In 1572, the Jesuit father José de Acosta arrived at the port city of Lima in the Viceroyalty of Peru. Tasked with traveling inland to meet the viceroy Francisco Álvarez de Toledo—who was on a tour of the colony after the suppression of the Tupac Amaru uprising a few months earlier—Acosta and about a dozen fellow Jesuits crossed the province of Huarochirí, making their way through the Pariacaca mountain range to the east of Lima. Reaching upward of 4,000 feet in altitude, Acosta wrote how, “after all my preparations, when I climbed the Staircases, as they are called, the highest part of the range, almost in an instant I felt such mortal anguish that I thought I would have to throw myself off the mount onto the ground.” He would go on to describe in excruciating detail how for almost 2,000 miles he and his companions suffered from the effects of common altitude sickness. Despite levels of anguish that seemed to push their bodies to the brink of death, the small cadre of travelers would soon feel normal, leading Acosta to conclude that: “the illness of the Indies of which I speak . . . stirs up the inner organs, and, what is even more remarkable, it happens even when there is pleasant sunshine and warmth in the same spot . . . that the harm is due to the quality of air that a person breathes, because it is very keen and sharp, and its cold is not so much perceptible by the senses.
Much the same can be said about the rest of his time in the Americas.

Although he was there to aid in the establishment of new Jesuit colleges, what Acosta encountered in Peru was a world the likes of which no other European chronicler or armchair philosopher had ever before seen. The experience was of such transformative power that the resulting book, his magnum opus the Historia Natural y Moral de las Indias, bolstered Acosta’s prestige across the Spanish Empire as a learned man and commentator of the New World. Yet despite a notable background in humanist philosophy, Acosta’s observations were permeated by a fear of the demonic that cast a shadow over all his empirical judgments. Indeed, much of what he notes about Peru’s Indian inhabitants is concerned with deciphering how the Devil himself, “retired to the most remote places . . . in that other part of the world,” so ably captured the devotion of indigenous peoples, “[subjecting] them to things of no importance, many of which were very vile.”

To that end there are many devils in this book. Chief among them is the challenge posed to political theorists to take seriously the intellectual contributions of early modern Spanish and Spanish American thinkers in their efforts to make sense of nature and other demons at the dawn of modernity. More the result of omission than commission, misleading narratives about Latin America produced by members of the early modern canon still retain a hold over the ways political concepts, debates, and exemplary names of the sixteenth century are defined. As someone highly indebted to that same corpus, I have written this book to broaden its horizons and rethink its political contours. Like countless postcolonial thinkers, I endeavor here to convey how historical domination is not only composed of epic conquests, but is also reproduced (even if inadvertently) via scholarly work. Specifically, the kind of inquiries I document here lie at the very heart of debates between the empirical and theoretical foundations of early modern political thought. That they happened at the other side of the known world, at a time when Europeans were only beginning to contemplate the existence of literally unknown utopian spaces, is a key part of the story.

Using Spain’s politics of natural history in the New World as my central object of analysis, this book argues that the study of nature in the New World was about the cultivation of wonder, more so than merely extractive, utilitarian interests. My aim is to show how the natural historical writings of chroniclers, explorers, and, most notably, missionaries helped to lay out a distinct set of empirical foundations for modern political thought, as these developed in the
New World. Natural history, I maintain, was a contentious field of narrative inquiry, and should be read today as a distinct genre of early modern political thinking.

The question of genre in the history of political thought has served to establish important boundaries around what political theorists do in their craft. As James Farr remarks, genre often serves as “an ideal-type, admitting of exceptions and differences,” that helps narrate the history of ideas as a lineup: “a linked chain of influence and attention . . . bound together as a tradition, engaged in a great dialogue, each later thinker speaking to or about each previous one.” To think of natural history as a genre of political thought, then, is to present for political philosophers the interfaces between politics, science, and faith as they developed in the early Spanish Empire. Natural history here serves as a vital link in demonstrating the empirical texture of moral wonder across the sixteenth century, both in the Americas and Europe.

