of a peasant who had been caught trespassing in a long-abandoned plantation. A second protest on October 11 was met by a small contingent of the colonial militia, which, surrounded and outnumbered, opened fire on the unarmed protesters, killing seven of them. An open riot ensued, during which eighteen white officials and volunteer militiamen were killed. The town of Morant Bay erupted into racial violence.
Government troops sent by Governor Eyre soon entered the town and, although encountering no organized resistance, fired upon the crowd indiscriminately, killing nearly five-hundred peasants and arresting nearly four hundred more (Paul Bogle among them), most of whom were later executed without trial. Hundreds were flogged, including women and children. Gordon himself was arrested and executed, even though he had not been in Morant Bay at the time of the riots and there was no evidence linking him to the events. Governor Eyre’s swift and violent response to the rebellion generated fierce debate in Great Britain and throughout the world, and he was recalled to London in August of 1866 for an investigation that led to several attempts at prosecuting him for murder, none of which led eventually to trial.

Church could not have been unaware of the crisis engulfing Jamaica during his sojourn on the island, as it absorbed local attention. The press was obsessed by the internecine war between Eyre and his critics and local politics were in turmoil. Church was certainly aware of the drought that was at the center of the political tensions and which had for almost two years destroyed crops and brought the peasantry of the eastern parishes to a point of despair. “A great drought still permeates this end of the island,” Church wrote in July to his farm manager, Theodore Cole, “the greater part of Jamaica has had abundant rains and the contrast between the gorgeous verdure of the one and the parched aridity of the other is striking. The line in between, in some places, is very marked – I have stood on dry parched ground and overlooked valleys intensely green and luxuriant” (OL.1981.863). One of his many Jamaica oil sketches (Cooper Hewitt 1917-4-355b) shows a landscape in which the drought line is clearly marked. He seemed also aware of the devastating poverty in which the peasantry lived, although this we know from his companion’s letters rather than his own. His sketches show instances of close observation of peasant life; a handful of them depict Jamaicans in their everyday pursuits (charcoal burners, peasant huts, a young boy, and a man and his little girl walking down a lane).

Church’s gaze, despite his awareness of the conditions faced by the Jamaican peasantry – which he described many years later as “depressing” and “bad enough” – and of the inaction of the colonial authorities, seemed to have been most often focused on the landscape.
The descriptions in his Jamaican letters of the variety of plants and bushes in the countryside surrounding Galloway Hill and above all his multiple sketches of foliage and vegetation, which “created a visual encyclopedia that became a vital reference tool when Church returned to his studio to compose the great easel pictures on which his fame rested,”\(^9\) testify to his almost obsessive attention to nature. He described the environment around Galloway Hill thus:

> We are about 3500 feet above the sea and have imposing views of the sea seen through tremendous gorges of the mountains and over picturesque hills. And we have also superb views of the Blue Mountain peaks from base to summit. The scenery here is grander than in any part of the island I have seen . . . (FEC to Austin OL.1985.63)

While in Jamaica, Church took delight in the many forest walks near the Galloway property. The more than a hundred oil and pencil sketches of plants and foliage he produced during these walks would eventually contribute to several landscape paintings – *The Vale of St. Thomas, Jamaica* (1867), *Jamaica* (1871), *Rainy Season in the Tropics* (1866), and *Morning in the Tropics* (1877). His companions’ pursuits were likewise focused on the natural world – Melbye produced countless pencil sketches of Jamaican mountain and marine landscapes while Mrs. Church grew passionate about a growing collection of rare ferns that she would later display for friends at Olana. One of her husband’s sketches (“Fern Walk, Jamaica”), which depicted her favorite spot in Jamaica, decorated her bedroom until her death.

