Oviedo, Las Casas, and the Difference That Made Nature

The blind man cannot distinguish colors, nor can one who is absent bear witness to these matters like one who sees them.

Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo, General and Natural History of the Indies

All the things that have taken place in the Indies, both since their marvelous discovery and those first years when Spaniards first went out to them to remain for some time, and then in the process thereafter down to these our own days, have been so extraordinary and so in no wise to be believed by any person who did not see them, that they seem to have been clouded and laid silence and oblivion upon all those other deeds, however bold and dauntless they might be, that in centuries past were ever seen and heard in this world.

Bartolomé de Las Casas, An Account, Much Abbreviated, of the Destruction of the Indies

In a recent essay titled “The Difference That Made Spain, The Difference That Spain Made,” William Eamon argues that Enlightenment critics across Europe could all agree on one thing about Spain: it was different. Its disparities ranged from barbarism, sloth, and ignorance to despotism, depravity, and, ultimately, decline. The sources of its degradation all seemed to coalesce around contrasting notions of disease. But as Eamon puts is, “The difference that was Spain had nothing to do . . . with the character of its people or its supposedly degenerative environment, but instead had everything to do with the most obvious fact about its early modern situation: it possessed the largest empire the Western world had ever known . . . the first empire in world history over which the sun never set.” What, then, could Spain add to the
conversations around science, history, and morality that shaped the Enlighten-
ment? In but a few words: the discovery of the New World and, with it, “the
coming together of scholars and craftsmen, the renewed interest in natural
history, the emphasis on collecting, and the development of institutions to
organize empirical knowledge.”

In this chapter, I look closer at the narrative origins of the Spanish culture
of discovery by engaging the links between empire and nature in contempo-
rary political theory. I argue how early natural histories of the New World
provided critical insights on colonization, narratives of civilization, and the
formation of modern empire that illustrate the difference that the experience
of nature makes in the history of political thought. More than this, Spaniards
involved in the craft of natural history created their own conceptions of nature
to frame distinct normative agendas. Across the Spanish encounter with the
New World, nature was not so much the setting, as it was the means through
which modern imperial projects were made possible.

Yet despite sustained attention to the economic, military, and legal dynam-
ics of imperialism, the “imperial turn” in political theory offers no examples
of historical engagement with imperial explorations of natural environments.
Nature, if at all depicted, is presented as a legal or resource problem. In other
instances, nature is a symbolic space used to distinguish the modernizing
process from backwardness or barbarism. Such stark distinctions between
the early- and late-modern past leave the impression that the natural envi-
ronment itself was a secondary concern of great powers such as Spain. Yet as
the case of natural history shows, the discursive difference that the writings
of early-modern Spanish naturalists make is critical for the history of politi-
cal thought.

As I show below, the polemical debates over the boundaries of morality,
society, and the formation of modern empire convey foundational normative
assumptions of early modern political theory. Specifically, I turn to the exem-
plary rivalry between the royal historian Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo and
the renowned Dominican priest, bishop, and fiery “Protector of the Indians,”
Bartolomé de Las Casas. Though the two chroniclers differ in their portrayal
of American nature as a space of diabolical, or Edenic, qualities, they share a
conceit common to Spanish natural history that portrays nature as timeless.

To illustrate these distinct visions, I juxtapose Oviedo’s Sumario de historia
natural de las Indias (Summary of the Natural History of the Indies, published
in 1526) and Las Casas’s famous polemic, Brevísima relación de la destrucción
de las Indias (An Account, Much Abbreviated, of the Destruction of the Indies,
published in 1552) as conflicting models of moral restoration.⁵ Within a space allegedly frozen in time, the two men turned to natural history as a means to communicate the great potential of the New World to Spanish audiences. For Oviedo, the New World presented an opportunity to relive the grand exploits of Spain’s recent past. What Las Casas’s writings reveal, however, is that although the development of European empire is tied to the material transformation of the New World’s natural landscapes, the grounds for that change reflect a series of spiritual and empirical conflicts. The Spanish Empire, then, does not emerge from mere technological or juristic competition between civilizations; it is tied to the nascent cultural crises that weighed heavily on the ways nature shaped human consciousness.

I begin by returning to Jennifer Pitts’s challenge for political theorists to “deal adequately with the imperial features of the current global order, including the substantial responsibility on the part of the great powers” for contemporary political crises.⁶ Striking among the calamities she presents is the challenge of ecological degradation. While Pitts acknowledges that early work on the history of empire began with Spanish debates concerning its imperial legitimacy, subsequent work in the field overlooks the role of nature in these debates.⁷

I go on to map the relation between empire and nature in contemporary work on the history of early Spanish naturalism. While most of this work is situated in the fields of environmental history and the history of science, there is much that political theorists can contribute, particularly in rethinking the role that New World natural experiences played on early European colonialisms.⁸ Turning to these fields broadens Enlightenment metanarratives on the origins of modernity, while carving out a space for firsthand accounts within early modern theories of nature-society interaction.

I close the chapter by reconstructing the polemical rivalry between Oviedo and Las Casas, both of whom are credited for producing the first descriptive systems of New World natural history.⁹ Pivotal for their interpretive frameworks was the experience of American nature as a site of redemptive, paradiesical, and providential design. While such visions of nature seem alien to our time, particularly as the natural world is no longer deemed either sacred or autonomous, Oviedo and Las Casas’s writings offered European audiences firsthand testimonial of the New World’s moral potential. Their participation in the greater debate surrounding the formation of Spain’s New World Empire establishes a distinctive literary trope I call the naturalist epic. As Anthony Pagden has pointed out, such accounts are crucial to re-evaluating
the effects of the “discovery” of America on Enlightenment thought. I would add that a clearer picture of how early modern metanarratives emerged also provides contemporary scholars with a stronger foothold in the polemics of historical writing.