Although the many implications of the European encounter with America have been increasingly documented, missing still is a closer look at how the natural environments of the New World fed into the broader intellectual transformations taking place across Spanish America. Though these objectives are not unwelcome within the field of Political Theory, there remains some reluctance to rethink the established lineup. The reasons for this, in my view, are sociological and ideological. For one, the academic division of labor under which today’s political theorists are trained has changed dramatically in the last two decades. Indeed, the cultures I take up in this text have garnered greater attention in recent years, particularly as the notions of rationalism, rights, and secularity that today’s political theorists predominantly wrestle with were only being sown in the Old World at the time of its encounter with the New.

The clear-eyed confidence articulated by Francis Bacon, Thomas Hobbes, and John Locke, among others, was allegedly still a few centuries behind in the Americas, where the natural and supernatural coexisted (and arguably still do) along multiple registers. And while the contemporary makeup of interdisciplinary scholarship has made it easier to take up a project that bridges literatures in Colonial Spanish American history, religious studies, and the history of science, with the developing program of the political theory of empire, the influence of a Great Books tradition remains strong. Is this work really political theory? Or is it Latin American Studies? The verdicts seem everywhere and nowhere, particularly as the burden of proof lies in demonstrating that political thinking on the margins of the European metropole can and does take place, positioned such as it is against an established canon. My point is not to
complain (or obfuscate), but rather situate the present text and the challenges raised therein. Vital for me is the question of whether the historical study of political theory can accommodate a broader conception of modernity than what it currently espouses. And if it cannot, at what cost?

Ideologically, there is a more salient issue to unpack. As Quentin Skinner long ago warned, “If we want a history of philosophy written in a genuinely historical spirit, we need to make it one of our principal tasks to situate the texts we study within such intellectual contexts as enable us to make sense of what their authors were doing in writing them.” To tell the story of the revival of natural history during Imperial Spain’s conquest of the New World therefore requires some attention to who its most notable practitioners were. As they happened to be primarily men of the cloth, additional difficulties emerge given their analytic vocabularies and evangelizing motives. More akin to eccentrics than savants, these chroniclers, missionaries, and scientists nonetheless often risked life, limb, and reputation to defend an emerging style of inquiry that was ethnographic and empirical in scope, as much as it was exegetical and demonological in character. Indeed, making sense of their politics demands reconciling how natural landscapes and indigenous people alike possessed unnatural powers and yet were also coveted as subjects of a distant crown.

To think with demons, then, rather than against them, can say much about the way in which the most notable and dynamic explorers of the New World wrestled with their various intellectual commitments. As Stuart Clark has argued, belief in the workings of demons, witches, and other occult, unnatural characters was an essential ingredient of modern intellectual history for nearly 300 years. “In effect,” he writes, “demonology was a composite subject consisting of discussions about the workings of nature, the processes of history, the maintenance of religious purity, and the nature of political authority and order. Inevitably, its authors took up particular intellectual positions in relation to these four major topics of early modern thought. Quite simply, their views . . . depended on concepts and arguments drawn from the scientific, historical, religious, and political debates of their time.” Moreover, accounting for the demonological discourses operating in the New World also addresses the reluctance to think of works by Spanish naturalists as canonical to the history of ideas.

As these thinkers developed a vocabulary to speak about what they saw, both among themselves and among various audiences, so, too, did the concept of New World nature emerge. Though the Americas have always held
a special place in the modern imagination, much of the fantastic world that
was first shared with eager audiences on the European continent remains
alien to many of us today. What did early travelers find that lay beyond their
dreams? How were these fantasies shared as desirable realities? What did
imperial ambition first look like in the face of great moral and environmental
challenges?

My approach in this book is to address that interplay between empire,
faith, and the experience of New World environments, illustrating how dif-
ferent conceptions of nature shaped Imperial Spain’s early efforts to cultivate
a New World civilization. To do so, I focus on works attending to the dis-
tinctive ecological character of the Americas, lending greater attention to
how early naturalist writings shaped the intellectual context of Spain’s New
World Empire, particularly its millenarian ethos. By extension, I also dem-
onstrate how spiritual wonder played a central role in making sense of the
New World’s exotic landscapes and peoples. Tracing the influence of religious
conviction on the study of natural history in the New World, my aim is to
broaden the evidentiary basis for rooting the Scientific Revolution in mat-
ters of faith as much as politics. Moving through two themes only cursorily
engaged in by political theorists—the history of conquest narratives and mis-
sionary nature writing—I seek to unravel a long-denounced, but tenacious,
historiographical prejudice that portrays the Spanish Empire as a largely
marginal feature of modernity.

