

Introduction: Tracing the Environmental Legacies of Ecological Imperialism

Abstract: This chapter connects recent historiographical trends in environmental studies and early modern global Iberian history to present seven theses on how Western imperialism has shaped the theories and concepts framing our modern relationship to nature and the Earth. It argues that environmental conflicts rooted in European imperialism demand analysis beyond Western-centric perspectives. By examining narratives of Southeast Asia, China, and the Americas, the chapter emphasizes the need to trace the diverse experiences and conflictual viewpoints driving early modern environmental conflicts. It explains how the book explores different responses to socio-ecological struggles arising from the expansion of Spanish colonialism, drawing on Iberian, Indigenous, and European sources to examine the resulting tensions and ecological dynamics of the early modern period.

Keywords: environmental conflicts, colonialism, Iberian globalization, Indigenous writing, contact zones, capitalist epistemologies

I. The Fragmented Entanglements of Iberian Globalization: Seven Theses

“The real reason that the floods are greater and that the summer drought is having more of an effect is that, in the days of the Indians, the farmlands along those slopes and near the Laguna were used for corn, agave, and other plants, for which the soil was hardly moved or lifted, because they did not

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use plows.”¹ This book posits these words, written by Antonio de León Pinelo (1595–1660), as a pivotal starting point for examining the variety of interpretations that respond to the shifts in human-environmental relationships brought about by Spanish colonialism. Within this passage, Pinelo’s observation about the importation of arable techniques in the Americas anticipates an uncomfortable truth: the degradation of the land, accompanied by a rise in extreme climate events such as floods and droughts, was a significant challenge during the colonial period. In contrast to conventional narratives that underscore Europeans’ capacity to discipline untamed lands, Pinelo’s account of the rising floods in the region surrounding the Mexican lake of Texcoco omits any reference to the colonial capacity to shape and control the environment. Instead, he contrasts Spanish agricultural practices, irrigation canals, and dikes with pre-existing Indigenous farming methods and hydraulic infrastructures to explain a process of increasing environmental uncertainty. In his explanation, he even incorporates a Mexican term—*Tepetate*—to name the phenomenon of soil erosion, which he directly attributes to the arrival of Spaniards on the continent.

What moved Pinelo to utter these words was his concern about the rising climate events in the Americas, which manifested in 1629 through one of the most devastating floods of the colonial era.² In Pinelo’s *El paraíso en el Nuevo Mundo* (*The Paradise in the New World*, 1645), the increasing ecological uncertainty that followed the arrival of the Europeans is characterized by references to pre-colonial infrastructures and practices defining the capacity of Indigenous societies to interact with their landscapes. Building on the distinctions that Pinelo was making between colonial and pre-colonial

1 Antonio de León Pinelo, *El paraíso en el Nuevo Mundo: comentario apologético*, Edición del Comité del IV Centenario del Descubrimiento del Amazonas. (Lima: Imprenta Torres Aguirre, 1943), 2:159. “La verdadera causa de ser mayores las inundaciones, y demas efecto la seca del verano, es que en tiempo de los Indios, las sementeras de todas aquellas vertientes y alrededores de la Laguna, eran de Maizales, y Magueyes, y de otras plantas, para las quales apenas se mueve ni levanta la tierra, por que no usaban arado.”

2 Pinelo’s account appeared fifteen years after the flood of 1629. In his account, Pinelo refers to the recurrent floods in the city of Mexico and to the construction of the Albarrada of San Larazo in 1555, which was destroyed by the flood. The city of Mexico remained flooded from September 1629 to 1634, generating a debate regarding the flood’s causes. Pinelo enumerates the floods from the pre-Hispanic period up until the flood of 1629, which he describes as the greatest and largest flood that Mexico ever had. The flood swept away a huge part of the city, killed more than 30,000 Indigenous people, and reduced the number of Spanish families from 20,000 to only 400. See Louisa Hoberman. “Bureaucracy and Disaster: Mexico City and the Flood of 1629,” *Journal of Latin American Studies* 6 (1974): 211–30.

times, one could theorize that he intended to dispute the patterns of Spanish ecological imperialism by bringing to the fore observations about the reconfiguration of human-nature relationships under colonial rule. However, attributing the increasing floods and droughts in the region to the implementation of colonial infrastructures does not necessarily imply that the author intended to challenge the ecological underpinnings of Spanish imperialism. Quite the contrary, Pinelo's preservationist concern reveals an extractive mindset, where ideas, attitudes, and frameworks referring to the deterioration of a once fertile land abundant in cheap resources were crafted to underline its developing potential. In this New World narrative, the richness and affordability of nature do not reside in the importation of colonial practices but are idealized by Pinelo as inherent qualities of its pristine past, imagined as an Edenic paradise.

