Small and smooth, shiny. It has small, pointed ears, just like a small dog. It is black, like rubber; smooth, slippery, very smooth, long-tailed. And its tail is provided with a hand at the end; just like a human hand is the point of its tail. And its hands are like a raccoon’s hands or like a monkey’s hands. It lives, it is a dweller in watery caverns, in watery depths. And if anyone arrives there at its entrance, or there in the water where it is, it then grabs him there. It is said that it sinks him, it plunges him into the water; it carries him to its home, it introduces him to the depths; so its tail goes holding him, so it goes seizing him.

Bernardino de Sahagún, “The Ahuizotl,” Florentine Codex

In this chapter, I engage with the work and ideas of the Franciscan friar Bernardino de Sahagún, known primarily as a pioneer of cultural anthropology and one of the single most influential ethnographers of the Mexica peoples. Specifically, I argue that Sahagún’s ethnographic work went far beyond cultural observation, developing instead an empirical disposition in the service of spiritual salvation against the New World’s allegedly diabolical character. I show how he developed a linguistic model that allowed him to study Nahua (that is, Aztec) culture, but also made sense of indigenous peoples’ relations to a natural environment allegedly full of deception and danger.

In his pursuit of the meanings of nature, however, Sahagún attempted to dehumanize indigenous cultures while simultaneously naturalizing his own millenarian fears of the demonic and inhuman. What his innovative approach to the study of human society intended was to extirpate evil forces from in-
digienous society by locating the source of moral deviancy within nature itself. His findings, he reasoned, would determine the suitability of some indigenous customs and beliefs over others. This particular style of cultural anthropology thus functions as a kind of political demonology: the sustained study of the human, the natural, and the supernatural as an interpretive framework to govern an unstable, yet promising, polity. Sahagún arrived in the Americas in 1529 as part of what scholars have called the “Spiritual Conquest.” Through his evangelizing efforts in New Spain, he developed an unrivaled catalogue of cultural, religious, linguistic, and social practices in Aztec society that culminated in the renowned Florentine Codex. Concerned with cultivating the proper conditions for conversion, Sahagún developed in this manuscript a series of systematic ethnographies aimed at differentiating between practices that were amenable to the Christian faith and others deemed idolatrous. As part of what he called a “General History of the Things of New Spain,” Sahagún’s work is regarded as a firsthand testimony of the conquest of the Americas. The work is also an early exemplar of the many transformations that Spanish missionaries underwent in the midst of great cultural, linguistic, and institutional paradoxes.

In what follows, I position Sahagún’s framework of scientific and ecclesiastic inquiry within the broader evolution of two trends: the cultures of conquest emerging from the Spanish Reconquista and the imperial revival of natural history. I then focus on the context of production of the Florentine Codex and particularly the paucity of research in the secondary literature on Book XI of the Codex, a volume entitled “Earthly Things.” In the third section of the chapter, I look at the anthropomorphized interactions between Mexica peoples and their natural environments described in Book XI, and how missionaries like Sahagún attempted to interpret indigenous rituals through an anthropological conception of diabolism, or, devil worship. In this anthropopolitical model, what Peter Pels calls the “practical relationship between ethnographer and people described,” indigenous peoples were stripped of agency as victims of satanic influences. In a paradoxical move, however, Sahagún also renders them as having exemplary cultural qualities, particularly their innovative uses of the natural environment that missionaries would need to become familiar with in order to extirpate idolatry.

Cultures of Conquest and Imperial Revival of Natural History

Recovering Sahagún’s story and writings is essential to unpacking the origins of a long-held bias in the Western human sciences against indigenous beliefs.
For instance, Sahagún’s example is crucial to understanding why political theorists today have such a contentious relation to indigenous peoples. In effect, Sahagún’s work and method form part of a contested reconfiguration of Western intellectual historiography, one where the indigenous past can be included within contemporary accounts of cultural domination. The study of nature is a critical juncture in the development of that history. Sahagún’s voice, and especially the muted experiences of his indigenous interlocutors, are misconstrued when depicted as mere curiosities, or, when missionaries like Sahagún are reduced to being fanatical agents of empire.

Indeed, in the intertextual construction of an ethnographic voice, Sahagún is more than an arbiter between indigenous dispossession and recognition. The paradoxes his work conveys are essential to the genre of colonial writing and domination, yet have been less influential in histories of science and political theory. A problem emerges in how the history of political thought in Colonial Spanish America depends on the mediated silence of native informants. Unpacking this impasse is a monumental task that does not begin nor end with Sahagún. Yet his work forms part of a formative moment in the history of political thought that, as the Mexican historian Miguel León-Portilla has noted, “was replete with paradoxes.”

The Florentine Codex is a work of many inconsistencies, due to conflicting descriptions one finds in the Nahuatl- and Spanish-language texts. In particular, Sahagún’s contrasting interpretations of animals, landscapes, and the stories Mexica peoples would tell about them reveal dissonant conclusions regarding his understanding of nature, religion, and the changing geopolitical context of New Spain’s Spiritual Conquest. Juxtaposing his views confirms that narratives of dehumanization and demonization were instrumental to the study of nature in Colonial Spanish America.