While political theorists such as Diego von Vacano and Juliet Hooker have
recently sought to engage accounts of the early Spanish Conquest of the New
World in innovative ways, their analyses border on offering a one-dimensional
portrait of Spanish domination’s role in the formation of racial hierarchy and
exclusion. Alternatively, scholars in Imperial Studies, such as Orlando Ben-
tancor and James Fuerst, have turned their attention toward more eclectic ex-
plorations of the continuities and ruptures between Spanish metropole think-
ers and colonial practices. By their accounts, agents of Imperial Spain are
problematic figures, but they are also intimately wrapped up in the creation
of something distinctly new. Hence if political theorists are to gain greater
insight into the logics of domination that inform early modern vocabularies,
they need a more nuanced glimpse of the imperial imagination and its intel-
lectual formation.

In light of these historiographical advances, this is the first work of politi-
cal theory that accounts for New World exploration and evangelization as a
dual science of domination. Rather than portraying imperialism as a project
forged from abroad, I offer instead a more complex genesis of the imperial ideas proffered by the study of nature within the Americas.

Natural history’s deployment led to enduring literary motifs in the representation of New World nature, as well as contentious depictions of a future colonial society. The case of Spanish natural history is thus a critical juncture in the relationship between science and empire: driven by religious wonder, scientific inquiry thrived; yet as the empire grew unwieldy, the normative aspirations of naturalist thought were subsumed to instrumentalist economic growth. Spanish experiences of nature in the early modern period helped shape spiritual visions of the natural world, offered an adaptive discourse for empire, and called for a new map on which the future of civilization could be written. This vital period remains today a disputed space from which to convey the imperial politics of science, particularly as contemporary forms of environmental ethics rediscover indigenous ways of relating to nature that reject romanticism and capitalist cooption.16

No doubt the history of Spain’s “natural encounter” holds valuable lessons for theorists, historians, geographers, and conservationists of nature alike. Indeed, the conditions under which Imperial Spain’s power evolved generated long-enduring themes within Enlightenment thought. Of particular salience was the proposition that humans could reconnect with their natural selves, if only they looked to the indigenous past.17 Today, as greater environmental challenges emerge from the unintended consequences of anthropogenic climate change, a curious revival of that past is developing in popular culture. At stake in media and political narratives alike is a radical, and almost paradoxical, ultimatum for the future of civilization: climate salvation, or a slow decline into self-induced extinction.18

Similarly caught between the extremes of global deliverance or destruction, the story of Imperial Spain’s first century in the New World highlights the moral complexity of domination in the face of cultural and ecological incommensurability. While reliving these early moments may not solve the ongoing climate crisis, the natural histories I engage can give theorists of nature and the public alike a renewed sense of the different ways of thinking that made nature into a source of contemplation. More than this, it is my contention that the urgent times we currently inhabit are in need of stories that serve as springboards both to action and reflection. Long ago, natural history helped launch a cultural wave of discovery and invention, albeit one that was analogous to conquest. Though I do not know the extent to which our present crisis remains linked to those stories, this book shows how their restoration is a timely effort.
Why Natural History?

The last decade has found political theorists profoundly interested in the history of empire again. In a recent review of the field, Jennifer Pitts argues that empire is a pivotal focal point in the genealogy of modern political theory, particularly in tracing the extent to which liberalism has developed alongside British, French, and American imperial legacies. Drawing upon several areas of scholarly salience (for example, the history of political thought, postcolonialism, globalization studies, and international law), Pitts exhorts political theorists to engage with the imperial projects linked to contemporary ills and conflicts, specifically pointing to “the substantial responsibility on the part of the great powers for conditions such as extreme poverty, ecological crisis, civil conflict, and tyranny around the world.”