The Imperial Moment in Political Theory

Although contemporary historians of political thought continue to draw inspiration from the past and present experiences of Spanish America, most of that attention has been focused on examinations of ideology, revolution, or radical democracy.\(^\text{10}\) As Jennifer Pitts puts it, when it comes to the question of empire: “Whether the subject is canonical political thinkers’ reflections on conquest, or the theorization of politics in the postcolonial present, much of the most innovative work, with which political scientists should engage far more than they do, takes place outside the confines of the discipline.”\(^\text{11}\) To be sure, this emphasis stems from the field’s own discursive foundations, focusing on how words represent forms of political action.\(^\text{12}\)

Pitts’s own intervention in framing the political theory of empire and imperialism comes at a time when several currents in contemporary theory seek to address the political impasse generated by liberalism’s global dominance and the rediscovery of opposing traditions. Comparative political theory, to give one example, presents itself as a rejoinder to “end of history”–style narratives proclaiming the imperial and intellectual dominance of Western Liberalism over the rest. The resurgence of empire as a field of inquiry not only raises questions about the diffusion of imperial norms and practices, but also about the understated commonalities between political vocabularies found across British and Spanish America.\(^\text{13}\) Having come late to this conversation, political theorists have yet to fully investigate the often-willing complicity of their ranks with imperial governance, as opposed to fields like Anthropology and History. Re-engagement with these disciplines, Pitts warns, is crucial to maintaining political theory’s vibrancy, as the field “has contributed less to the vigorous and significant scholarly conversation on empire than it might have been expected to do.”\(^\text{14}\) Such expectations, she holds, stem from the field’s long-held fascination with the sovereign nation-state.

As traditional definitions of the state bend and break through increased global interdependence, the turn toward empire also emerges against the backdrop of a long hiatus in international history. The drive to explain both economic and cultural differences, made more evident now in light of global capi-
talism’s revolution in communications, has prompted a rethinking of where concepts such as difference, authority, and legitimacy come from. More than this, it has prompted intellectual historians to call into focus the entwined paths of globalization and political thought.\textsuperscript{15}

Yet even more pertinent to political theory has been the revival of imperial history as a central feature of economic, as well as political and cultural, knowledge. Empire is a concept that straddles both national and international history; its primary orientation, however, is global in scope as European-led commerce and conquest have made the world an arguably smaller place. Though there is significant scholarly disagreement over how consolidated (or accurate) such global orders may be, there is an increasing realization that the history of political thought is itself wrapped up in the material dynamics of imperial order.\textsuperscript{16}

Much of the field’s current interest in empire stems from the realization that the links between “extra-European commerce and conquest to the development of European political thought [are] heightened . . . by the active involvement of key political theorists as legislators or as employees or associates of trading companies.”\textsuperscript{17} Political theorists are not only complicit in the expression and defense of an economic or social status quo; they are also guilty of its perpetuation through practices of scholarly legitimation. The implications of such involvement have demanded greater attention to theorists’ historical, linguistic, and imperial contexts:

[A] full understanding of these thinkers’ ideas, as well as the broader traditions to which they contributed, requires attention to imperial and global contexts and concerns. . . . Just as we must understand modern Western constitutional democracy (and international law) as having emerged in an imperial context, so we must understand its exponents in the tradition of political thought, and those of other inherited political forms and concepts, in the same global and imperial context.\textsuperscript{18}

Indeed, a turn to empire not only facilitates greater understanding of the origins and deployments of foundational concepts as the result of exchanges from imperial conquest and commerce, it also clarifies the boundaries and limits of such concepts for our own times. The history of Liberal Imperialism is an important case in point, for example, as historians of political thought have gone to great pains to articulate liberalism’s mutual constitution alongside empire.\textsuperscript{19}
Key assumptions and tropes of liberalism have been rendered questionable in light of their imperial liaisons. Yet despite political theorists having taken up the challenge of rethinking liberalism’s relationship to empire, there is no consensus on whether or not this relationship is as universally negative as critics so often maintain. More specifically, there is a significant degree of ambivalence in current debates within political theory as liberalism’s own complexity has given rise to far more nuanced defenses in its favor.20

Such complexity is highlighted by Pitts as she frames liberalism’s trajectory as “an always changing ideology whose commitments at any given time result from contingent conjunctures of discourses (for instance, of rights or liberty), interests (such as those of merchants in an emerging commercial society), and institutions (for example, the Bank of England, the East India Company).”21 For Pitts, at stake in the interrogation of liberalism is the emergence of questions about the structures of international law and the prevailing liberal order. The continued disenfranchisement of both native and noncitizen individuals in settler colonial societies points to vibrant debates by political theorists on the limits of Western sovereignty, the overcoming of liberal notions of freedom, and the possibility of coexistence within liberal constitutional structures.22 And while this work is important and critical to the development of certain forms of Euro-American imperialism, it neglects an alternate dimension to the unraveling of “imperial universalisms” made popular by Spain and Portugal in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries: the spiritual cultivation of colonial society.

Since Anthony Pagden’s early work almost single-handedly brought the Spanish sixteenth century into the discipline’s imagination, few political theorists have taken up his challenge for a “much-needed re-evaluation” of the period.23 The work of John Pocock may be a singular exception to this as his attempts to reconstruct Edward Gibbon’s The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire aimed at clarifying the literary and political implications of writing imperial histories.24

For Pagden and Pocock, the Scottish Enlightenment theory of civilization would have been unthinkable without the legacies of Spain’s Empire and the debates surrounding descriptions of the New World. Yet today the terrain remains idle as there is little work on empire concerned with the conflicts in cultures of knowledge production in the early modern period, most notably concerning Imperial Spain.25 The problem, then, with political theory’s turn toward empire does not lie in its stance toward excavating the origins of global inequality or domination. Rather, as Stanley Hoffman once argued about the
field of International Relations, the undisclosed anxiety perhaps lies in its being “too close to the fire.”