As this book will delve into more deeply, the examination of writings and ideas regarding shifts in human-environmental relationships reveals the fragmented and heterogeneous experiences that accompanied the expansion of Spanish colonialism in the early modern period. Following an intense hierarchical reorganization of human-nature relations, Iberian and Indigenous writings presented different perspectives of the unequal distribution of environmental conflicts resulting from Spanish colonialism. In the case of Pinelo's account on the environmental change that followed the arrival of Spaniards to Mexico, the existing scholarship would provide a partial explanation. For some historians, the European expansion was at the origin of preservationist discourses that came to shape the modern divide between humans and nature. Pinelo's observations on human interactions would therefore echo a lineage of texts expressing mounting concerns about the detrimental impact of human activities on the environment. Yet, while new attitudes towards nature are consistently identified in relation to Western discourses and genealogies, the prevalent historiography fails to adequately account for the ways in which Indigenous and non-European actors, languages, and practices have shaped modern environmental attitudes. More frequently, non-European actors are often deprived of their historical agency and portrayed as lacking the capacity to transform and develop the environment. This trend underscores an extractive mindset deeply ingrained in the belief that nature is inherently underutilized and undeveloped without the intervention of Western forces. Yet, aside from this pervasive Western archetype, this book puts forward an alternative historical viewpoint, diverging from homogenous narratives and delving into a more complex archive. It aims to unveil a wider spectrum of conflict-ridden perspectives, attitudes, and voices that engage with the task of documenting,

interpreting, and responding to environmental conflicts brought about by Spanish imperialism during the early modern era.³

The archive addressed in this book finds expression in a collection of texts authored by European, mestizo, and Indigenous writers. While some, like José de Acosta's *Historia natural y moral de las Indias* (*Natural and Moral History of the Indies*, 1590), have been extensively studied as precursors of modern environmental science, others, such as Juan González de Mendoza's *Historia del gran reyno de la China* (*History of the Great Kingdom of China*, 1585) and Felipe Guamán Poma de Ayala's *El primer nueva corónica y buen gobierno* (*The First New Chronicle and Good Government*, ca. 1616), have been overlooked by scholars exploring the underpinnings of modern attitudes defining human-nature relations. The rationale behind these narratives has been examined in relation to conquest and colonialism, as well as their capacity to act as responses to the power imbalances of European imperialism. This heterogeneous archive has also been analyzed to trace the emergence of a global awareness, offering an Iberian early modern perspective on regions such as Africa, the Americas, the Philippines, Japan, and China. Yet, these narratives have never been investigated as components of a broader textual genealogy where diverse perspectives intersect to negotiate, address, or dispute the principles and expanding epistemologies of Spanish and Western ecological imperialism.

This book examines selections from these collections of sources found in the Iberian early modern archive to trace how environmental theories, historical narratives, and political ideas were directed to frame the restructuring of human-nature relationships in the early modern world. It focuses on texts that elicited various responses to the hierarchical structuring of

3 A growing movement of scholars and activists argue that dominant notions of environmental preservation often embody a form of detachment from nature and the lived experiences of those who depend on the environment for their livelihoods. New perspectives defend a departure from the traditional focus on preserving pristine nature, instead advocating for a deeper engagement with and accountability for a world irrevocably altered by human activity. This book delves into this scholarly discussion within environmental studies. It seeks to confront Western-colonial preservationist genealogies to contributions of non-European actors and languages within the formation of knowledge, narratives, and practices regarding the human impact on the environment. For the question of the origins of modern environmentalism and the pervasive theme of wilderness in environmental history, see, Richard Grove, *Green Imperialism: Colonial Expansion, Tropical Island Edens, and the Origins of Environmentalism, 1600–1860* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); William Cronon, "The Trouble with Wilderness: Or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature," *Environmental History* 1, no. 1 (1996): 7–28; Etienne S. Benson, *Surroundings: A History of Environments and Environmentalism* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2020); and Guillaume Blanc, *L'invention du colonialisme vert, pour en finir avec le mythe de l'Eden Africain* (Paris: Flammarion, 2021).

humans in nature stemming from Spanish expansion into different lands and regions. It examines these texts to uncover a capitalist epistemology, unveiling contrasting ideas, attitudes, and frameworks created to respond to the violent expropriation of land and resources effected by Spanish imperialism. The array of perspectives shaping an early modern capitalist epistemology that I excavate within this book encompasses the erasure of Indigenous labor, the extension of racial hierarchies structuring extractive property regimes, the emergence of ecological distribution conflicts, Indigenous responses to these conflicts, and the conceptualization of pristine and abundant natures intertwined with Eurocentric racial schemes and configurations.