*The Vale of St. Thomas*, avowedly the most important of the canvases produced as a result of this sojourn in Jamaica, has been read as reflective of Church’s hopes for a resolution of racial and political conflict in the United States at the end of the Civil War. The painting’s depiction of the rising sun breaking through thick storm clouds most certainly lends itself to such a reading. It links the conception of the painting to ideas proposed at the time by the likes of

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the Rev. Henry Ward Beecher, the prominent clergyman and abolitionist, that the war “was an opportunity to lead the country out of darkness and into light.”¹¹ This reading of the painting, in which the darkness and tumult of the storm clouds is identified with slavery – the “defining issue of antebellum religion”¹² – links The Vale of St. Thomas to earlier, Humboldt-inspired work, in which Church sought to imbue the Latin American landscape with the full force of a divine presence. As Elizabeth Kornhauser writes in her analysis of The Vale of St. Thomas, “Church took care in imbuing his tropical landscape with a deeply spiritual meaning” vividly conveyed by his choice of the “moment after a storm, when the landscape glows in a lush, steamy atmosphere.”¹³ “In this landscape,” she adds, “a tiny monastery is placed high on the horizon, overlooking the river, symbolic of divine presence in the tropics.”

![Image of The Vale of St. Thomas by Frederic Church (1867), Wadsworth Atheneum](image)

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An alternative reading could link the painting more closely to the specific circumstances that led to its creation. Thomas Stebbins, in *The Life and Work of Martin Johnson Heade*, quotes a description of Church by one of his companions in Jamaica as in “a frenzy of inspired observing of the life of this near-prehistoric island.”¹⁴ The life observed is that of the island’s abundant flora, since in his numerous preparatory sketches, which feature plants and flowers, studies of the large variety of trees to be found in the region, and of the brilliance of the sunlight, particularly as it struggles to pierce through storm clouds, human figures are scarce. The lack of a prominent human presence in the sketches is not surprising in and of itself. Human figures, although relatively common in Church’s landscape paintings, are not prominent elements in his compositions. In the Latin American landscapes that precede the painting of *The Vale of St. Thomas*, for example, tiny human figures in colorful indigenous garb blend harmoniously into the landscape, underscoring with their insignificance the grand majesty of nature. (See, for example, the human figures bent before a cross on the lower left quadrant of *The Heart of the Andes*.)

In *The Vale of St. Thomas* there are no human figures – human presence is evident only in the tiny church perched atop a hill. The absence gains significance only when we realize that in his Jamaican painting Church was not depicting a composite of tropical landscapes – as he has done earlier in some of his Latin American paintings, chief among them *The Heart of the Andes* – but a specific valley in the mountains of eastern Jamaica that he had come to know at a specific moment in time – a moment in which the island was just about to burst into the world’s consciousness as the site of a violently repressed peasant rebellion. John Howat writes of the specificity of the landscape – which Church’s companion, Robbins, had described as one of “the sweetest & finest views I have yet seen on the island” – thus:

That scene, which Church chose as the subject for *The Vale of St. Thomas, Jamaica*, of 1867, is an enclosed valley in the center of the island. From the valley the Black River flows to join the Cobre River,

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which then empties into Kingston harbor. In Church’s picture, the perspective places the viewer on a high vantage point looking south over the river and the unspoiled jungle (a scene dominated today by a large open-pit bauxite mine and ore-processing plant at the town of Ewarton). (125)

The specific landscape represented in *The Vale of St. Thomas* was at the time of Church’s visit moderately populated and partly cultivated, as panoramic photographs of the valley taken by one of his companion and still in Church’s collection at Olana show (see figure above). It belonged to a Jamaican parish that no longer exists called St. Thomas in the Vale, north of Kingston and to the west of St. Thomas in the East, the actual site of the insurrection. The prints capture the valley in St. Thomas in the Vale as dotted by peasant huts, colonial barracks, small plots planted with crops meant for the local market, and a couple of government buildings – all indicative of the sustained, long-standing, human presence that characterized the peasant, post-slavery economy of Jamaica (See figure below).
V. S. Reid, in his 1949 novel *New Day*, set partly during the Morant Bay revolt, peoples the spaces of Church’s paintings and sketches in all their social, economic, and ideological complexity. “It is the year 1865. June and July and August gone, and no rain comes with October. Brown on our yam-vines, the earth a-crack with dryness, there is no *osnaburg* to make clothing for our backs, four hundred thousand are a-moan. God O! – there are tears all over the land and only the rich laugh deep.”  