Yet despite sustained attention to the economic, military, and legal dynamics of imperialism, Pitts neglects to offer a resounding example of historical works engaging the relation between empire and ecology. The closest reference is to Anthony Pagden’s classic work, *The Fall of Natural Man*, a text more interested in the impact of New World anthropologies in European legal thought than on the uses of imperial nature. Reduced to a backdrop for resource extraction, then, Pitts’ account suggests that nature was merely an ancillary concern of empires, second to the larger objectives of territorial sovereignty. While providing an otherwise trailblazing review on the current state of the field, Pitts’ account also acknowledges how important early debates across the Spanish Empire were over the legitimacy of their rule in the Americas. Much of those debates occurred in Spain, however, and said very little about the New World as autochthonous legal spaces with their own voices.

Indeed, even the scholarly treatment of settler colonial logics in the Global South takes more of an interest in matters of legal ownership than what exactly is to be owned. Upon further investigation, it becomes evident that the existing literature on the political theory of empire largely neglects the European encounter with nature as a formative experience, bounded almost overwhelmingly by a fascination with liberalism.

As recent anthologies of the subfield have unequivocally shown, political theory’s present—and arguably its future—is imbricated within the logic of global liberalism. In their introduction to the *Oxford Handbook of Political Theory* (2006), John Dryzek, Bonnie Honig, and Anne Phillips assert the troubling claim: “Liberalism has demonstrated an almost unprecedented capacity for absorbing its competitors, aided by the collapse of its rival, Marxism, but
also by its own virtuosity in reinventing itself and incorporating key elements from opposing traditions.”25 While seemingly omniscient, the editors of the Oxford Handbook also offer a warning: liberalism's ability to absorb its challenges is paralleled by “increasing anxiety about the way Western liberalism illegitimately centers itself,” with even prominent liberals ready to “acknowledge that there are significant traditions of thought beyond those that helped form Western liberalism.” Arguably, the contemporary turn toward empire can be read as symptomatic of this intellectual anxiety.26

What role then, if any, does nature have in the turn to empire? More pointedly, where does natural history itself fit in the history of political thought? From Thucydides to Nietzsche, the meanings that men (and women) have made of their natural environments over time have been central to theories of politics.27 Those conceptions are in turn vital to the kinds of imaginaries that peoples—and empires—deploy to fulfill their own aspirations. Equally important, however, is how might someone else’s environments, for instance, change those ambitions? While previous scholars have attempted to account for what was once termed the “impact” of the New World on the Old, few of their arguments had at their disposal the interdisciplinary registers available today.28 Although a wide scope of inquiries around the concrete matter of nature can be found across modernity, it is the collective experiences of nature in the New World that are vital to the political transformations of the Old World.29

I do not pretend to address all of the mechanisms at work in the intellectual struggle with the wonder and incommensurability of nature in the Americas. In my view, however, many of modern political thought's assumptions about nature and society stem from the early representations of nature in the New World that emerged in the wake of the Spanish Conquests. Spaniards turned to natural history as part of a larger attempt to formalize the experience of wonder and offer typologies for the seeming incommensurability informing their earliest encounters. While visions of nature in the Americas were part of larger shifts in European migration and exploration, the distinct views of nature, wonder, and empirical inquiry held by Spanish naturalists possessed radical implications for modern science and political theory. That missionary orders were among the first to pursue the revival of natural history, adapting their biblical vocabulary to new times, adds an important interpretive horizon.30

This, then, is a story about faith, as much as it is about nature in the first century of Spain’s New World Empire. It aims at nothing less than providing the theoretical scaffolding to study this interplay of forces in light of a greater
historiographical debate within the human sciences, what Jorge Cañizares-Esguerra calls: *writing the history of the New World*.31

In comparing the efforts of Spanish chroniclers, explorers, and missionaries to make sense of New World nature, I demonstrate that the natural histories they forged as part of their various efforts exerted a decisive influence on the intellectual climate of Spain, its colonies, and Europe. They also produced conflicts of interest between the Spanish Crown and its colonial representatives. As a historian of political thought, this juxtaposition helps me theorize Spain's Empire in more varied ways, jettisoning the notion that Spanish rule operated singularly across distinct territories. Going further, my analysis will also substantiate the effects of New World nature on different Spanish imperial imaginaries.