As historians of political thought increasingly locate the origins of modernity’s vices within the rise to prominence of liberal empires, a large part of the Americas’ past continues to be subsumed into a tale of rational progress and the instrumental transformation of nature. There is no space for wonder in that story. There is certainly little to say, moreover, about a concept of nature stripped of any normative and spiritual power. The fascination over New World nature embodied in Spanish natural history evolved along different discursive axes, contrasting epistemological visions, and political disputes over the proper bases of empirical evidence and moral propriety. This is a story yet to be well told.

In the field of Historical International Relations, for instance, the terrain on which empire, science, and nature have been studied is somewhat less ambivalent. Cultural and social historians have addressed the Spanish Empire’s place within the origins of international law, discourses of civilization, and even the long-revered state of nature. Yet much of this work does not propose a historical re-evaluation of the empire’s trajectories. That is to say, there are attempts to sanitize individuals within the empire that stood out as a result of their resistance to Spanish abuse, or because of their efforts to universalize Spanish rule. Yet historical engagement with how imperial agents perceived and conveyed their missions remains undeveloped.

The dearth in historical analysis is, in part, the product of a contemporary bias among political scientists that takes for granted historical changes in the meaning of the term “empire.” The coordinated expansion of European power that characterized the Scramble for Africa, for example, is a far different project than what Spanish colonizers or British explorers encountered in the Americas. As Edward Keene has suggested, the encounter with the Americas “had such a profound impact on sixteenth-century geography and natural science that it is easy to overestimate the extent to which, in itself, it posed a novel problem for theologians and political theorists. . . . The real impact of the discovery—and, even more importantly, the conquest and colonization—of the Americas was to force this long-standing issue about how to conduct relations with non-Christians into the foreground of theological and political debate.”

The novelty of the New World brought into relief the inadequate extent to which theories of the state and natural law could account for non-Western peoples, as well as vast, unexplored natural landscapes. Many of these short-
comings have given rise across the centuries to greater degrees of specialization in the study of regional, structural, and global modes of governance. It is arguably that heightened degree of specialization that has generated a lack of interest in the trans-Atlantic history of international political thought. Yet as a space of conquest and domination, the Spanish Atlantic was a testing ground for human and nonhuman conceptions of geopolitical power. As I illustrate below, the degree to which the natural world can be governed may not have been a new concern for early modern scholars, but how nature was conceived had a significant effect on how to rule future societies.

Missionary Science and the Wonder of New World Nature

In his 1982 book, *The Fall of Natural Man*, Anthony Pagden tells the story of indigenous peoples’ place in European visions of the Americas. By “natural man” Pagden was not referring to Rousseau’s picture of the noble savage, an ahistorical critic of European morality who in the Enlightenment played the critical function of flipping civil society on its head. Rather, Pagden wanted to focus on the ways indigenous peoples were excluded from the emergent narrative of civilization, often portrayed as beings living “outside” the boundaries of human community. Much of Pagden’s account is a recovery of the ways that the idea of “natural man” was constructed, diffused, and later debunked in scholarly debates across the Iberian world. Yet the crux of Pagden’s story is in the anthropological roots of “natural man” and his emergence as an object of scientific and philosophical inquiry.

Forced to remain at the margins of the sixteenth century’s intellectual horizon, “natural man” was sought for as a fact by virtue of his construction in theory; he was not so much found in nature, as he was described as deficient in nature, allegedly lacking the mental faculties of civilized social beings. For Pagden, however, these normative assumptions only told half the story behind justifications of Spanish imperialism, demanding a wider inquiry into the empirical implications of colonizing the Americas. Turning to the early writings of Spanish chroniclers like Las Casas and the Jesuit José de Acosta, Pagden sought to highlight a “program for comparative ethnology” that, in his mind, offered the necessary framework for interpreting Amerindian history, culture, and conquest in an imperial context. That program is itself rooted in earlier polemics concerned with establishing the political stakes of Spanish rule, as seen in the writings of Oviedo and Las Casas.

Both Oviedo and Las Casas turned to descriptions of nature as part of a
larger attempt to formalize the experience of wonder they faced and offer typologies for the seeming incommensurability informing early Spanish experiences. Neither of the two men saw a systematic narrative as their intended goal, but rather expressed it as a reaction to the limits of the dominant ideology of Scholasticism in making sense of the myriad differences brought to light by Amerindian life.33

Largely based on Aristotelian psychology, Scholastic philosophy was concerned with the order of things within a highly stratified Christian cosmology. The discovery of the New World threatened to destabilize that cosmology, prompting an important set of disputes that would consume the empire’s learned circles. While visions of nature in the Americas were part of larger shifts in Spanish exploration, Oviedo’s and Las Casas’s distinct views of nature, wonder, and empirical inquiry brought forth radical implications for the modern understanding of science and civilization. In this last regard, my efforts build on a growing historiographical concern with the intersection of nature, empire, and nation.34 What is different in my effort is the intention of clarifying how Oviedo and Las Casas linked the natural realm they encountered to the ideological landscape they were inextricably a part of.

No doubt exists that the jarring experience of the New World was itself key for the two men, for as Stephen Greenblatt observes, “the experience of wonder continually reminds us that our grasp of the world is incomplete.”35 Yet incompleteness is more an invitation than it is a sign to stay away, a striking desire shared by the early natural historians as men possessed by the larger objectives of their projects. Describing those intentions is not to assess the “objectivity” of their accounts; rather, as Pagden says, it means clarifying “the context of contemporary epistemological concerns with the operations of what the Jesuit Acosta would later call ‘the machine of the world.’”36

My account of the two men’s works begins with outlining how they engage the writing of the natural landscape of the conquest: What do they say? Where are they situated? To whom do they speak? And why are their audiences relevant? The context of production in which these works emerged shows how each man inherited (and adapted) different aspects of the narrative of conquest for his own purposes. By comparing two of their most renowned works—Oviedo’s Sumario and Las Casas’s Brevisima relación—I lay out the broader framework of narrative description they respectively establish.