The narrator will bring them to life as they make their way to town down the country lanes of the mountains and valleys of Church’s sketches and as they gather after church to watch the militiamen parading around the square: the “*buckra* planters” in their carriages, the town officials, and the narrator’s family with their friends: “After the militiamen have marched off, Father will lead we family a-march behind them, our

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15 Reid, V. S. *New Day* (NY: Alfred A. Knopf, 1949), p. 11. Further references to this work will be given in the body of the text.
friendly families marching with us. Ruthie says we do this because we are better-class families who have no carriages but who can no’ run with street Arabs” (52). The erasure of the likes of them from The Vale of St. Thomas is not surprising, given that Church’s central interest had always been that of “taking inspiration directly from the natural, not cultural, milieu”; rather than perceiving nature “through the colored glasses of anthropocentric preoccupations,” Bunkse has argued, “he was looking at it more or less for its own sake” (28). This assessment of Church’s own specific relationship to the nature he reproduced so realistically has become commonplace, understandably so given Church’s own statements on the subject. “I believe an artist should paint what he sees,” Church had once explained, a claim for his art that the work itself brings into question. As a summary of his artistic philosophy it does not address the multiple erasures that had been characteristic of his paintings thus far, and which he practices once more in the recreation of what he “sees” in Jamaica. His philosophy may have been to faithfully recreate what he saw, but his practice, particularly in The Vale of St. Thomas, points to his gaze moving beyond what he sees, past human presence to the “prehistoric” landscape that predates human occupation. It is a practice that eschews realism in favor of erasure.

Erasures such as the one practiced by Church in The Vale of St. Thomas have been a source of critical examination by post-colonial scholars for more than a decade. What Elizabeth DeLoughrey calls “the imposition of the mystifying terra nullius (empty land) upon indigenous spaces” was first analyzed in relation to Alexander von Humboldt by Mary Louise Pratt in Imperial Eyes (1992), where she speaks of the “erasure of the human” that characterized his wildly successful Views of Nature as contributing to the reinvention of the Caribbean and South America in European and North American in a state of “primal nature . . . in relation to the prospect of transformative intervention from Europe” or later the United States. Humboldt’s

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18 Pratt, Mary Louise. Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation (London: Routledge, 1992), 127. Further references to this work will be given in the body of the text.
“seeing man” (like the pre-Jamaica Church), Pratt argues, is a “self-conscious double of the first European inventors of America” who described the continent as “a primal world of nature, an unclaimed and timeless space occupied by plants and creatures (some of them human), but not organized by societies and economies; a world whose only history was the one about to begin” (126).

In The Vale of St. Thomas, as in Church’s Jamaican sketches, the presence of native flora underscores both the exotic and “prehistoric” elements of the landscape. There is a multiplicity of local plants and trees in the sketches, representing indigenous species such as the genip tree (see Genip Tree in the Mountains, Cooper Hewitt 1917-4-410A), the thatch palm (see Thatch Palm, Jamaica, Cooper Hewitt 1917-4-672A), or the cotton tree (Study of a Cotton Tree, Jamaica (Cooper Hewitt). Rob Nicholson, for example, notes the incorporation into the foreground of The Vale of St. Thomas – on a ridge crest – of tree ferns (Cyathea arborea) that Church had sketched while in Jamaica. Among these indigenous plants there are a number commonly associated with prehistoric environments, such as palms, ferns, bamboo, and bromeliads – all of which can be easily traced to the fossil world and which appeared frequently in Church’s Caribbean and Latin American paintings. Nancy Stepan, in Picturing Tropical Nature, writes of the incorporation of flora perceived as “ancient” in tropical landscape paintings as suggestive of “a vegetative existence belonging to an older, more primitive world than the temperate world of the present – plant analogues, perhaps, of the gigantic dinosaurs that were being reconstructed by paleontologists at the time” (11). Stepan singles out the palm tree, which in The Vale of St. Thomas occupies the right half of the composition and which Humboldt had described as “the most noble of tropical plants,” “the ubiquitous sign of the tropics,” a tree that instantly signaled “less a botanical species than an imaginative submersion in hot places” (19). As Katherine Manthorne has noted, the discovery and exploration of the tropics had led to the coconut palm replacing the date palm in Biblical iconography as emblematic of the Tree of Life.19 Nicholson, in turn,

