

“Let the Islands be populated with Americans”: Mark Twain’s Hawaiian Travel-Burlesque and  
U.S. Imperialism

In his letters commissioned by the *Sacramento Union* in 1866, Mark Twain encouraged Americans and specifically American businessmen to migrate to the Hawaiian Islands. These letters are the first instance of Twain’s travel writing, and they simultaneously advance and criticize the U.S. expansionist practices and ideology of the nineteenth century. Scholarship exploring Mark Twain and U.S. imperialism runs a wide spectrum from an avoidance of the subject to a critical analysis of even his earliest writings. For example, while Malcolm Jones in “Our Mysterious Stranger,” mentions that Twain’s *Following the Equator* is a “jeremiad against colonialism fitfully disguised as a lighthearted travel book,” he fails to make the distinction that it is not just abstract colonialism or European colonialism, but U.S. expansion that Twain criticizes as well. Other times, Twain seems to be reductively known for his humor as entertainment, but not for the complex engagement with national issues that this use of humor often reveals. Conversely, Twain scholars often recognize that his work is anti-imperial, but usually the texts discussed are those later works criticizing the U.S. involvement in the Philippines or Twain’s rejection of European colonialism in Africa. Scholars often point to these obviously anti-imperial texts as the only evidence of Twain’s engagement with the discourse of U.S. imperialism. However, John Carlos Rowe argues that Twain’s anti-imperialist work appears not only in his later travel books, but in the novel *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court*. Rowe claims in *Literary Culture and U.S. Imperialism* (2000), that this novel both explores and critiques nineteenth century American technological and economic expansion that acted as

catalyst for a global expansion. Likewise, Amy Kaplan demonstrates that Twain's work has been both influenced by and engages with U.S. imperialism, but she chooses to focus on the beginning of his career: his letters written about his travels in the Hawaiian Islands. In her article, "Imperial Triangles: Mark Twain's Foreign Affairs" (1997), Kaplan offers a three pronged discussion of Twain's Hawaiian journey. She claims that these letters operate as engaging with imperialist and nationalist ideology linking Twain's personal stake as an author, and also a national stake in expansion to the Hawaiian Islands.

Drawing upon the work of Kaplan and Rowe, I too, intend to explore *Mark Twain's Letters from Hawaii* to suggest that this work engages with imperialism. To do this I will make three arguments: *Letters* is travel writing, specifically travel-burlesque, that simultaneously supports the imperialist use of the foreign space to solve domestic economic issues and critiques this expansionist culture through humor. I will explore *Letters* as travel writing as travel writing engages with imperialist expansion as a genre. For example, Twain utilizes the conventions of travel writing to portray Hawaii as a space of romantic landscapes and exotic natives overflowing with an individual's opportunity for rejuvenation and economic opportunity, and it was a source of rich natural resources and a plentiful labor supply needed to fuel the expansion of the nation determined to rebuild after the Civil War. However, I intend to complicate the discussion of the *Letters* as imperialist travel writing through the use of the term travel-burlesque. This form of humor allows the *Letters* to simultaneously support and undermine U.S. imperialist expansion across the Pacific. Through his employment of travel-burlesque, the use of humor facilitates Twain's suggestion of the universality of humanity and his critique of U.S. culture; however, using a close reading of the text, I argue the use of travel-

burlesque is also the place where imperialist expansion is supported through the idea that domestic national issues can be solved through foreign natural and labor resources. As Kaplan suggests, Hawaii is a space where the recapitulation of the ideology and function of the American slavery system can happen through the native Hawaiians as the new non-white labor force. Furthering her argument, I suggest that the treatment of Hawaii as the new American South leaves out the influx of Chinese immigrants used as an inexpensive labor replacement for African American slaves.

Imperialism can be the use of territorial space as a source of natural resources without a formal inclusion into the nation. Thus, it is useful to discuss American expansion according to Rowe's definition of imperialism: "many of [America's] imperial ventures had more to do with controlling trade routes and markets than with the inherent value of the land that happened to lie along the way" (9). So U.S. imperialism is the desire for foreign space, not to possess the land itself, but to use the foreign resources and labor for economic or technological advancement; it concerns the solution of domestic, national issues and not just territorial expansion. Using Kaplan's discussion of the manner of U.S. imperialism, I also explore the connection of domestic and foreign issues. She suggests, "Imperialism as a political or economic process abroad is inseparable from the social relations and cultural discourses of race, gender, ethnicity, and class at home. The binary opposition of the foreign and the domestic is itself imbued with the rhetoric of gender hierarchies that implicitly elevate the international to a male, public realm, and relegate the national to a female, private sphere" (16). Thus, U.S. expansion is driven by the domestic concerns of the nation.

One way to explore imperialism is through travel writing. Like Twain's other works, there is a debate about which of his travel books engage with imperialism. Twain's bestsellers were his travel books, often outselling his novels by thousands of copies. His first journey outside the continental United States to Hawaii in 1866 was the beginning of his career as a travel writer and also provided material for his famous lectures (Day vi). As Mary Louise Pratt explored in her seminal work *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (1992), the writings of travelers and explorers are closely linked to expansion and imperialism. She argues that European travelers' writing reflects the contact zone which is the "social space where disparate cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination" (4). Although Pratt explores European travel writing, she claims travel books create "domestic subjects" whereby the writers produced the rest of the world to the metropolitan European readership (4). Similarly, Twain's readers were the in the city of Sacramento. I use Pratt's definition of travel writing to argue that *Letters* not only reported the geographic beauty of the islands and the cultural practices of the native Hawaiians, but suggested that U.S. business needs to place their stake in Hawaii as a new place for labor and resources.