By showing that scientific activity in the New World was linked with a spiritual wonder that theorized the possibilities of a future colonial society, this book challenges established accounts of not only political thought within Imperial Spain, but also the intellectual, cultural, and religious climates of the Americas. Indeed, by reading imperial political thought in Spain as the product of a broader culture of inquiry, rather than a solely continental development, one can paint a richer portrait of imperial formation. Furthermore, I reconstruct a critical period in the New World's modern history: a period of innovation, dispossession, and accommodation, dubbed the Spiritual Conquest: a period in which European thinkers—and the colonized people of the Americas—struggled to resolve the emerging moral and political challenges of their new joint fate. Recognizing that Spanish imperial agents held more critical views of ancient and biblical historiography, as well as more complex appreciations of indigenous cultures, should prompt political theorists today to reconsider the oblivious tropes surrounding Spain and its political significance for modernity.

Yet I am not interested in reviving old debates and grand narratives of the Black or White Legends, nor of freeing Spanish colonizers from moral scrutiny. What I aspire to is to use the interpretive tools available to historians of political thought as a means of clarifying concepts, understanding distinctions, and appreciating the worldviews of these characters. In a few words, again with Skinner, I aim to “so far as possible . . . see things their way.”32 Where I differ from existing accounts of early Colonial Spanish America's place in the history of political thought is two-fold: first, that I read missionary writings as contributing to the emerging Enlightenment spirit being cultivated across European universities in the sixteenth century; and second, that it was men of various religious faiths who would sow the seeds of these new cultures in the New World.
Only by excluding the activities and stories of what historians have dubbed the Hispanic Enlightenment does the narrative of a monolithic Spanish backwardness hold sway, and by extension, the allegedly derivative character of New World intellectual production. This is not to whitewash the violence and bloodshed of Spanish Conquest. Plenty of ink has been spilled over this very question and what little remaining value there is to grand narratives of what Lewis Hanke once called Spain’s “civilizing” justice. Yet if political theorists today engage with the individual actions of Spanish intellectuals in the New World, the sixteenth century garners a rather fascinating mirror through which we can perceive many of our own preconceptions—about nature, to be sure, but also about the boundaries between wonder, politics, and political thinking.

Indeed, Carlos Fuentes long ago captured this sense of historical reflexivity in his celebrated text, *The Buried Mirror*. Writing on the Latin American connections with Europe, he considered how “the Spain that arrived in the New World on the ships of the discoverers and conquerors gave us at least half our being. So it is not surprising that our debate with Spain should have been, and continues to be, so intense. For it is a debate with ourselves.” If, in effect, political theorists still have something to say about Imperial Spain’s legacies on our present thinking—particularly about nature—this study continues the debate.

Finally, I would be remiss to not acknowledge that this is a history of conquerors more so than a history of the conquered. This may raise several dilemmas for scholars in the humanities and social sciences, as well as environmental activists, particularly at the risk of rendering my account into some kind of a hagiography. Yet as Bianca Premo notes, the Spanish Empire is at the core of the most critical intellectual transformations of modernity, with none more important than the very notion of the Enlightenment as an epistemology and historical event:

In what was once called the “Debate of the New World,” creole intellectuals defended the region’s past and their own ability to interpret it, skeptical of the eyewitness accounts of early Spanish chroniclers as well as of newer northern European alternatives that degraded Amerindians and American-born Spaniards. Spanish American historians created a new way of writing history based on their proximity to the New World and their mastery of native sources—in many ways, laying the foundation for our own way of writing history—in a dialectic with the rest of Europe.

I do not intend for these reflections to whitewash the violence of Spain’s imperial past. However, not knowing the stories that conquerors themselves em-
ployed in justifying their violence—physical and intellectual—is also a venture full of risk. As Edward Said noted almost 30 years ago in *Culture and Imperialism*, “The power to narrate, or to block other narratives from forming and emerging, is very important to culture and imperialism, and constitutes one of the main connections between them.”37 Understanding that process of narrative formation underlies my motivations, certainly more so than neglecting the history of Amerindian peoples who suffered—but also contributed in unacknowledged ways to—Spain’s rule for 300 years.38 Any egregious omissions are my own fault.