Yet when reading Sahagún “with the grain”—through his own evolving experience with the Nahua language—one can see counterintuitive inconsistencies in the allegedly impervious logic of imperial domination that missionaries like him espoused. As Sahagún learns more about the peoples of New Spain, his zeal to condemn them wanes. My account of Sahagún’s natural history of New Spain thus shows that Spanish chroniclers of the New World were involved in a far more normative project than mere material extraction. Indeed, for a brief period of time, statecraft in Colonial America could only be achieved as soulcraft, making the conquest of nature one step in a larger negotiation of spiritual values.

As I have established so far, natural historians played a wide range of roles in the conquest of the New World. The revolutionary implications of the en-
counter with the Americas rested on the need to account for what Europeans found on the new continents. Storytelling in this context helped to naturalize Spain’s imperial mission by taking American nature as a unit of analysis to explain social, political, and economic differences between indigenous peoples and European explorers.  

As the first Spanish conquerors returned to Europe, their accounts of creatures and landscapes outside of existing conceptual and interpretive frameworks enticed settlers, merchants, and missionaries to relive and re-enact the chivalric epics recounted in the *Reconquista*. For one set of actors in the Americas, the narrative of imperial conquest included a monstrous and unpredictable natural world, not just an allegedly uncivilized opponent. In this scheme, the unknown and exotic were used as proof of God’s favored view of the Spaniards as bearers of the Christian faith, as well as Satan’s exile from Heaven into an unpredictable land. For another group, the drives behind conquest demanded reform: more than just a violent appropriation of territory, reconquering the natural world of the Americas demanded the conquest of narrative itself.

Bernardino de Sahagún—in conjunction with other predecessors of modern cultural anthropology, such as Diego Durán and Diego de Landa—saw in the Americas a repository of cultural deviance that needed to be archived and withdrawn from circulation, so that proper cultivation of Catholic values could take place. Sahagún saw in the land and peoples of the Americas a world split in two: one a source of order and the other a site of fear. His preconceptions mirrored a longstanding belief in the bifurcation of time and history into a secular, worldly realm, and another heavenly, universal space. Many naturalists initially employed the classical frameworks of Aristotle and Pliny to explain the nature of the New World. The sheer novelty of these spaces made the stretching and challenging of ancient sources pragmatically necessary, yet also politically controversial.

Myriad collections of flora and fauna—along with the tapestry of words used to describe them—testified that the New World, and indigenous peoples’ knowledge of it, were truly advanced. These vast landscapes, however, provided ample opportunities for indigenous peoples to behave in allegedly devious and idolatrous ways. Early explorers had emphasized the superstitious reading of signs and lack of literary scripts as markers of the slow mental and technological development of Amerindian peoples. However, the first waves of missionaries to the New World encountered many similarities with Christian custom and ritual that challenged these readings. Their discoveries
generated great doubts over the reliability of earlier writings on American nature. Sahagún’s own arrival in the New World coincided with a second wave of religious (and naturalist) inquiry. The men who came to conquer the environments and souls of the New World were trained not just to interpret native languages and customs, but also to find in the American landscape the source of great dangers.

In this endeavor Sahagún represents an intellectual conundrum. Historians have described Sahagún as “a declared enemy of the hybridization of cultures,” as well as a “mature and seasoned Franciscan . . . concerned with shaping the knowledge of a tradition to which he did not belong and had to deal with conflict between his own ethnic tradition and the one he was trying to understand.”13 Most commentators, however, have largely overlooked how central the study of nature was to Sahagún’s project and the political implications surrounding his observations. Even fewer political theorists have studied how his naturalistic observations contributed to the development of Spain’s imperial project.

I hone in on Book XI of the Florentine Codex to offer a more empirically grounded portrait of Sahagún’s depictions of indigenous customs and their uses of New World nature. Book XI is a focal point for these observations, revealing a far more ambivalent relation to indigenous peoples than generally seen among Spanish missionaries. As Laura Ammon has noted, one of the dominant hypotheses held by missionaries in New Spain was “an Augustinian understanding of the world,” where humanity was defined along two sets of characteristics: first, as belonging to a world where, “God left traces of himself in nature and could therefore be known, at least nascently, by all living things”; and second, as was argued about Amerindian peoples, as exhibiting qualities that “were not rational, meaning . . . [they] were equivalent to beasts of burden and did not possess a soul.”14 That second conception rendered indigenous societies especially susceptible to the demonic. In this way the holy, mundane, and inhuman all come together to inform Sahagún’s broader project. Moreover, his linguistic interpretation of the cultural, medicinal, and naturalist rituals found in Book XI renders the nature of the New World into a living artifact without equal in Old World taxonomies—a veritable “Forest, Garden and Orchard of the Mexican Language.”15