reads the incorporation of palm trees in *The Vale of St. Thomas* as a reference to the Churches’ loss of their two children. “In the roiling storm of an evening’s shower, two distant palms on the mountain crest reach up into the patch of soft lemon light,” he writes; “Is the work symbolic of Church and his wife on one shore and their two children, who have ‘crossed over,’ on the other?”

Church’s approach to landscape representation in the paintings that precede *The Vale of St. Thomas*, built as it was on Humboldt’s example, seeks to obliterate a history of colonization, slavery, and exploitation. All the elements of Euroimperialism that had been manifestly clear in the panoramic photos of people, architecture, and cultivated plots Church had in his possession – and which attest to what he had actually “seen” in Jamaica – have been erased from the painting in favor of the scientific gaze which was at the center of his popularity as a painter. He was known, after all, as Henry Tuckerman described, for his “vivid and authentic illustrations” of physical geography.

The “authenticity” claimed by art historians and critics for Church’s work, however, is brought into question by new interpretations of the meaning of landscape in environmental and ecocritical theory. In *Landscape and Power*, W. J. T. Mitchell defines landscape “not as an object to be seen or a text to be read, but as a process by which social and subjective identities are formed.” “As a process rather than a passive template,” De Loughrey argues in her reading of Mitchell’s collection of essays, the landscape is not “reducible to anthropocentric representation” but is “constituted and constitutive of human history,” through a process that creates a “particular dialectic between the land and its residents.”

The precise space of post-slavery Jamaica that Church seeks to represent as “pre-historical” is indelibly marked by the history of the island’s

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20 Nicholson, Rob. “A Beautiful Hand: Through His Scientifically Detailed Canvases, Frederic E. Church Transported the Tropics to the Temperate Zone.” *Natural History* (June 2002). [http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m1134/is_5_111/ai_86684503/pg_2](http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m1134/is_5_111/ai_86684503/pg_2)


23 De Loughrey, Elizabeth. “Island Ecologies and Caribbean Literatures”; 299
colonization that is often erased from official accounts. From this perspective, the landscape is history.