The book develops across five chapters. In chapter 1, entitled “Narratives of Conquest and the Conquest of Narrative,” I show how literary forms and tropes inherited from the early formation of the Spanish state were central to the conceptualization of American nature by Spanish naturalists. By framing their efforts as an empirical typology of narrative inquiry across distinct works of natural history, I demonstrate the ways different types of stories employed by sixteenth-century naturalists can be traced and reconstructed.

Chapter 2, “Oviedo, Las Casas, and the Difference That Made Nature,” engages classical work in the political theory of empire, focusing on the history of nature writing. My substantive focus in this chapter is on the conflict between the Dominican friar Bartolomé de Las Casas and the official royal chronicler Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo. Las Casas and Oviedo traveled to the New World while emerging from the cultural context of the Spanish Reconquista. In the two historians’ works one finds opposing visions of a utopian American landscape, where nature was not so much the setting, as it was the means through which a modern imperial project could be made possible. Whereas Las Casas is credited for inverting the story of territorial conquest originally deployed by Oviedo, he adapts this genre to the specific interests of an entire generation of missionary scientists: religious assimilation.

Chapter 3, “The Anthropolitics of Bernardino de Sahagún,” homes in on Book XI of the renowned polyvocal text, the *Florentine Codex*, specifically a chapter entitled “Earthly Things.” I argue that Sahagún inherited several narrative elements and themes from early travelers of the Americas, including the conception of colonization as part of a satanic epic. By attempting to dehumanize native peoples and demonize the natural world, the story of conquest in this period is transformed into an account of conflicting moral orders. Yet Sahagún’s journey also demonstrates the extent to which natural historians were indebted to indigenous beliefs and intellectual labor, despite the dangers this proximity would pose to notions of European
supremacy, as the problems of deciphering culture became indistinguishable from the interpretation of faith.

Chapter 4, “The Imperial Renaissance of Francisco Hernández,” paints a portrait of natural history’s fall from prominence as a lost episode in the early modern culture of scientific inquiry. The chapter focuses on reconstructing the contributions of the little-known imperial doctor (protomedico) Francisco Hernández de Toledo. In 1570, Hernández was appointed by King Philip II to lead the first scientific expedition aimed at collecting and cataloguing natural life in the New World. Although a massive wealth of information on the natural environment of New Spain emerged from Hernández’s mission, by 1577 Hernández had lost favor with King Philip II, with much of his work lost to fire and intrigue. Hernández’s story therefore captures the contentious role played by natural history as a handmaiden of empire, as well as source of ideological confrontation during the late Spanish Renaissance.

In chapter 5, “José de Acosta and the Ends of Empire,” I look at the Jesuit historian José de Acosta’s contributions to the theoretical development of natural history, reconstructing the normative goals and literary strategies behind his magnum opus, the Historia Natural y Moral de las Indias. As a philosophical exploration of the natural landscape of the New World, the Historia Natural is fraught with conflicting goals. Although the work’s zealousness has led to its modern-day marginalization, Acosta’s contributions to natural philosophy are central to the development of foundational political thinkers of the seventeenth century. To this end, he remains an indispensable interlocutor in the emergence of early modern political thought.

In the concluding epilogue, “Toward a Natural History of Colonial Domination,” I present the story of Spanish natural history as part of a larger journey of historiographical evolution, asserting how the stuff of nature has, over time, become the stuff of human civilization. This, at least, is how Western scholars have defined the development of the human sciences, where the documentation of collective memory is central to the movement from savagery and barbarism toward the more familiar plains of commercial society. The conclusion reiterates why the return to natural history retains a contemporary moral relevance. In turn, it points toward new directions in studying the relationship of mutual dependency between European power and indigenous American thought.

At the heart of the dynamic exchange that shaped the creation of the New World is the evolution of narrative modes of inquiry central to the political landscape of the Americas, past and present. This, indeed, is the normative
assumption of recent works across the humanities that seek to resist both the slander and misappropriation of Latin America's many voices; it also drives the political immediacy of my own efforts. In closing, then, telling that history of resistance and adaptation to the project of natural history is a necessary task. Invariably, many of the sources I draw inspiration from have already begun that arduous process. My hope is that by telling the story of how would-be conquerors were transformed by the marvels of the New World, we can add another crucial piece in support of that larger struggle for self-expression across the Americas.