Scholars have paid little attention to Book XI of the Codex, despite that it is both the largest and most illustrated of the work’s twelve volumes. In part, this is a result of the relative obscurity under which the best-preserved copy of the Florentine Codex was kept, under the auspices of the Medici-sponsored
Laurentian Library. Secondly, however, that obscurity is also a testament to the Codex’s labyrinthine history as a subject of royal controversy in the late sixteenth century. The larger story of the Florentine Codex’s trajectory goes beyond the scope of the present text. Censured by the Council of the Indies for its potential vindication of indigenous beliefs, Sahagún’s Codex was also the source of great debate within the Franciscan Order concerning their theological disposition. In Book XI of the Codex, Sahagún documents Aztec accounts of flora, fauna, insects, landscapes, and the religious uses around them. The narrative offers clues as to how the study of indigenous customs, religion, and politics demanded a more nuanced, adaptive, and flexible strategy for Spanish control. Especially critical in Sahagún’s observations was the unique cosmological relationship to nature that Aztec peoples had and, in effect, conveyed through their language and social values.

The text of Book XI follows a bilingual format of Nahuatl- and Spanish-language columns, developed throughout the Codex by Sahagún and his conscripted indigenous interpreters to lay out the linguistic and cultural bases of Nahua society (see figure 2). The strategy also allowed Sahagún the space to offer interpretive commentary. Sahagún develops here a natural history of the Valley of Mexico, employing Aztec knowledge developed before the arrival of Spanish conquerors. Much like his efforts to compare and reconcile Aztec rituals with core Christian practices in other books of the Codex, Sahagún’s natural history blended Aztec methods of collection with the growing emphasis on experiential, evidentiary standards found in Spanish naturalism more broadly.

As I will illustrate below, however, Sahagún’s documentation of his encounters with New World nature and indigenous religious practices reveal several conceptual paradoxes about his method. Indeed, Book XI is arguably the most complex of the Florentine Codex, as it positions Sahagún the furthest away from what his stated objectives and anthropological sensibilities claim to pursue, but also makes him one of the leading lights of early modern scientific and political thought.

Pursuing Sahagún: The Spiritual Conquest and the Devil in the New World

The first Franciscan missionaries arrived in Colonial America in 1524 under the banner of the “Twelve Apostles of New Spain.” Their initial efforts in the region ranged from establishing Nahuatl instruction for all missionaries, to
dividing the Mexican territory into administrative provinces. Their immersion into Mexica culture also set the stage for the order’s long history of spiritual and institutional influence. In his celebrated text, *The Spiritual Conquest of Mexico*, Robert Ricard documents the ethnographic and organizational challenges that mendicant orders faced in developing religious missions in post-conquest Mexico. Highlighting the extent of linguistic training that Franciscan missionaries needed in order to properly preach the Gospel and fulfill the rites of conversion, Ricard writes of an enduring tension between theory and practice from one generation to the next. “The missionaries of Mexico” he writes, “were aware that they could be led into dangerous compromises, especially at the beginning, when their knowledge of the country and its religion was still scanty; that they might breed confusions and erroneous notions in the spirits of the natives.”17 Drawing on training manuals and letters written by early missionary leaders, Ricard shows how the demands of mission life led to compromises in the ways Christian rites were interpreted and integrated into indigenous society.

The practical consequences of this initial uncertainty might have tempted overzealous missionaries “more or less consciously to sacrifice the integrity of the dogma to their desire to swell the number of their neophytes.”18 Key in this milieu is the legacy of Sahagún, who spent most of his efforts in New Spain working against religious compromise, while crafting a history of the post-conquest landscape for future missionaries and the Nahua themselves.19 Sahagún and others learned early on that Christianity had to be explained in terms that were familiar to Aztec culture and language. His willingness to experiment with heterodox forms of representation made Sahagún an exemplary figure of the immersion that was necessary to understand indigenous lifestyles and belief systems.20 Yet Sahagún’s example is also representative of the costs of that immersion.

Among the various obstacles faced by Franciscan missionaries, the figure of the Devil was perhaps the most prominent. Particularly important for early missionaries was tracing how representations of the Devil played an active role in shaping both indigenous attitudes toward Christianity and missionary perceptions of pre-Columbian religions. As Fernando Cervantes has argued, conceptions of idolatry and diabolism in the relations between missionaries and indigenous people were highly contested. The spectrum of equivocal indigenous practices that resembled Christian rites prompted great worry for the future of the Church. The prospects of a diabolical presence in the Americas—the root source of idolatry in the New World—demanded a resilient response
from evangelizers to identify, single out, and eradicate erroneous interpretations of God’s traces in the world. As Cervantes explains:

The crumbling optimism of the second decade of Franciscan evangelization was a reflection of the growing conviction among the missionaries that Satanic intervention was at the heart of Indian cultures. It had become clear to the friars that the deities of the Indians were not merely false idols but, in the words of Fray Bernardino de Sahagún, “lying and deceitful devils,” whom he was careful to represent as such.21

It was imperative for missionaries like Sahagún to remove the presence of the Devil from indigenous appropriation of Christian rites. Many practices—from ritualistic ceremonies and baptisms, to sacrificial offerings—retained an alarming similarity to earlier idolatrous customs. Their recurrence took up significant energy from missionaries such as Sahagún, who attempted to evangelize native cultures much in the way a doctor would operate. The success of prescription, Sahagún maintained, depended on a broad set of lived-experiences encompassing both missionary and native, for the “physician cannot accurately prescribe remedies to his patient if he does not first know the humors and the causes from which the sickness proceeds . . . preachers and confessors are the physicians of the soul, and in order to cure certain spiritual sicknesses, they must know these remedies and these sicknesses.”22 The physician’s goals, in this sense, mirrored a process of moral rehabilitation.