Some of the texts I discuss circulated widely, having a great impact on the political ecologies of the period, while others that remained obscured allow us today to trace contrasting views arising from the unequal distribution of ecological conflicts engendered by Spanish imperialism. Yet, I do not pretend to reconstruct and detail in this book the whole variety of responses that supported, contested, or renegotiated the capitalist epistemologies of ecological Imperialism. Indeed, while the texts analyzed in this book present a broad spectrum of perspectives, they do not represent the entirety of voices and experiences that we can find in this heterogeneous archive. I hope this book will inspire readers to explore alternative viewpoints and stimulate a discussion that deepens our understanding of the entangled historical ramifications, environmental sensibilities, and social struggles that emerged from the expansion of European colonialism in the early modern period.

Ecological Imperialism in Early Modern Spanish Narratives unfolds as a historical and conceptual inquiry, delving into various geographies, environmental perspectives, and branches of knowledge. In essence, this inquiry seeks to understand the planetary crisis and its political manifestations through an exploration of narratives responding to environmental conflicts brought about by Spanish colonialism in the early modern period. To ensure clarity and coherence, the main ideas of the book are structured into seven theses. These theses underscore the nuanced relationships between human agencies and the realms of conceptual frameworks, historical narratives, and environmental theories. Subsequently, the second and third parts of this introduction delve into the notions, content, and narratives analyzed in this book. As the book progresses, it becomes evident that early modern theories and historical narratives documenting human impact on the environment were deeply shaped by the fragmented social experiences that emerged from the expansion of Spanish and European colonialism. The ideas and conceptions of human-nature relations that emerged from the process of

European expansion are central to this book's exploratory endeavor. Yet, the book's objective is not to trace the origins of environmental attitudes and ecological sensibilities through a monolithic genealogy of narratives. Instead, its objective is to explore how environmental conflicts rooted in the history of European imperialism permeate the fragmented and contentious experiences that characterize the planetary ecological crisis.

Thesis 1: At the core of anthropogenic environmental and climate change lies a mosaic of divergent theories, historical perspectives, and political frameworks. These arise from the pressing need to confront the significance of planetary forces shaping human-nature interactions on a global scale.

The first thesis of this book posits that historical narratives and political ideas, regardless of their stance on ecological ideals, are deeply influenced by divergent perceptions of the human impact on the environment and the Earth over time. It expands on the discussion of how human actions have impacted the environment and climate over the long term.⁴ Throughout the early modern era, a wide array of actors, ranging from natural historians, merchants, and officials to Indigenous leaders and communities, engaged in debates and social conflicts to confront what they perceived to be a new form of planetary agency at the origin of socio-ecological imbalances. Expressed through diverse terminologies and languages, these actors described how the expansion of European powers and their increasing hegemony had varying impacts on social, ecological, and collective life. At the heart of their discussions lay a vital question: Did European imperialism represent a legitimate planetary force with the authority to govern and improve human-nature relations at a global scale, or did it just export illegitimate wars, social conflicts, and environmental uncertainty? This question unlocked a multitude of legal, historical, and philosophical domains transforming discourses on human-nature relations. These narratives reflect on the historical significance of humanity's growing awareness as a major planetary force, influencing socio-ecological changes on a global scale.

Thesis 2. European powers and individuals not only acquired an environmental planetary awareness from colonial domination but also assimilated novel ideas from their interactions with non-European powers that were not subjected to Western rule.

4 For other books approaching this question, see Richard Grove, *Green Imperialism*; Simon L. Lewis and Mark Maslin, *The Human Planet, How We Created the Anthropocene* (New Orleans: Pelican, 2018); Jean Baptiste Fressoz and Fabien Locher, *Les Révoltes du ciel: Une histoire du changement climatique XVe-XXe siècle* (Paris: Seuil, 2020); Dipesh Chakrabarty, *The Climate of History in a Planetary Age* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2021).