Precisely because of their widespread diffusion across the European continent, the highly charged visions of the natural world that both works portray deserve a closer analysis.37 While scholars have singled out the two works as
examples of the broader shift away from a Scholastic worldview, I am more interested in what they have to say about the experience of the Americas’ natural landscape and the writing of history more generally. Las Casas, specifically, plays a transformative role in his reactions against Oviedo, illustrating how, according to Jorge Cañizares-Esguerra, “Iberians have come to represent the antithesis of modernity,” despite their rich portrayal of New World ecologies.38

Experience and Ethnography in Oviedo

Looking at the natural histories of Oviedo and Las Casas marks an important first step in the longer genealogy of the modern empire’s narrative of civilization. According to Tzvetan Todorov, the written text was an important symbol of the experience of discovery, particularly as an expression of eyewitness authority.39 While Todorov is interested in clarifying how textual referents are indicative of the larger dynamics of modernity, contemporary scholars of Spanish historiography have gone on to extend this logic to the experience of rising commercial and administrative classes in fundamentally alien landscapes.40 The Americas were perceived as a laboratory for empirical learning, as much as they were considered a space of salvation, or a site of imperial management. Alongside conquistadors, priests, alchemists, collectors, astrologers, painters, and curious men of letters, Oviedo and Las Casas were among the first chroniclers of the Americas that brought with them old assumptions about natural hierarchies, yet developed a new vocabulary for experiential knowledge.

In spite of his reputation as an ideologue of conquest, Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo y Valdés, known simply as Oviedo, is considered by literary historians as one of the luminaries of the Spanish Golden Age. Trained in the arts, letters, and sciences of Renaissance Italy while growing up in the peripatetic Castilian courts, Oviedo started his literary career as the composer of chivalric epics and dramas. One epic in particular, entitled Don Claribalte, has garnered some attention as the “first novel” of the Americas.41

The story is presented as the translation of a manuscript Oviedo found while traveling in a fictitious kingdom and recounts the romantic misadventures of a young knight-errant who embodied the political aspirations of Imperial Spain. Yet the work also conveyed Oviedo’s first attempts to overcome the challenges of crafting accurate, historical representations. That Don Claribalte was composed during one of Oviedo’s many sojourns in the New World is no biographical accident; nor are the similarities between his hero’s trials and their place in Oviedo’s petitions for an audience with Charles V mere facts of convenience. As Stephanie
Merrim remarks, the novel is “too provocative to simply abandon,” particularly if regarded as “an experiment in varied modes of representation, which with all their flaws and failures themselves constitute rich and telling developments.”

In 1532, Oviedo’s efforts tellingly prevailed, and he was appointed by the Emperor as the official royal chronicler of all matters concerning the flora, fauna, and peoples of the Indies. His administrative role granted him access to myriad documents flowing in from all over the empire, as well as placed him alongside prominent conquerors, missionaries, chroniclers, and other intellectuals; this included taking part in a public dispute with Bartolomé de Las Casas. Indeed, in his role as the empire’s scribe, Oviedo produced what some consider as “the most comprehensive history of the discovery, conquest, and colonization of the Americas from 1492 to 1547 . . . the most authoritative text on the Americas from the first half of the sixteenth century,” a massive book he titled the Historia general y natural de las Indias. Though this work, the first part of which was published in 1535, cemented Oviedo’s status as the leading natural historian of the early modern period, it was preceded by a smaller, more descriptive text that framed much of his later writings.

It was not stylistic innovation or breadth that caught the eye of Oviedo’s audiences. Rather, it was his self-professed “new and gallant style of speaking”—that is, the adoption of the Castilian language as a tool for the building of colonial memory—that gave Oviedo’s work an influential place in the history of New World narratives. The Sumario de la Natural Historia de las Indias, commissioned by Charles V in 1526, is in part a framework for Oviedo’s more ambitious Historia general; however, the work also constitutes what Andrés Prieto calls “a reflection on the problems that arise when the observational and taxonomical conventions used to describe Old World species are imposed upon a new, and hitherto unknown, biological reality.”

In Oviedo’s reading of the New World’s natural landscapes, there is more than just a novel subject matter. Ever since the Reconquista, the intertwining of faith and territorial expansion served as the backdrop of much Spanish exploration, even while the newness of the Americas raised challenges to the historical and religious preconceptions of European colonizers. Oviedo’s work emerged in this interplay of narrative forces as an attempt to bridge factual documentation with the need for an imperial program. In this regard, the writing of history played a prominent political role in making the royal chronicler a kind of master narrator.

What Oviedo offered in his Sumario was a rethinking of the relationship between history and empire through the medium of naturalistic observation.
The strategies Oviedo employed to achieve this transformation were a result of what Pagden calls the “problem of recognition,” whereby the lack of interchangeable categories to make sense of New World novelties led Spanish observers to “classify and describe what they recognized to be unfamiliar in what they saw.” Oviedo had already spent many years in the New World traveling, surveying, and assessing the many uses of natural resources. Though he claims to have written the book from memory, his attention to geographic, navigational, and naturalist detail reflect assiduous training. Through his drawings of fantastic creatures, appeals to his own eyewitness experience, and the melding of both the monstrous and the natural through the construction of memory, Oviedo sought to cultivate a strange canvas for a new kind of audience. Many of the things Oviedo describes within the Sumario—from the iguana to the horseshoe shape of the American continent—reflect the earlier dilemmas of representation Oviedo first encountered in Don Claribalte when he attempted to convincingly describe things and events that seemed unreal.