Indigenous appropriation of diabolical imagery often acted as a means of preserving their cultural autonomy from the conquering Spaniards. Cervantes writes that one of the major paradoxes in the assumption that indigenous societies were merely passive recipients to religious indoctrination was the alien character of concepts such as “the good” or “divine”: “In contrast with the typically Western conception of evil,” he writes, “Mesoamerican notions of evil and the demonic were inextricably intertwined with the notions of good and the divine. Evil and the demonic were in fact intrinsic to the divinity itself.”23 The broad spectrum of cosmological beliefs found in the New World made any empirical or spiritual interpretation of indigenous uses of nature a mutually inclusive matter, rather than part of separate endeavors. Much of Cervantes’s book focuses on the subtleties of Christian theology and their evolution through immersed experiences with indigenous cultures. Yet a key finding of his contribution is to locate the meaning of diabolism for missionaries within early modern debates over the links between the natural and supernatural, not merely in the presumed piety of their project.
Laura Ammon and Pete Sigal have wrestled with this alleged division between nature and the divine in Sahagún by paying attention to his context of production. Ammon points to the importance that classical works such as Pliny’s *Historia Naturalis* and the apocryphal Gospel of Nicodemus had in missionary comparisons of indigenous culture. “In their use of a comparative method to understand indigenous religion,” Ammon tell us, “[missionaries] engaged in two levels of comparison. The first level involved placing indigenous practices against their knowledge of the world of the Greeks and Romans. . . . The second level of comparison . . . was a much more straightforward Christian approach: the use of biblical texts to look for evidence of God’s presence in the New World.”

Similarly, Sigal has convincingly argued that greater attention to the cultural context of production behind texts such as the *Florentine Codex* reveals the great political imbalances at work in the narration (and translation) of indigenous belief systems. Specfically, he refers to the *Florentine Codex* as an exemplary “post-conquest” text, “[containing] voices mediated by a wide variety of influences, which often act as filters to make the voices heard in a framework that makes sense to the colonizing authorities.”

As Sigal goes on to argue, Sahagún’s exposition of indigenous beliefs and practices is a pluralistic one, yet given what his role as evangelizer entailed, it is also paradoxical:

Sahagún’s own filters came into play in organizing and translating the work as well as in preparing the questions. In the cases of the myths, gods, and traditional religious rituals, Sahagún made it clear in the prologues to the various books that his only goal was to destroy these practices. However, others have emphasized what the tone of the *Florentine Codex* makes clear: the Nahua intrigued Sahagún to such an extent that he began to identify closely with them, if not with all of their ceremonies.

It is in those ethnographic passages where a presumed toleration of indigenous beliefs occurs that some of Sahagún’s most valuable observations can be located. Specifically, and as I show below, one of Sahagún’s least-studied filters was his millenarian belief in the coming end of the world and the great danger that the Devil posed in accelerating this cataclysm. That conviction seems muted right at the moment when Sahagún’s catalogue of natural beings, landscapes, and rituals depicts the larger cosmological encounter between Nahua and Christian spiritual worldviews.
Anthropology as Demonology: The Spiritual Geopolitics of American Nature

As noted above, the concept of diabolism was inextricably linked to the Franciscan evangelizing enterprise. Sahagún’s treatment of diabolism is two-pronged: first, he focuses on the interaction of indigenous words and the natural environment to reveal particularly nuanced instances of idolatry; and second, his appreciation of that nuance reveals his own intellectual tolerance regarding the blurred lines between spiritual and naturalist ritual. Specifically, Sahagún sees in the indigenous connection with language an important anthropological marker that illustrated norms of religious custom, ritual spaces, and theological belief. However, it is in this linguistic model of studying New World nature that anthropology becomes for Sahagún an exercise in demonology, not as a spiritual apologetic, but as an empirical science of man employed in a global battle against the demonic. Despite some scholarly impasse concerning the novelty of Sahagún’s efforts, his anthropological demonology was more than just a tool of domination, acting instead as a means of cultural accommodation.

Several missionaries sought to accommodate the Americas into the canon of classical knowledge by using naturalist inquiry in the service of religious conversion. Their experience of the great diversity of peoples in the New World challenged the colonial demand to dispossess indigenous peoples from any claims to self-mastery. My call for acknowledging Sahagún’s normative flexibility throughout these exchanges stems from a greater emphasis within emerging historiographical work on the trans-Atlantic character of knowledge production in sixteenth-century Spanish America. As Cañizares-Esguerra has argued, naturalist experiences were key to shaping the aims and future trajectories of imperial domination. Through systematic empirical observation, natural histories (including Sahagún’s) formed part of “a larger scholarly mood concerned with the debilitating effects” of the New World. Sahagún’s inquiries showcased both the allegedly corruptible, but also vibrant, facets of indigenous religion.