Church’s project to represent Jamaica’s “pre-historic” landscape “authentically” is undermined precisely by the very methodology of acute observation and detailed sketching he had developed under Humboldt’s influence. *The Vale of St. Thomas* displays the impact of human habitation as accurately as if Church had painted the huts and farms of its inhabitants in the minutest detail. Of course, the chapel on the hill that many see as a representing Church’s signature already bore the mark of history. In the Jamaican context, however, that history is one of a colonial imposition of Christianity over autochthonous and African-derived beliefs and practices and has a different spiritual significance from the one Church intended. Moreover, the terrain of the valley, as painted by Church, displays the impact of deforestation and the soil depletion that comes from the resulting erosion; its trees are part of the patchy second growth that signals hillsides that have sustained too many ground-provision crops. The sugar cultivation that had led to untold riches for white planters in the valley had left the hillsides open for slave (and later peasant) cultivation, with the result that hillsides throughout the Caribbean had been severely deforested and eroded. The hills on the left half and center of the painting are characteristic of the impact left on the landscape by plantation-era misuse. This is a landscape far removed from the dense tropical forest that covered Jamaica’s mountains at the time of Columbus’ arrival. The scene suggests a process of deteriorating wilderness in which changes in land use have affected the diversity of the flora present. Rather than pristine nature suggesting divinely-created wilderness, the painting captures the changing ecological dynamics of a post-emancipation society. It also captures the impact of the severe drought of 1865 in the river’s water level and the comparative dryness of the vegetation that should have been moist with dew and rain at dawn.
The impact of history on Church’s landscape is seen most clearly through the incorporation into the painting – and the presence in the sketches – of numerous diasporan plant species that are not indigenous to Jamaica but which arrived on the island as transplanted biota together with European colonizers and uprooted slaves. The presence of these diasporan species is deeply rooted in the island’s history of colonialism and the plantation. They underscore the degree of Jamaica’s insertion into the biological exchange system of the British Empire and as such stand for the territory’s history of colonization. The diasporan plants Church incorporates in his painting can be identified most clearly in the scores of sketches he produced while in Jamaica. *Scene in the Blue Mountains* (see above) an oil sketch, displays the denuded mountains in sharp contrast to the greenness of a mango tree laden with fruit on the lower left corner of the painting (Church visited Jamaica at the height of the mango season). The mango, a native of India, was introduced with great success into Jamaica, where its many cultivars have become central to Jamaican cultural life. *Cardamum, June 1865*, an oil with pencil sketch on paperboard, offers another example of the number of diasporan plants that had become naturalized in Jamaica, appearing with local species as continuous with the landscape. Cardamom, a
member of the ginger family, is native to India and Malaysia, where it has been incorporated in local healing traditions. Rob Nicholson, a biologist, had already noted what he called “this tropical collage” that incorporated “exotics from other countries” in *The Heart of the Andes*.24

Not aware of the historical significance of the post-Columbian botanical exchange, Church seems to have accepted all flora encountered in Jamaica as local, thereby unwittingly bringing into his painting the burden of a historical process that denied the “prehistoricity” of the landscape he sought to recreate. Jamaica Kincaid, in her book on gardening, *My Garden (Book)*, speaks of the difficulty in separating indigenous species from imported biota in the Caribbean:

> What did the botanical life of Antigua consist of at the time . . . [Columbus] first saw it? To see a garden in Antigua now will not supply a clue. The bougainvilea . . . is native to tropical South America; the plumbago is from southern Africa; the croton is from Malaysia; the hibiscus from Asia and East Africa; the allamanda is from Brazil; the poinsettia . . . is from Mexico; the bird of paradise is from southern Africa; the Bermuda lily is from Japan; the flamboyant tree is from Madagascar; the casuarina comes from Australia; the Norfolk pine comes from Norfolk Island . . . the tamarind tree is from Africa and Asia. The mango is from Asia. The breadfruit is from [Tahiti]” (Kincaid 1999, 135, qtd by DeLoughrey).25

The painstakingly observed biota of *The Vale of St. Thomas* – betraying as it does the island’s colonial history – is just one of several elements that move Church’s Jamaican painting away from the scientific realism of the idealized landscapes he had mastered under Humboldt’s influence and into a locale-specific realism that, despite its multiple erasures, invites the viewer to place the painting in the context of the personal, political, philosophical, and historical turmoil that frames its creation. It invites the reader, in short, to see the painting as a commentary on specific local and time-sensitive events and circumstances. Work on the painting, completed during the 1866-1867 period, coincided with a period of personal healing for Church

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and his wife, for whom the birth of two children brought renewed hope. Nicholson finds such meaning in his reading of the positioning of palm trees in the composition of the painting. There are at Olana several examples of small canvases whose production coincided with his work on *The Vale of St. Thomas* in which imagery of rising and setting suns is used to refer to his children – the ones he lost and those born immediately upon his return from Jamaica.