Throughout the Sumario, where Oviedo lacks the words to describe what he sees, he offers visual sketches that help portray what he is encountering. In one famous example, he describes his perplexed position on the iguana, an animal both terrestrial and aquatic in its behavior, as “uncertain if they are animal or fish, because they go about in the water and in the trees and by land, and they have four feet, and they are larger than rabbits, and they have an alligator’s tail, and the skin is all painted . . . and by the spine they have pointed spikes and sharp teeth and fangs.” The attention to detail aside (see figure 1), Oviedo attempts here to compare the iguana to all kinds of animals familiar to European taxonomies: fish, rabbits, and alligators are all used as examples to convey the various folk-taxonomies that Oviedo was surely familiar with through his training in Renaissance natural history.

Historians have interpreted the equivocal stance on the iguana, and several other examples that Oviedo describes, as expressions of his dissatisfaction with simply transposing those European taxonomical systems to the New World. However, that Oviedo does not know how to place the iguana within a discrete taxonomy (that is, as reptile, mammal, or fish) is not what I find relevant. Rather, what is innovative is his attempt to overcome the limits of naturalistic description by way of what Kathleen Myers calls a “visual epistemology.” As Myers describes it, Oviedo’s illustrations of the New World’s exotic specimens “remind the reader that the author experiences the apprehension of the new and communicates that personal experience and process to the reader so that he may participate in it and understand it.”
Figure 1. Iguana, Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo, *Sumario de la natural historia de las Indias* (Seville, 1535). Courtesy of the John Carter Brown Library, Brown University.
The self-assurance that colors both Oviedo’s style and his approach to the *Sumario*, no matter how seemingly innocuous or incommensurate, is indicative of his vast documentation of the New World’s plant and animal life, but also the vast spirit of inquiry that figures like Oviedo attempted to embody. As Antonello Gerbi describes him, however, Oviedo’s motivations were not just to serve, but to have his works regarded as classics, like the Ancient Greek and Roman natural histories:

[Oviedo’s] attitude to the physical nature of America is what we might expect from an unprejudiced but not ingenuous observer, from a gifted ‘dilettante’ enamored of his material, happy to rediscover nature, not only mentally, in tune with the general movement of the Renaissance, but concretely, in lands hitherto unknown; to be able to emulate Pliny and at the same time render him eternal homage in becoming himself, proudly and enthusiastically, the Pliny of the lands across the ocean.52

Yet it was not Oviedo’s strictly naturalistic descriptions that were polemical among his contemporaries. Rather, it was his approach to representing the New World’s environments and indigenous peoples that raised objections among other communities of scholars documenting the New World’s contents. Throughout many of his later works, Oviedo oscillated back and forth over his role as a historian: was he to merely collect samples of the New World’s many wonders, or was the thing that warranted documentation the very experiences he claimed to have, hold, and narrate for others to enjoy?

Writing to Charles V in the dedicatory preface to the *Sumario*, Oviedo explains how: “The thing that best preserves and sustains the works of nature in the memory of mortals are the histories and books in which they are found written.”53 His initial claim of writing the *Sumario* from memory, given his escape from political events in Panama, therefore served two functions: first, of establishing an experiential basis for natural knowledge, but second, and more specifically, to differentiate the textual authority of Old World ways of knowing from New World ways of living. As Andrés Prieto outlines, there is nothing innocent or modest about that juxtaposition, especially as an objective of colonization:

Written for the benefit of the Empire by an Imperial agent, the *Sumario* changes the location of knowledge from Europe to America by constantly predicking that knowledge on the memory of colonial experience . . . the *Sumario* placed both knowledge and authority not in the Imperial metropolis, but in the Colonial periphery, claiming pre-
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cedence over the works written in Spain by armchair scholars . . . its aim was not to present a collection of already known facts, but instead to present new facts and knowledge about a hitherto unexplored part of the world.\textsuperscript{54}

Such facts were needed to build a historical record from which future readers could retain the memory of conquest and establish a new society. By contrast to Oviedo, the Dominican Fray Bartolomé de Las Casas is famously known as the most vocal defender of Amerindians in the New World. He was also a ferocious critic of Spanish colonial violence, and his legacy on that front is best captured by the official title granted to him as “Protector of the Indians.” From that position, Las Casas endeavored to institute a different kind of colonial project.

Polemics and Possession in Las Casas

Las Casas had been a colonizer of the island of Hispaniola as the son of a Spanish \textit{encomendero} (a work grant title, or official overseer of a cadre of indigenous laborers) and also took part in the “pacification” of the island’s Taino natives. He renounced his territorial holdings upon being ordained a Dominican priest in 1510 and took the Taino massacre as his moral point of departure. Though Las Casas’s work has been the subject of great scholarly and political debate, no doubt exists that he was, in Antonello Gerbi’s famous formulation, “a man possessed by an \textit{idée fixe}”—the inherent moral superiority of the New World’s indigenous peoples.\textsuperscript{55} The dispute between Las Casas and Oviedo therefore rested on more than just historiography or royal influence: it established rival traditions of interpretation concerning indigenous cultures and different responsibilities for the historical interpreter in the face of an alien natural context.

Las Casas’s \textit{Brevísima relación}, a small manifesto and perhaps the most emblematic of his many texts, has been deemed the inaugurator of what is called the Black Legend and is considered one of the most widely translated texts in modern history. And while the \textit{Brevísima relación} is regarded as a vivid denunciation of Spanish atrocities in the Americas, it is less known for its utopian descriptions of the natural landscape of the Americas.\textsuperscript{56} More specifically, the \textit{Brevísima relación} paints a portrait of the Americas that is both fantastic and prophetic, taking stock of the New World’s wonders, as well as outlining a role for the historian in terms of capturing its significance.\textsuperscript{57} Las Casas frames the natural and human landscape of the New World as a kind of untouched Eden.
through which Europeans can rediscover Christian natural right and exercise a new program of civilization. Many of his anecdotes and descriptions of the natural world are coupled with descriptions of the Amerindians in its midst. In his introduction to the text, for example, he describes Terra Firma and its peoples’ celestial character:

Terra Firma, which lies at its nearest point two hundred fifty leagues distant . . . possesses a sea-coast of above ten thousand leagues discovered (and more is discovered everyday), all filled as though the land were a beehive of people. . . . And so it would appear that God did set down upon those lands the entire multitude, or greatest part, of the entire human lineage.