Indeed, missionaries saw in natural history a vital medium through which indigenous cosmologies, properly understood, could be subsumed into Christian worldviews and rule. At stake in the Franciscan conception of New World nature was an eschatological interpretation of the Americas’ place in world history. In their view, determining the origins and cosmological contradictions of the New World would have dramatic historical implications for the final judgment of all the world’s peoples. Mendicant orders often described
indigenous peoples as the New World equivalent of the Tribes of Israel, that is, as a civilization lost on a cosmic exile. The Franciscans’ encounter with the people and conditions of the New World signified the beginning of an apocalyptic countdown that added great urgency to the task of religious conversion and the necessary tools to achieve it.

Missionaries in New Spain, for instance, were expected to live with and emulate the Mexica’s own conditions of poverty. Their exposure to indigenous customs was thought to be the crucial step to reviving a “Primitive Apostolic Church” that, unlike the one in Europe, was free of hubris and materialism. Culinary habits and taboos put Spanish naturalists in contact with indigenous herbariums and medicinal standards. Spanish commercial interests would eventually invest greatly in learning and reproducing indigenous medicines for an international market. As Cañizares-Esguerra points out, however, the same obsession with Amerindian peoples as the theological equivalent of the Israelites came with its own darker vision, one that transcended boundaries and generated distinct geopolitical cultures among missionaries:

Sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Europeans were obsessed with demons, and they thought that the devil had made the New World his fiefdom. . . . Both northern Protestant and southern Catholic settlers felt threatened and surrounded by the devil, who allegedly attacked their polities by unleashing storms, earthquakes, and epidemics, and by loosing heretics, tyrannical royal bureaucrats, foreign enemies, and Amerindians on them.32

Franciscan millenarianism was therefore one aspect of the wider demonological discourses at play in early Colonial America. While some missionaries came to see indigenous peoples as the conceptual, if not actual, counterpart to a lost biblical people, there was a larger tendency to view them as a diabolical inversion put forth by Satan to sabotage ecclesiastical aims.

Sahagún himself believed that conversion was made far more difficult by the fact that the world of indigenous peoples had been infused by the diabolical for centuries. As he remarks in one of the prologues of the Florentine Codex, he was “certain that the Devil neither sleeps nor has forgotten the cult that these Indian natives offered him in the past, and that he is awaiting a suitable conjecture to return to his lordship.”33 Notoriously damning evidence of one such “cult” was the practice of sacrificial rituals around natural phenomena, such as the rain in the central highlands, which native peoples were surreptitiously drawn to worship: “deceived by the demons, enemies of humankind.”34
Moments of distrust and zealotry are common in Sahagún’s writings. As Millie Gimmel highlights, many of these instances were also “notable . . . of how Sahagún was changed by both the land and the culture of the indigenous world in which he was living.” Sahagún’s encounters with idolatry may point to his keen nose for traces of the demonic; for my purposes, however, they also show how he “had acquired the indigenous sensitivity to landscape and accepted the local explanation of meteorological events without losing his evangelical zeal for the extirpation of idolatry.” The lands and mountains themselves held vestiges of the Devil, for how else could one explain the indigenous veneration of the mountains as a sacred place, Sahagún reasoned, if not for their being “persuaded or admonished by the devil or his governors to visit those mountains.”

Those same beliefs are at play in Sahagún’s account of the Cult of St. Anne, which I engage below, but instead they offer a more generous, if not ambivalent, set of interpretations. In what follows, I provide an explanation for that ambivalence, positioning Book XI of the Florentine Codex as a naturalist mediation between Christian and indigenous religious values. More pertinently, I show how Sahagún’s observations act as a model of interlingual relations where the Codex’s bilingual representation is used as a form of political consolidation. While Sahagún’s model was never completed, it remains methodologically instructive for studying the history of early modern imperial thought.

A Natural History of Soulcraft: Reading Book XI of the Florentine Codex

Book XI of the Florentine Codex, which is entitled “Earthly Things,” is notable for its discussion of prominent flora and fauna, as well as herbal medicinal practices. The text, whose contents had been disclosed by native informants in response to Sahagún’s questionnaires, is remarkable for providing a systematic understanding of indigenous peoples’ uses of natural resources prior to Spanish contact. Indeed, as Henry Reeves points out, “Sahagún, while writing primarily to further the missionary effort, inadvertently but fortuitously helped establish the Aztecs as pioneering New World naturalists and the Spaniards as conveyors of that information.” In addition to ethnographic observations that borrow from native informants, who were conscripted to aid Sahagún’s efforts, Book XI’s narrative offers a second complex layer: documenting indigenous knowledge about nature that is both factual and mythical.