Work on the painting also coincided, more problematically, with the scandal of the Eyre affair, during which Church’s amiable, charming host in Jamaica found himself presiding over a massacre that was “one of the ugliest episodes in the history of the British Empire” (“Shame of Empire”). The attempts by the Jamaica Committee to bring Eyre to justice in England – led by the likes of John Stuart Mill, Herbert Spencer, Charles Lyell, and Thomas Henry Huxley – clashed against the passionate defense of the Governor by the Eyre Defense Committee – headed by Thomas Carlyle, Alfred Lord Tennyson, John Ruskin, Charles Dickens, and Charles Kingsley. It was a bitter struggle lasting nearly three years that was to end inconclusively with Eyre neither formally charged nor exonerated. Church’s stance on the scandal is unknown, but he could not have escaped its ramifications, as the story dominated newspaper accounts for a considerable portion of the two years during which he worked on *The Vale of St. Thomas*. The involvement of Charles Darwin in the Eyre affair as one of the most passionate and vocal denouncers of the former Governor would have added considerable interest to Church’s thoughts on Eyre’s travails, particularly given the impact Darwin’s work had had on Church’s approach to nature and landscape painting since 1859.

*The Vale of St. Thomas* could be read, in its local specificities, as reflecting Church’s response to the philosophical crisis unleashed by the publication in 1859 of Charles Darwin’s *The Origin of Species*, with its challenge to Humboldt’s central idea that nature evolved harmoniously in accordance with the rules of a divine will. Church, as a follower of Humboldt and of naturalized American geologist Louis Agassiz, shared with colleagues such as Martin Johnson Heade and George Catlin a “pre-Darwinian worldview” – “a union of science,
religion, nature, and art.” Agassiz, the U.S.’s most revered naturalist, whom Church met in the summer of 1859, was “an eloquent proponent of the Science of Design, the science which revealed the workings of a Supreme Intelligence in the operations of nature.” In the new Darwinian universe, nature had not developed following a harmonious pattern that revealed God’s plan but through competition and struggle, strife and disharmony. As John Davis has argued, “God, the Creator, had been taken out of the landscape, thereby nullifying the significant teleological element of most of Church’s major wilderness scenes.”

If read “locally,” in the light of Church’s experiences in Jamaica, his own close observations of nature, and the inescapable awareness of the political turmoil surrounding him during his stay and spilling into international headlines after his departure, *The Vale of St. Thomas* comes closer to reflecting a Darwinian state of strife and disharmony than any other of Church’s landscapes to that date. The Jamaican canvas, however, is not the only one that could be read thus. Rob Nicholson, in his analysis of *The Heart of the Andes*, alludes to the Darwinian energy behind that painting: “to the biologist, the painting speaks of process, change, diversity, and interconnection. Yet Church apparently never embraces the concept of evolution, remaining loyal to the God of his Yankee forebears.”

The composition of *The Vale of St. Thomas*, with its two distinct and seemingly opposing parts, suggests this notion of competition, process, and struggle as being central to Church’s response to the Jamaican landscape. The painting appears to be divided in two halves – approximately equal in size – as if following the drought line that Church had found so dramatically etched into the landscape in his observations of the mountains and valleys of the Parish of St. Thomas. The movement of the eye, which is directed clearly from left to right, from darkness into light, from shadow into clarity, is also a movement from dryness into greenness, from drought into the river and increased

28 Davis, John. “Frederic Church’s ‘Sacred Geography’”: 84.
29 Nicholson, Rob. “A Beautiful Hand.”
and abundant moisture. The movement of the light from the upper left quadrant (the emerging sun) to the lower center, where it vividly illuminates a patch of dusty ground before swinging upwards towards the palm tree, underscores the glimmer of hope that many critics have read in the painting. The storm that dominates the left side of the painting, bearing potential rain over the despoiled hills, could be read “locally” as the much needed rain that would have brought the Jamaican political crisis to an end. It could also be read, ironically, as foretelling further disaster, since in a landscape as out of balance as the one depicted in the painting the storm could bring catastrophe and death. (In the Caribbean, sudden and torrential rainfall over deforested hills can bring devastating mudslides that are among the deadliest of natural hazards in the region.) The river belongs to the right side of the painting, which depicts the sections of the island spared by the drought, greener and more luxuriantly covered in vegetation, a suitable place for the Tree of Life in a landscaped watered by the River of Life. The movement of the eyes from left to right extends the storm’s impact to the entire landscape, pointing to rain (the storm) as an ambivalent element that could wreak further havoc on the landscape or bring much needed rain, thereby carrying the potential either for destruction or for the reconciliation of the two halves.