All these universal and infinite peoples a toto genero, God created to be a simple people, altogether without subtlety, malice, or duplicity, excellent in obedience, most loyal to their native lords and to the Christians whom they serve; the most humble, most patient, meekest and most pacific, slowest to take offence and most tranquil in demeanor, least quarrelous, least querulous [sic], most lacking in rancor or hatreds or desire for vengeance of all the peoples of the earth.58

No doubt seems to exist in Las Casas’s mind that whatever conflicts emerged from the encounter, the peoples of the Americas were the least responsible for them. It was simply not in their nature, or that of the landscape, to induce harm or quarrel. The Amerindian lifestyle and behavior contrasted so radically with the Spaniards (who had come to see the natural environment for its monetary and instrumental uses) that Las Casas at times even suggests that Spanish colonizers were unworthy of having discovered the New World at all. Writing on the conquest of Yucatán, he outlines the conquistadors’ ravenous indifference to the healing character of the continent’s verdant lands:

This kingdom of Yucatán was filled with infinite numbers of people, for it is land in great measure healthful and abundant with food and fruits (even more than the land of México) and particularly abounding in honey and wax above any other part of the Indies that has so far been seen. . . . The people of said kingdom were notable among all those of the Indies, both in prudence and policy and in their lack of vices and sins more than others, and very fit and worthy to be brought to the knowledge of the Spaniards’ God, and their land a fit place where there could be made great cities of Spaniards and they might live in them as though in an earthly paradise, were they worthy of it—but they were not, because of their covetousness
and greed and insensibility and great sins, as they have been unworthy of the many other parts that God had shown them in those Indies.\textsuperscript{59}

Las Casas is appealing to several audiences here. First, the \textit{Brevísima relació n} was initially intended and dedicated to Charles V’s son, the prince Philip II, aimed at convincing the monarchy of the violent and irresponsible behavior of Spanish colonizers. Las Casas’s attempt is credited for the passing of the New Laws of 1542 (which led to the formal abolition of native slavery) and the infamous Debate at Valladolid (1550–1551) between Las Casas and the noted jurist Ginés de Sepúlveda. More on Las Casas and Sepúlveda’s debate will be said below, particularly since at the heart of their disagreement lay a crucial difference in their interpretation of human nature and the character of the American environment.

Yet in advocating for the New Laws one can also see Las Casas’s intent in describing the Americas as a fruitful place for the emperor to take tutelage of indigenous peoples, a kind of space of salvation where, as he noted above, “there could be made great cities of Spaniards and they might live in them as though in an earthly paradise.”

While addressing the ramifications of the conquest’s violence on Spanish souls, Las Casas also sought to curry favor to institute his own brand of pacification through conversion. As Santa Arias writes, Las Casas’s rhetoric has a double character to it: “grounded in spatial interrelations where the methods of aggression in one place influenced other spaces as colonialism extended throughout in the hemisphere,” he was able to generate “a polemical debate about the consequences of empire” while at the same time never denouncing the colonizing project.\textsuperscript{60} Though he was schooled in Thomistic natural philosophy, Las Casas’s vision of the Americas is more often framed in terms of his own experience of revelation, rather than his intellectual upbringing.

On this point, both Oviedo and Las Casas share the use of their own experiences as the foundation of a new way to interpret Amerindian practices and the New World’s natural realities. Whereas Oviedo used the medium of eyewitness testimony to confirm Spanish prejudices, Las Casas began to break away from these traditions by emphasizing empirical observation as a vehicle of vindication. What Las Casas maintained over Oviedo was to link the world he encountered with the future, not the past, of the Spanish imperial imagination. What kind of a New World were Spanish colonizers interested in building? More specifically, through his translation of the narrative of conquest into a kind of naturalist epic, Las Casas took what seemed like an alien world and rendered its natural history as the foundation for a future human story.
The Naturalist Epic as New Horizon of Interpretation

In his *Brevísima relación*, Las Casas offers an account of the Americas rife with utopian references to the New World’s “infinite lands” and “universal” peoples, while simultaneously advocating for an anti-imperial agenda against perpetrators he saw as less human than those they attacked. Las Casas, however, also saw colonization as an opportunity for regenerating Spanish moral sensibilities in the wake of the conquest’s violence and the changing material culture of modernity. The power of Las Casas’s account lay in its relational morality: in the context of building an empire, many feared that great violence and evil would eventually contaminate Spaniards themselves.

The perceived cultural, biological, and environmental incommensurability of the Americas, particularly in relation to anything previously experienced in Europe, came to reflect recurring myths of unstable realities. The stories ran a wide gamut: such a land of vast wonders could only be the result of weakened judgment and alienation from God on the part of European settlers; the alleged superiority of the Amerindians as a people “untouched” threatened the basis on which Spain’s Empire had so far been enacted; Spain had been chosen to make sense of the New World, to understand and explain, so as to make sense of its own development; failure to change the terms under which conquest was enacted would alter the trajectory of the empire and create a world upside-down for both colonizer and colonized.