To illustrate the tensions between these interpretive layers, I look at two de-
scriptions within Book XI of the *Florentine Codex*: the “bird of the heart” (*yollotototl*) and the myth of Toci, a manifestation of the goddess Tzapotlantenan, also known as “our grandmother.” These illustrations are important as they present an ambivalence within Sahagún’s approach regarding their linguistic meaning and the religious customs they represent. According to Jill McKeever Furst, for example, the concept of “*yolia*” was used in indigenous cultures in much the same way that the concept of “soul” was used for European societies. More specifically, *yolia* “animated the body, and it also conferred a special and highly individual character consisting of personality, aptitudes, abilities, and desires. Native peoples also said the *yolia* survived after death and traveled to a postmortem existence.”

As Sahagún documents it, the embodiment of this concept by the “bird of the heart” (that is, *yollotototl*) vividly portrays an emergent missionary tolerance toward a syncretic ritual that espouses Christian and indigenous beliefs.

For Sahagún, *yollotototl* (a common Bananaquit; see figure 3) is a social curiosity. His description of the bird illustrates both its natural features and cultural relevance within the region of Teotlixco (a toponym, or place-name, meaning “to face the Gods”) in Southern Mexico:

> It lives there in Teotlixco, toward the southern sea. . . . As for its being called *yollotototl*, the people there say thus: that when we die, our hearts turn into [these birds]. And when it speaks, when it sings, it makes its voice pleading; it indeed gladdens one’s heart, it consoles one. . . . It is edible.

Several characteristics stand out about the above description. For one, the idea of *yolia* (that is, the soul) being animated by a living natural analogue was both a boon and challenge for Franciscan missionaries. As Furst points out, “Belief in the *yolia* as a bird may have facilitated the adoption of European winged beings—angels and cherubs—into indigenous iconography. In [some Nahuatl-speaking communities] the soul animates the body and is punished after death, but a different entity, the spirit, is a guardian in the intangible form of a dove or pigeon that attempts to protect both soul and the body from misfortune and bad decisions.” To see God’s actions or agents manifested in the natural world would have been reassuring to a Franciscan missionary, because it confirmed the Augustinian conception of the divine in nature that animates much of the Franciscan millenarianism at work in New Spain.

Yet given what we know of the Spiritual Conquest, Sahagún’s description would have been troubling to his Spanish audience. He blends a naturalist
description with a mythological narrative about *yollototl*'s place in Nahua beliefs, making no judgment regarding the story’s veracity and (perhaps only implicitly) seems to willingly overlook a suggestion of cannibalism. If one’s heart does, indeed, transform into an edible bird upon death, there is more than ample potential to find instances of heresy and hence grounds for ecclesiastic intervention.

The passage also reveals a further linguistic innovation. Scholars have often singled out a distinctive feature of Sahagún’s style where claims made in one column of text (the Nahuatl-language portions, for instance) are later omitted.
in the Spanish translations and commentary. While such omissions have been considered oversights and errors of the Codex’s tortuous path toward publication, the omissions are in some cases systematic. In the case of the Nahua yollotototl, for example, there is a straightforward interpretation that reconciles elements of the Christian soul with indigenous readings of nature’s value. Not all of Sahagún’s illustrations, however, are as easy to decipher. For instance, consider the case of the myth of Toci and its parallels with the Cult of St. Anne.

As part of Book XI’s naturalist descriptions, Sahagún provides an account of different mountain ranges and sites where he has been told of the existence of idolatrous acts. In some cases, as noted below, he himself has been witness to the idolatry. As he writes of one mountain range in Tlaxcala (central Mexico) in particular, the reader encounters a certain ambivalence over the incommensurability of the Nahuatl- and Spanish-language terms. In this striking passage excerpted from the Spanish-language column, Sahagún’s disapproving tone seems to acknowledge an act of native idolatry. But the equivocal character of the Nahuatl term “Toci”—as seen in the conceptual meaning Sahagún attributes to it, as well as the ritual practice around it—leaves Sahagún’s reading rather open-ended:

The second place where previously there had been many sacrifices, to which people would come from far lands, is the range of Tlaxcala, where there was a temple called Toci, where a great multitude of people would congregate to celebrate this festivity Toci, which means “our grandmother,” and by another name is called Tzapotlatenan, which means “the goddess of mezcales and medicines.” And later there they built a church to St. Anne, where now there is a monastery and religious of our father St. Francis, and the locals call it Toci, and from more than forty leagues people congregate for the festivity of Toci. Like this they call St. Anne, taking their cue from the preachers who call St. Anne the grandmother of all Christians, and like this they have called it and call the pulpit: Toci, which means our grandmother. And all the people who came like before to the festivity of Toci, come dressed in the colors of St. Anne, but since the name is equivocal and they respect the past, it stands to reason that they come for what is past and not for the modern.