The second thesis of this book presents a nuanced perspective, contending that the emergence of an environmental planetary awareness in Western societies was not solely driven by the experience of colonialism. Instead, European actors enriched their understanding by drawing upon substantial knowledge from different non-European powers, leading to both affirmation and questioning of the evolving impact of colonialism in different lands and territories. Through interactions with diverse cultures and polities, novel perspectives on human-nature relations were introduced, challenging prevailing narratives about the Western powers' capacity to improve upon nature. Therefore, the second thesis reframes the argumentative line put forth by scholars such as Alfred W. Crosby and Richard Grove, who primarily attributed the emergence of an early environmentalist awareness to Western expansion and colonialism.⁵ In contrast, this book emphasizes the significance of cross-cultural exchanges in shaping an environmental planetary awareness in the early modern period. It highlights that Europeans not only gained insights from their imperial pursuits but also learned valuable lessons from the knowledge systems and practices of non-European powers that were not subordinated to Western rule. These societies were often described and narrated by Iberian actors as possessing superior ability to govern human-nature relations. The exploration of the dynamic relationship between imperial expansion and planetary awareness contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of the history of environmental ideas as an entangled evolving process. This thesis broadens the scope of analysis, offering an enriched understanding of the complex factors influencing the development of divergent environmental perspectives and attitudes shaping ideas about nature and the Earth during the early period of European expansion.

Thesis 3. The interplay between European imperialism and the uneven distribution of environmental conflicts significantly shapes the production of historical narratives, environmental theories, and the conceptual frameworks that drive political ideas about human-nature relations.

The third thesis of this book contends that the unequal distribution of environmental conflicts caused by European imperialism deeply influences the production of historical narratives, environmental theories, and the

5 Richard Grove posits that environmental destruction caused by colonialism was a catalyst for the emergence of modern environmentalist ideas. Grove traces in early modern narratives depicting climate change and idyllic tropical islands within the context of European expansion the emergence of "early preservationist notions." Richard Grove, *Green Imperialism*, 33. For Alfred W. Crosby's theory on ecological imperialism, refer to my own reflection in the second section of this introduction.

conceptual frameworks underpinning ideas about human-nature interactions. It originally situates scholarly debates on ecological distribution conflicts within the context of early modern texts and perspectives shaped by European expansion and colonialism.⁶ The book posits that the theories and conceptual frameworks used by early modern writers to explain the evolving dynamics of human-nature relations were profoundly marked by environmental conflicts arising from the uneven access to natural resources and the imposition of social and ecological burdens in colonial peripheries and extractive zones.

European imperialism, with its vast expansion and dominance over distant lands, brought about a wide array of socio-ecological conflicts across the globe. These conflicts arose from the unequal allocation of environmental benefits and burdens resulting from the imperial pursuit of resources and territorial control. As European powers expanded extractive regimes to other regions, new political concepts took form to rationalize their imperial endeavors. Historical narratives emerged that painted the history of colonial lands as undeveloped and unused by its primitive inhabitants. These narratives stimulated the development of conceptual frameworks and racial schemes used to socially structure the constant expansion of extractive regimes. The resulting political concepts and historical frameworks have left a lasting impact on perspectives about human-nature relations, influencing practices and contemporary environmental movements. To understand the mechanisms sustaining the uneven distribution of environmental conflicts, it is imperative to incorporate historical and social perspectives that bring to the fore marginalized viewpoints and movements regarding the configuration of human-nature interactions. At this juncture, this book asserts that the climate and ecological crises, contrary to some claims, do not inherently give rise to a distinct ecological class, thereby generating an entirely new sphere

6 Ecological distribution conflicts are examined within political ecology, a field established by geographers, anthropologists, and environmental sociologists. The term Ecological Distribution Conflicts (EDCs) was originally coined by Joan Martínez Alier and Martin O'Connor (1996) to describe "the social, spatial, and temporal asymmetries or inequalities in the use by humans of environmental resources and services, for example, in the depletion of natural resources (including loss of biodiversity), and in the burdens of pollution." In this book, the term environmental conflict refers to disputes arising from unequal access to the natural resources and environmental costs and benefits that structure life-support systems. See J. Martínez-Alier and M. O'Connor, "Ecological and Economic Distribution Conflicts," in *Getting Down to Earth: Practical Applications of Ecological Economics*, eds. R. Costanza, J. Martínez-Alier, and O. Segura (Washington, DC: Island Press/ISEE, 1996), 160. For a broader conceptualization of the term, see Joan Martínez Alier, *The Environmentalism of the Poor: A Study of Ecological Conflicts and Valuation* (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 2002).

of political action. Instead, it posits that the climate and ecological crises have engendered divergent visions and social strata over time, stemming from the uneven distribution of environmental conflicts spanning local, national, and global scales.⁷ Through this lens, this book argues that the reproduction of environmental conflicts is inextricably intertwined with the fragmented, heterogeneous, and contentious experiences that emerged from the expansion of European imperialism and globalization from the fifteenth century onwards.