In *The Vale of St. Thomas* the divided landscape – a legacy of Thomas Cole’s *The Oxbow* (1836) – is imbued with a political significance absent from most of Church’s earlier canvases. As Cole’s sole pupil, Church had learned the compositional possibilities of polarized landscapes. Cole’s *The Oxbow*, with its landscape divided between a green impenetrable wilderness shrouded in dark clouds to the left of the canvas and the agrarian promise of a verdant valley fed by a broad and calm river to the right, serves as a compositional model for Church’s Jamaican landscape. Much admired and imitated in the mid-19th century, Cole’s painting registered cultural polarities and uncertainties that were central to the definition of national identity at a crucial time in American history. *The Oxbow*, through which Cole sought to produce “a union of the picturesque, the sublime, and the magnificent,” offered a visual paradigm that Church had already used to great advantage in work preceding *The Vale of St. Thomas*.

Church had already created a dramatically divided canvas glowing with political significance in *Cotopaxi* (1862), which set
aside the “organic unity” of his earlier luminous Latin American landscapes to allude to the Civil War “as a struggle of cosmic proportions” (Miller 129). The composition of *Cotopaxi*, with its chasm in the foreground, the violence of the volcano’s eruption in the background, and the sun’s struggle to pierce through thick smoke, has important points of correlation with *The Vale of St. Thomas*. Angela Miller, in her reading of the painting as echoing “the confrontational rhetoric of the early Civil War period,” sees the conflict between the volcano and the sun as resonating with “allusions to the social, moral, and military confrontation of North and South on the stage of the nation” (130, 133). Like *The Vale of St. Thomas*, it incorporates a vision of hope in the vividness of the sun’s presence and the greenness of the surrounding landscape, as if “Church’s vision of the landscape as the ground of contending geological forces” that echoed the violence between men and nature were only part of a passing storm (Miller 133)

The tensions that *The Vale of St. Thomas* incorporates into its composition were evident in the naming of the painting at the time of its first public exhibition in 1870, when it bore the less locale-specific title of *Jamaica*. Its present title, *The Vale of St. Thomas*, bears the burden of the insurrection and subsequent scandal and as such was a divisive referent that could have forced Church into assuming an unwanted public political stance. During previous public exhibitions of his work, such as the wildly successful tour of *The Heart of the Andes*, Church could have safely assumed that his audience had no frame of reference other than the one provided by the landscape on display and the national hopes and aspirations his audience could project onto it. In the case of his Jamaica painting he had no such assurances, as viewers could easily fill in their knowledge of the events surrounding the insurrection and resulting scandal, thereby adding unexpected (and most probably unwelcome) layers of meaning.

Moreover, the links between end of the Civil War (the abolition of slavery in the United States) and the renewal of racial hostilities in post-emancipation Jamaica during his stay on the island suggests a thematic connection between the two events that could have easily found its way into contemporary critical assessments of the painting. These links extend the national racial crisis beyond the United States
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border, problematizing the space of the painting by “peopling” it despite the black peasantry’s erasure from the canvas. Had Church exhibited his painting as *The Vale of St. Thomas* amidst the widespread knowledge of the insurrection that characterized his audience in 1870 he could conceivably had risked opening a dialogue between the painting and the viewer through which meaning could have escaped the painter’s control. Church’s painstakingly orchestrated public showings, in which all the elements of the presentation of his work to the public – lighting, framing, curtains, etc. – were almost obsessively planned and controlled, strove to leave very little margin for such wayward interpretation. Nonetheless, the valley of St. Thomas, as the site of the insurrection, was in 1870 still too historicized for critical distance, and the painting, despite our assumption of its Humboldtian origins, opens itself to a post-Darwinian reading in its embodiment of political strife centered on race. As such, it moves uncomfortably close to U.S. experiences in the Civil War, providing a less-than-hopeful coda to the nation’s recent history.