In the original manuscript, Nahuatl portions of Sahagún’s text are concerned with the naturalist descriptions of surrounding bodies of water and mountains. Descriptions in Spanish, however, from which the above passage is translated,
remain “culturally charged,” demonstrating Sahagún’s methodical silence over beliefs taken as ritualistic facts (for example, lands of “many sacrifices,” multiple pilgrimages “from far lands,” the building of churches) or even those that are potentially idolatrous practices (for example, worshipping the old gods in places where there are allegedly new ones, the suggested consumption of hallucinogens like mezcal to commemorate St. Anne). Especially salient in the passage’s closing lines is Sahagún’s invoking of two conflicting cosmological timelines. In the events he is describing, land, peoples, and their respective rituals oscillate from “what is past” to what he modestly qualifies as “the modern” (lo moderno).

The above tension in Sahagún’s approach to idolatry can be linked back to the cultural and practical meanings of the Nahua concept of “altepetl” (that is, town, or, city-state) and how it infuses Sahagún’s descriptions of the landscape. The cultural meanings of altepetl made it problematic for Sahagún to come to terms with the emerging Cult of St. Anne, forcing him to recognize how toponyms allowed indigenous peoples to perform “old” rituals in sites where new ones were allegedly taking their place. It also affected his entire conception of the land, territory, and the space of ritual as categories that, as least when used in Nahuatl, had the potential of generating enduring social and political hierarchies (albeit idolatrous ones).

As Gimmel explains, “All indigenous communities were formed around or near sacred mountains and bodies of water,” where they “enacted specific rituals, often including sacrifice, for the gods of these geological formations in order to guarantee the arrival of rain.” It was therefore no coincidence that a Christian cult to a significant biblical figure (the mother of the Virgin Mary) would be founded on the same hills and mountains where a rain goddess (that is, Toci) had been previously worshipped. The passage on the Cult of St. Anne, or myth of Toci, therefore confirms an important element of Sahagún’s anthropological work: its polyphonic, that is, interlingual and open-ended character. Despite a fervent missionary zeal to expose and extirpate allegedly diabolic influences, Sahagún’s attention to the shifting valence of Nahuatl language raises for him a political sensitivity that verges on toleration, if not syncretism.

Sahagún saw in New Spain many cosmic and cultural conflicts. Yet in his exposure to the land and people, the natural world (at least textually) becomes split into both a source of order and fear. His account of the yollotototl seems to accept the winged nature of the human soul, while tolerating implicit animism and references to cannibalism; his description of the mountains of Tlaxcala and the Cult of St. Anne, though far more judgmental, leave open to inter-
pretation the potential dangers and pragmatic opportunities that interlingual translation could uncover. For his Spanish audience, Sahagún points out the ease with which certain idolatrous practices have continued under the guise of Christian rites. In the Nahuatl portions of his text, however, he allegedly overcomes—or perhaps disregards—the potential vindication of recounting the myth.

A sympathetic reading of Sahagún’s encounter with New World nature might claim that he “hoped to show how the natural world and Nahua culture were connected but at the same time his goal was generally not to preserve most of this information, but rather to exterminate it, or at least control it.”46 That interpretation downplays the context of production informing Sahagún’s logic of domination. Instead, as I have argued for above, Sahagún’s anthropological ethos should be linked back to the assumptions and trends informing Franciscan missions in the sixteenth century. Both metaphoric and actual idolatry amounted to instances of diabolism, many of which perplexed Sahagún. Indeed, in his description of vast natural environments imbued with strange customs and forces, one gets the sense that Sahagún is witnessing the early instances of what Anthony Pagden has called “the fall of natural man”: the irreversible move away from a cosmological relation between human beings and nature.47 In some instances, nature represents the seductive and degenerative qualities that Spaniards feared would unravel their own cosmic mission. Yet in other important episodes, nature represents a source of order, such as in the geographic knowledge Aztecs offered Sahagún in his efforts to understand medicinal and social practices.

Sahagún’s story therefore has multiple implications for the study of nature in the early Spanish Empire. His linguistic sensibilities and scientific creativity make Sahagún a formidable case for studying the ethos of the Spiritual Conquest in the New World, the political channels and interests espoused by his visions of nature, and the narrative dissonance at work in the marriage between scientific inquiry and imperial ideology. I therefore see Sahagún as an enduring example of the epistemological challenges behind writing the history of past peoples, places, and their intertextual representation by historians and political theorists more broadly.

Sahagún’s Book XI sheds light on the historical origins of a shifting attitude toward nature, particularly regarding the interpretation of religious experiences in the New World. Two intersecting dispositions resonate throughout this work: first, the Franciscan Order’s heightened sense of cultural assimilation that acts as the immediate backdrop of Sahagún’s evangelizing mission. 

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The search for idolatry may have been the motivating force driving Sahagún’s accounts of the landscape and contents of New Spain. It was, however, Sahagún’s profound sense of curiosity for the sacred and the profane that fueled his ethnographic approach, revealing a productive, though divided, commitment to both science and religion. Second, Book XI conveys an important moment of naturalist innovation, using both Nahuatl- and Spanish-language sources to portray nature in contending lights. It is arguable whether imperial authorities ever intended scientific inquiry in the early conquests to be conducted for its own sake. Sahagún’s example, however, points to the complex interaction between indigenous and European systems of knowledge that early modern thinkers attempted to negotiate. It also embodies the interaction between politics and ideology in an apocalyptic time.