As a result of Pratt's work, most scholars agree that Twain's final travel book, *Following the Equator* (1897), criticizes colonialism. For example, Jeffery Alan Melton dedicates a chapter to this discussion in *Mark Twain, Travel Books and Tourism* (2002). Melton argues that this is the work in which Twain engages with and criticizes imperialism in *Following the Equator*. Twain rejects his role of a tourist even while reporting the sights to his readers. Melton argues that Twain's travel writing offers a critique of U.S. culture rather than simply reflecting the

imperialist tourist. Melton also claims that Twain's last travel book was filled with the acknowledgment of the inescapable connection to one's personal travels and an imperialist expansionist national culture: "On the political level, the imperial culture spreads its influence throughout the world; on the personal level for the tourist and travel writer, the act of sightseeing—defining and commodifying place—is also an act of domination, no matter the intention of comprehension of the tourist, since the sights are subordinated to the primary goal of gaining touristic experience" (147). It seems unavoidable that these issues are inherent in the travel writing of what Melton calls the "Tourist Age." Melton makes a compelling argument linking imperialist culture to travel writing, but what he fails to recognize is that the U.S. has practiced imperialist expansionism arguably much earlier during the nineteenth century for the desire for foreign space began in the antebellum period.

Like Melton, I suggest that Twain's travel writing is complicated, but instead of Twain's later books, I propose that his first venture in travel writing, the letters which he was contracted to write for the *Sacramento Union* regarding his visit to the Hawaiian Islands were also his first textual engagement with the idea of the U.S. as empire. Although I suggest that these Hawaiian letters are an example of travel writing, Twain's use of humor complicates this form. I intend to use Franklin Roger's term "travel-burlesque" to explore these letters. In *Mark Twain's Burlesque Patterns* (1967), Rogers suggests that Twain's Letters function as a burlesque of the conventions of travel writing. He argues that he intersperses factual reports and fictional humorous exchanges as a format for the rest of his writing. Although Rogers focuses on the identification of this use of genre, I will use travel-burlesques as a means to explore the connection between U.S. expansion and domestic concerns of the nation. His use of burlesque

causes these letters to move beyond reporting or description for American readers. Much of his humor is self-deprecating or a commentary on American or European culture, even within his description of native Hawaiian culture, especially through his invented traveling companion, Mr. Brown. Ultimately, the humor allows Twain to make an argument for the humanity of the native Hawaiians while it supports imperialism through the encouragement of expansion of U.S. business in the sugar industry.

To explore how U.S. imperialism took the form of the hunt for new business ventures and cheap labor sources, I intend to apply Kaplan's argument in "Manifest Domesticity" (1998): the foreign and the domestic are linked, not only in terms of nations, but also within the ideology of men and women's separate spheres. In thinking of domesticity in these terms she claims, "when we oppose the domestic to the foreign, men and women become national allies against the alien, and the determining division is not gender but racial demarcations of otherness" (582). She argues that instead of dividing the nation into separate gender spheres, it is more useful to discuss the idea of domestic versus foreign. Thus, Hawaii is the foreign space with foreign bodies that becomes a source for U.S. labor. In my analysis, I will closely read to show examples of travel-burlesque; for instance, Twain's humorous recitation of Mrs. Captain Jollopson's use of nautical idioms to describe her day's events, such as going to the market. This domestic scene engages with Kaplan's discussion of domesticity both in terms of household and national concerns. Nevertheless, Twain's treatment of the native Hawaiians is complex; he describes their culture with an emphasis on the universality of their humanity regarding their government and often admires their cuisine and social practices. However, he also supports

the use of the native Hawaiians and Chinese immigrants as a cheap source of labor; thus, this is one of the ways I show Twain to be engaging in the discourse of empire.

Therefore, Twain's Hawaiian travel-burlesque is an example of how writing simultaneously engages and reflects the concerns of the antebellum U.S. These islands seem to function as the new "frontier:" a place of resources that will economically heal the newly scabbed wound of the Civil War. Slavery had been abolished, but according to the *Sacramento Union* report printed in the same year that Twain's *Letters* were published, slaves could be replaced with cheap Chinese labor. Hawaii serves as a model; in 1865, 500 Chinese were contracted to work the sugar plantations (Kuykendall, 180-181). This island nation's population had been devastated by disease, such as leprosy. Because of the diminished population of native Hawaiians, any Chinese children born in Hawaii are forbidden to leave. Hawaii was increasingly under the influence of imperialist nations; the U.S. was in competition with Great Britain to establish an economic foothold in the islands. Therefore, the domestic problem of how to rebuild American economic health has a foreign solution: a new non-white labor force of Chinese and native Hawaiians could be available and as the demand for products made from whales declined, the islands then became a source for products made from sugar cane.

There remains a need to recognize the significance of U.S. imperialism and the impact on our American authors and Mark Twain in particular. I suggest that even as a work criticizes the ideological or cultural dictates of that time period, that work is influenced by those same beliefs and statutes that it seeks to reject. Currently, one of the topics in the media is that the U.S. must be concerned with an ever-growing global economy. However, if one recognizes the expansion of the U.S. in the nineteenth century was driven by the need to provide the nation

with resources and labor, than one must also recognize that the U.S. has always had a global economy for the resources and labor were found outside the continental U.S. Therefore, imperialism should be recognized as the shaping force of a nation that influences culture and literature.



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