Race, however, is precisely one of the elements of representation that Church’s erasures would have easily sidestepped, had it not been for the insurrection forcing the ghost of racial strife into his unpopulated canvas. Elizabeth Kornhauser has argued that Church learned in Jamaica that Emancipation had not brought about the end of racial conflict. For Church – accustomed to travel through eastern South America, through countries peopled primarily with indigenous populations working in conditions which, although exploitative, did not resemble racially those of the American South – Jamaica reawakened the specter of racial tensions associated with African slavery. Indeed, for someone as uncompromisingly opposed to slavery as Church had been during the U.S. Civil War, the events of 1865 in Jamaica must have been a painful foreshadowing of the fact that Emancipation in and of itself would not solve the problems of race and class that the institution had introduced into American societies, in the north as well as the south.

Moreover, for many months following the Morant Bay revolt, the debate over Governor Eyre’s culpability in the massacre brought the race question into open and often acrimonious public debate – a debate that found its echo in the United States in the highly publicized voyage to South America by Louis Agassiz and his wife Elizabeth to disprove amidst the nature and indigenous peoples of Brazil the revolutionary ideas Darwin had introduced in *The Origin of Species*. These included a theory of evolution that put into serious question Agassiz’s belief in polygenism, the notion he advocated that races had different origins and were endowed with unequal attributes, and his geographic determinism, which held that different races belonged and were defined by specific climatic zones. From Agassiz’s perspective, “some of the problems that have impeded progress in the Tropics have to do with the races who inhabit the region: an inferior and indolent black race; an inferior white variety, not as energetic and civilized, that suffers the degradation of hybridity; and finally, a primitive and indomitable Indian race that cannot be assimilated into civilization and therefore, inevitably will perish.”

The ideas Darwin introduces in *The Origin of Species* not only contradicted Agassiz’s scientific racism but went beyond to explain events such as the Morant Bay rebellion as the logical outcome of oppression and exploitation. Of what he observed during his travels in Brazil, for example, Darwin would comment that he “never saw any of the diminutive Portuguese with their murderous countenances, without almost wishing for Brazil to follow the example of Haiti; & considering the enormous healthy looking black population, it will be wonderful if at some future day it does not take place.” Church’s encounter with the Caribbean’s racial and cultural hybridity in Jamaica on the eve of the Morant Bay revolt – coming as it does after the crisis provoked by Darwin’s seminal book – causes a concomitant crisis of representation rooted in an awareness of new modes of thought that, battle against them as he may, were gaining currency and

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power throughout the United States, replacing beliefs he had held dear. With *The Vale of St. Thomas* his period of grand South American canvases ended and he would turn his sights to the Middle East, where he would travel in search of the renewal of artistic hope he had failed to find in Jamaica. The path to the American century may have had Humboldtian origins, but its unfolding – as evidenced by the Jamaican revolt and the ways in which it imposes new layers of meaning on Church’s *The Vale of St. Thomas* – would prove to be Darwinian in the extreme. In *The Vale of St. Thomas*, Jamaica (and by definition America), no longer function as the North’s pristine Eden, as the unpopulated unspoiled landscape on which the North can project itself. Despite Church’s attempts at erasure, history – and the Jamaican people in revolt – have imposed themselves on the landscape, reminding us that the path to the American century was to be one of resistance and racial conflict, as North and South worked towards their uneasy entente.

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