Sahagún’s Model for an Interlingual Relations

The open-ended character of Sahagún’s story, and of Book XI particularly, re-affirms the complexity of political and scientific thought in the early midst of Spain’s New World Empire. This picture also points toward future avenues of research in the history of political thought and the anthropolitics of nature, past or present. Indeed, what this chapter documents is an alternative conception of ritual, faith, and scientific inquiry in the early modern period. As I argue above, the intersection of religion and nature in Sahagún’s depiction of the New World can offer historians of empire a textual, yet also linguistically informed perspective that overcomes the reduction of faith to the realm of the nonscientific. By taking seriously Sahagún’s deep cultural and linguistic awareness, particularly employed in his naturalist explorations, the politics of early modern Atlantic exchange can be further reconstructed and put on greater display.

I have made the case above that studying Bernardino de Sahagún as an exemplar of a larger set of ideals practiced by natural historians in the early modern period is historically and theoretically relevant. Sahagún also represents an instance of the larger interplay between religious experience, scientific inquiry, and colonial governance in the New World that historians of political thought continue to ignore. By revisiting Sahagún’s attempts to study the naturalist values, as well as demonic influences, of native peoples, it is my contention that a broader historiographical dilemma concerning the study of New World intellectual production can be raised and challenged. The impasse concerns the exclusion of early modern Spanish thinkers as foundational fig-
ures of the Western canon. Having inherited a narrative tradition that can be traced back to the Reconquista of the Iberian Peninsula, Sahagún formed part of a generation of missionaries who set out initially on a Spiritual Conquest of the recently conquered New Spain. Yet these missionaries transformed this task, in their minds and by their hands, from a mission of conversion into a cosmic geopolitical battle to extirpate demonic forces from the Americas.

While both of these objectives were far larger than Sahagún himself, the influence of both natural history and diabolism upon his study of the Mexica peoples profoundly altered his epistemological assumptions and normative endeavors in the New World. I maintain that Sahagún’s influence and notoriety is not a result of his collection, or destruction, of indigenous artifacts and norms. Rather, he produced an unrivaled catalogue of naturalist beliefs in the *Florentine Codex* and developed a systematic framework based on an anthropological demonology: that humanity, nature, the divine, and demonic could not be understood in isolation from each other; that the future of the New Church would be intimately tied to the assimilation of both indigenous ritual and Christian millenarianism; and that the study of language itself was the key through which both the Old and New Worlds could be kept from collapsing in disrepair.

Such a programmatic endeavor no doubt raised many critical questions for Sahagún, as it should for contemporary students of the history of political thought. To paraphrase Michel Foucault’s famous claims on translation, Sahagún’s mission and relevance can be captured under the weight of a single question: if humanity’s nature can be found both in the environment and the heavens, is he one distinct being or two? It stands to reason that a conscientious participant such as Sahagún could not escape unchanged from decades of study and observation in the Americas. Indeed, his legacy is embraced in Europe and Mexico alike, symbolizing his own complex colonizing experience. Although missionaries were tasked to uncover and decipher the practices that render the New World’s peoples as idolatrous, this could only come after being exposed to the satanic itself, perhaps rendering it less powerful.

Despite the challenges and ultimate censure encountered by Sahagún in the development of his demonology, his insights were not without political value for future naturalist endeavors. Both the herbalist Francisco Hernández, who led a royal expedition to New Spain from 1570 to 1577, and the Jesuit father José de Acosta, whose writings influenced the works of Francis Bacon and John Locke, were shaped by Sahagún’s legacy. In his exploration of the natural landscape of New Spain, however, Sahagún seems to have discovered a greater
level of cultural commensurability than previously acknowledged by Spanish missionaries or even those who followed him. Historians of political thought would benefit greatly from further study of these instances where the boundaries between secular, religious, and scientific institutions and practices were not as fervently demarcated from each other as they are today.

Indeed, this separation of scholarly realms is what has precisely contributed to the alternating senses of romanticism and dismay that afflict political theory’s relationship to indigenous peoples and the early modern Catholic empires of Spain and Portugal. Yet to take seriously how the divine and demonic coexisted with the mundane and political at the everyday level might not only be a source of greater understanding of what came before the foundations of our own times. That engagement could also act as a space where our own assumptions over the boundaries between culture and nature could be put to a greater test. In closing, my challenge has been to consider carefully what Sahagún’s experience tells us about early modern religious, naturalist, and anthropological encounters. It is of little use to suggest that an approach such as Sahagún’s can be easily applied today when it comes to unpacking contemporary problems. Yet more than offering an opportunity to study the micropolitics of concept formation and knowledge production, Sahagún’s model of interlingual relations puts on display how the “thickening of relations between polities” is also a result of the nuanced melding of words and not just violent confrontation. A pertinent reminder of how older political vocabularies always beg to take their place alongside the new, and how the seeming past competes with the modern. In the next chapter, I offer a historical portrait of that competition, turning to the most understated, yet no less significant, naturalist of the sixteenth century, Francisco Hernández de Toledo.