In such a transitional realm of narratives and counternarratives, Pagden tells us, “representation, the creation of mental images through language, could never be an adequate means of making the ‘other’ fully intelligible.” The lack of lived-experience of the place was therefore thought to be the primary source of the Spaniard’s representational dilemma, prompting the need for a radically experiential framework that could accurately account for what the New World contained and signified. For those rooted in the older, Scholastic tradition, the Americas presented a significant interpretive problem: there were no “texts” for interpretation to be found. Las Casas, by focusing on “the primacy of firsthand experience,” became the second major exponent (after Oviedo) of a tradition of writing that saw representation as a “necessary relation between the cognitive status of text and experience.” Facts of experience could themselves be read as texts, making ethnographic exploration itself an expression of authority. The difference with Oviedo’s approach lay in the cosmic moral order at stake, not the mere establishment of colonial memory; the result is a naturalist epic with ambitious spiritual goals and, as I will show in later chapters, dangerous political liaisons.
Las Casas’s “conversion” from colonizer to priest best captures this new way of understanding text and experience constituting the naturalist epic. In 1510, he was denied communion by a group of Dominican friars who arrived in Hispaniola and denounced the atrocities attributed to the encomienda system. Las Casas’s attention was particularly captured by the fiery sermons of Antonio de Montesinos, who dramatized the experience of Spanish injustice through his reading of Ecclesiasticus 34:21–22. For Las Casas, the verses were a text that “made sense of what he had seen, but [also] what his blinded eyes had never allowed him to ‘witness’ for years,” forcing him to reread his earlier acts as part of a larger interpretation of conquest and empire.

Las Casas was prompted to rethink the texts and logic of ancient authorities (particularly Aristotle’s natural philosophy) as a means of advocating for the human status of the Amerindians. Las Casas’s conception of natural law was born out of his immersion into the American experience, a process he deemed necessary to faithfully relate the facts on the ground (that is, provide a relación). The coupling of “natural laws” with “natural texts” offered a new approach to understanding the relationship between analogical interpretations of the New World (such as Oviedo’s) and the moral wonders raised by the study of natural history.

Las Casas’s work is therefore two-fold: he offers a basis for interpretation and engages in a reflection on the historian’s task to “give clarity and certainty for readers of ancient things . . . the principles which have been discovered about the machine of this world.” Yet at work in the Brevísima relación is the same link between a subjective “I” and the physical eye through which documentation must happen. Las Casas, at least initially, suffers from the same epistemology of possession as Oviedo. Experience, particularly through its articulation as a form of authority, was not meant to replace hermeneutics. Rather, experience alone was touted as the appropriate basis of interpretation and only the presence of the historian in the natural landscape of the Americas could establish both textual and moral authority. There was not much room in this vision for those not versed in this new science of interpretation.

Most of the narrative transformation that the Brevísima relación heralds was a dramatic and polemical one, so much so that in order to cleanse his account of ulterior political intent, Las Casas framed his rhetorical flourishes through the caveat of “merely” being an eyewitness. His new vocabulary—one among many precursors to “new philosophies” sprouting across Europe—ran against the vocabulary of conquest employed by the likes of Cortés and Bernal Díaz de Castillo, through which Spanish conquistadors had positioned their actions as if against the “infidels” who had overrun
Christian lands in Europe. It also challenged the way Oviedo established a new canvas for the empire to position itself. Las Casas had sought to bring the colonization of the Americas into accountability by opposing Spain’s lexicon of natural and civilizational hierarchy. Rather than reading the Amerindians as the analogue of Europe’s past—a backward land in need of moral, material, and intellectual development—Las Casas sought to familiarize the Amerindians to Europeans’ modern (that is, temporal) sensibilities. In Las Casas’s mind, the Americas came to represent the prehistory of European modernity, an opportunity for Spaniards to get the project of society right, both for the Amerindian’s sake as well as theirs.

But what then does one make of Las Casas’s approach to natural history? Scholars have long recognized that a central dilemma in Las Casas’s work is his reliance on an authoritative and quasi-solipsistic notion of lived-experience. He offers no other voices than his own; he gives no sense of the temporal connections between indigenous society prior to the encounter, at the time of conquest, or during the emergence of the colony; he even fails to provide an outline from which his kind of inquiry could be re-enacted or reproduced to create the interpretive model (both at the level of writing history and empire) he employs. With Las Casas, one is left wondering how such a biased, personal, and yet systematically diligent vision was able to coexist in a context that was allegedly intolerant of dissent and a scholarly community that was purportedly backward and unscientific.

Not everyone reads Las Casas’s contributions with a positive gloss. For political theorist Diego von Vacano, the friar’s efforts are entirely rhetorical, questioning the Brevísima relación’s basis on any kind of ethnographic inquiry. Nevertheless, von Vacano writes, it is in the Brevísima relación where Las Casas’s “transvaluation of values is most evident . . . where he inverts the subject of the civilized-barbarian dichotomy most clearly.” According to von Vacano, Las Casas is an aesthetician, reading the Amerindians and their place in nature as instances of God’s plan in making the world attractive. Yet Las Casas’s rhetorical style also subverts the meanings of words, using the term “barbarian” to describe Spanish actions, while simultaneously granting the Amerindians a near supernatural capacity to withstand suffering. The text’s exaggeration is meant to prove the Amerindian’s humanity, itself an object of analysis and skepticism at the time.

Cañizares-Esguerra, on the other hand, describes how Las Casas’s defense of the Indians was couched in a description of the Americas as “one of the most salubrious environments on earth . . . that Amerindians were exceptional
human beings . . . that since the natives lived in extremely temperate climates, they therefore had exceptionally good mechanisms of perception and superior intelligence.”71 This position ran against a material context in search of labor to exploit the earth. The Amerindians’ bodies—which Las Casas had described as meek and reflective of a passive nature—were read by Spanish conquerors and encomenderos as phlegmatic and effeminate. In one instance of the Brevísima relación, he describes the “fertile” province of Nicaragua as “a thing of wonder . . . with admirable groves of fruit trees that caused the people to be immense.” The description not only conveys the utopian qualities of this space, but also doubly condemns Spanish violence. In seeking to exploit indigenous bodies, the conquistadors set them further back on the civilization scale, for fleeing the land that been so key to their growth meant returning to nature itself:

[Because] it was a land that is flat and without features, so that the people there could not abscond into the wilderness of forest or up into the mountain, and delightful, so that they were grieved and in anguish to think of leaving it, they thus did suffer terrible persecutions and all that it was possible for them to tolerate of bondage and acts of tyranny at the hands of the Christians (for by their nature they were a most meek and pacific people).72

Again, as with Oviedo, Las Casas does not necessarily disagree with granting nature the power to determine social behavior, although he rejects any notion that their indigenous peoples’ “natural” docility entailed social inferiority. Indeed, he never completely rejected the notion, which would be made popular again in the eighteenth century, that the New World was literally a continent in maturation:

And those sins which are reserved for punishment by God alone, such as a desire for vengeance, or the hatred and rancor that those people might harbor against such capital enemies as the Christians were to them, into these I believe very few Indians ever fell, and they were little more impetuous and hard, by the great experience that I have of them, than children of ten or twelve years old. And I know too, as a sure and infallible truth, that the Indians always waged the most just and defensible war against the Christians, albeit the Christians never waged just war against the Indians, but rather were diabolical and infinitely unjust, and much more so than in that wise than might be held or said about any tyrant in the world at any time before.73
Though admirable, this is no call for an imperial exit. The violence of the New World’s conquest convinced Las Casas of the severe moral duty that God had imposed on Spain—and arguably himself—to paternalistically bring the Amerindians into history and modernity. Nature helped frame his argument by offering a site of wonder that would subvert the authority of the Scholastics and carve a space where natural law met its limits. Such arguments did not go unchallenged within the Royal Court. The Aristotelian humanist, Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda, argued against Las Casas’s conception of natural patronage, advocating instead a model of natural slavery to justify what he considered was a “just war” against Indian infidels. Their Debate at Valladolid—renowned for the eloquence and rhetorical flourish of the two men’s arguments—culminated in a philosophical stalemate over what ultimately constituted the Amerindians’ humanity (or lack thereof). In terms of imperial policy and philosophical impact, the debate shifted the terms under which both the Spanish conceptions of empire and the naturalist conception of knowledge would develop from that point forward.

Debating the Nexus of Nature and Empire

The vision of nature depicted in the works of Oviedo and Las Casas is both holistic and Edenic. Oviedo, seeing in the Americas the opportunity to enact a new story of conquest for Imperial Spain, constructs a vision of the earth as a canvas onto which he can limn the development of a civilized society. Las Casas, while interested in defending the humanity of the Amerindians, creates a portrait of the Americas as a space being fought over by holy and unholy forces alike. In the face of the New World’s wonder, one can assume that part of what shaped the two historians’ minds was the sheer size and lushness of the American landscape.

Between Oviedo and Las Casas, however, the allegedly untouched, undeveloped, and uncivilized world of Amerindians raised among Europeans many arguments and disagreements about the relationship between language, morality, geography, climate, and ultimately, the place of human beings in the world. What I aim to start addressing here is how the description of the natural world began as a source of historical understanding, as well as an invitation to dig deeper into the mystery of the machine of the earth. This is an invitation with significant political ramifications that can greatly contribute to the work being currently done in the political theory of empire and imperialism. As Pitts herself observes, a measured move into other fields such as the history of science and environmental history may be a welcome development:
If all political theory has become cross-disciplinary, this is nowhere more true than in the study of empire. A proper understanding of the phenomenon of empire requires the contributions of social and cultural history and theory; literary criticism; feminist criticism and history; and anthropology.76

According to Scholastic philosophers, what distinguished man from other beasts, and civilized man from barbarism, was his ability to employ his speculative intellect to the fullest. On one side of the New World experience of nature was the absence of cities; on the other, was a coexistence with natural life that (in the European vision of nature) violated the natural hierarchy of beings. Assuming there was a space to tolerate and engage with the existence of indigenous peoples, and that their connection with the natural world was something to be left behind, how was the Amerindian meant to escape nature in the future Spanish Empire? The imperial answer was univocal: by building cities, tilling the land, educating indigenous peoples (pedagogically and spatially) in an environment where their mind could thrive and the Amerindian could become human.

The humanist scholar Francisco de Vitoria, when he entered the end of the debate between Las Casas and Sepúlveda, offered a valuable synthesis of the two men’s positions. Vitoria argued that the only way to recognize humanity within the Amerindians was to situate them alongside the Spaniards as beings in history, subject to the same laws of growth, maturity, decline, and death that characterized Europeans. The habituation of the Amerindian into humanity demanded a systematic transformation that only the empire could offer, but that by no means guaranteed success.

Prior to the material transformation brought about by Spanish colonizers and their new modes of commerce, exploration, and science, Vitoria envisioned religious re-education as the source of new customs and “natures” for Amerindians and Spaniards alike. It was easy, from this premise, for chroniclers like Oviedo to see the Amerindian’s relation to nature as misguided, heretical even, in spite of offering an understanding of harmony that was far less conflictive than what was found in European systems of knowledge. As Las Casas’s case shows, however, Spanish naturalism, as I sought to clarify here, was not the product of mystery and elegance, but rather of wonder, faith, and empire. From my perspective, further exploring this relationship reveals the political stakes in the exclusion of Spanish imperialism’s role in the formation of modernity. While there was the possibility of an escape from nature in the minds of philosophers like Vitoria, and historians such...
as Oviedo, their efforts (alongside Las Casas's) act as reminders that there is no escape from the questions that conquest and dominance over the earth have inaugurated. From their experience, the idea of civilization was yet to be properly understood, and the burden of civilizing nature, or creating the right narrative to cultivate New World nature, remained for Spanish naturalists a dilemma of timeless implications. In the next chapter, I look at one of the most systematic efforts to make sense of the links between nature and the narrative of civilization as approached by Bernardino de Sahagún.