Thesis 4. In response to the expansion of environmental conflicts in extractive zones, Indigenous communities employed diverse methods, including acts of resistance and subsistence. This book examines these acts as modern environmentalist movements reacting to the expansion of capitalist regimes associated with European colonialism.

As European powers expanded their extractive regimes to different regions, they encountered resistance from Indigenous communities who sought to protect their lands, resources, and communal forms of life. Regardless of the approach taken, the responses of these communities were deeply entwined with the uneven distribution of socio-ecological conflicts resulting from the implementation of extractive regimes. Some communities engaged in armed resistance, fighting against the encroachment of European forces on their territories, while others opted to adapt or collaborate with colonial powers. Indigenous leaders undertook multiple legal initiatives, seeking to assert the rights of their communities to land and resources. For these communities and individuals, to preserve the environment means first to protect communal forms of life and vulnerable groups from the predatory demands imposed by colonial administration. The book identifies these local responses as modern environmental movements that emerged in response to the extension of colonial frontiers of extraction and dispossession.

Ecological Imperialism in Early Modern Spanish Narratives provides historical perspective on how various actors have engaged with environmental conflicts resulting from the expansion of European imperialism. This historical perspective aligns with the broader objective of understanding

7 This is for instance the proposition in Bruno Latour and Nikolaj Schultz's *Mémo sur la nouvelle classe écologique* (Paris: Les empêcheurs de penser en rond, 2022). In their book, Latour and Schultz advocate for the reappropriation of traditional notions of "class" and "class struggle," infusing them with a novel meaning in alignment with the ecological concerns inherent in our "New Climate Regime." In contrast, this book, through its historical analysis, demonstrates how the climate regime and its ensuing political implications give rise to and renew divergent environmental and political positions over time, originating from the uneven distribution of socio-ecological conflicts.

how vulnerable communities have cultivated environmental movements that prioritize social justice over preservationist ideals. As Joan Martínez Alier argues “in ecological distribution conflicts, the poor are often on the side of resource conservation and a clean environment, even when they themselves do not claim to be environmentalists.”⁸ Building on Alier’s perspective, this book explores a variety of responses to the extension of environmental conflicts in colonial territories, examining the efforts of Indigenous communities to protect their lands from the exploitative demands of the Spanish extractive regime. As the book excavates, Indigenous responses predominantly emerged in zones of contact, where native communities and individuals negotiated, opposed, or adapted to the extension of extractive regimes. By examining Indigenous reactions to environmental conflicts taking place in these contact zones, the book provides valuable historical insights into the heterogeneous experiences associated with the expansion of European colonialism in the early modern period.

Thesis 5. The contact zone serves as the gateway through which colonial forces gain access to communal resources and forms of life, while concurrently acting as the battleground for Indigenous communities to respond to the predation of their vital resources.

Social and racial hierarchizations enforced by European imperialism placed Indigenous communities in vulnerable positions, exposing them to economic hardships and ecological disruptions caused by extractive regimes. In response, some communities adapted to these new realities, while others resisted the colonial predation of communal resources through diverse means. Both resistance and adaptation were deeply influenced by the uneven distribution of environmental conflicts, shaped by the power imbalances of imperial expansion and its impact on communal forms of life. Understanding these responses requires excavating the complexities of addressing the power imbalances of European imperialism from a perspective that interrogates how Indigenous individuals and communities navigated Western conceptual frameworks, legal configurations, and languages. Instead of excavating Indigenous knowledge and practices as distinct from Western frameworks and modern environmental attitudes, portraying them as embodying a purer and more direct connection to nature, this book examines how Indigenous communities and individuals countered European extractive regimes by utilizing and, in some instances, challenging Western conceptions, languages, and impositions.

8 See Joan Martínez Alier, *The Environmentalism of the Poor*, viii.

Through this lens, to fully understand the meanings behind these responses taking place in the contact zone, one must scrutinize the spaces where Indigenous historical agency is stifled or persists as an enduring resistance against the predatory dynamics enforced by European powers. Thesis 5 discusses the notion of the contact zone, a term coined by Mary Louise Pratt. This concept characterizes spaces of cultural intersection marked by “highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths as they are lived out in many parts of the world today.”⁹ Within the understanding of the concept developed in this book, the contact zone takes on a new meaning, as it serves to interrogate the battleground where Indigenous communities confronted the perilous cannibalization of their vital resources—labor, raw materials, energy, food, knowledge—and traditional ways of life. It also serves to examine how the extension of capitalist epistemologies operates in zones of contact that were not entirely subject to the logics of power, capital, and environment-making introduced by Spanish colonialism. This thesis posits that the contact zone serves as the very site where colonial forces relentlessly consume communal forms of life, while also being the arena where Indigenous communities and individuals respond to the predation of their vital resources.

Thesis 6. Racial configurations play a pivotal role in structuring social hierarchies of domination upholding the uneven distribution of environmental conflicts. These hierarchies are deeply entwined with the extraction of social and economic value from subjects subordinated to racial capitalist regimes.

Thesis 6 asserts that racial configurations occupy a central position in structuring the hierarchies and conceptual frameworks that underpin capitalist extractive regimes. These racial configurations, intimately intertwined with processes of dispossession and accumulation, serve as essential pillars upholding the systems of exploitation developed through colonial rule. In this respect, this book argues that racial hierarchies structure and legitimize the uneven distribution of environmental conflicts, particularly in capitalist regimes deeply rooted in the extraction of social and ecological value from marginalized racial groups. As the book contends, the disruption of relationships between human beings, as well as between Indigenous life and nature, sustains the extension of capitalist expropriation and the reduction of collective life within non-capitalized areas.

9 Mary Louise Pratt, “Arts of the Contact Zone,” *Profession* (1991): 33–40, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25595469>.

Thesis 6 and its analysis in chapters 3 and 4 adhere to the dominant understanding of racial capitalism, as articulated by scholars such as Cedric Robinson, Jodi Melamed, and Brenna Bhandar.¹⁰ As Melamed has observed, capitalist expropriation requires “social separateness” and the “unequal differentiation of human value.”¹¹ To sustain the social severance that legitimizes capitalist expropriation, diverse actors actively engaged in the construction of legal arrangements, environmental theories, educational agendas, and historical narratives, playing a pivotal role in solidifying racial regimes where new subjectivities and categories were established through the domains of law, science, pedagogy, and history. The interaction between these domains and narratives shaped the power imbalances of the early colonial period that structured the violent expropriation of Indigenous lands, labor, knowledge, and resources. Rather than being merely outcomes of power imbalances and competition among social groups, racial theories and racism organize the fragmentation of relationships between human beings and the rest of nature, sustaining the uneven distribution of socio-ecological conflicts that emerged from European expansion.

Thesis 7. The concept of ecological imperialism, as explored in this book, pertains to the intent to legitimize and impose conceptual frameworks, categories, and historical narratives sustaining Western authority over human-nature relations.

Incorporating and building upon the preceding propositions, the seventh thesis offers a comprehensive framework that encompasses diverse discourses, categories, and practices sustaining authority over human-nature relations. Consequently, ecological imperialism refers to colonial power infrastructures and ideologies associated with the authority to govern human-nature interactions. It encompasses the imposition of Western practices, ideologies, and racial hierarchies onto colonized territories, dictating land use, resource extraction, and environmental management to the detriment of Indigenous cultures and webs of life. In this book, ecological imperialism is thoroughly explored as the intentional act of Western powers to impose conceptual frameworks and narratives defining or silencing historical agencies over nature. This deliberate effort serves to assert and

10 See Cedric J. Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000 [1983]); Jodi Melamed. “Racial Capitalism.” *Critical Ethnic Studies* 1, no. 1 (2015): 76–85. <https://doi.org/10.5749/jcritethnstud.1.1.0076>; Brenna Bhandar. *Colonial Lives of Property: Law, Land, and Racial Regimes of Ownership* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018).

11 Jodi Melamed. “Racial Capitalism.” 77–78.

maintain their authority to possess and exploit colonial lands, perpetuating extractive regimes across different environments and populations. The concept of ecological imperialism is primarily examined as a complex political phenomenon that intricately interlaces with systems of power. It operates as a mechanism that justifies and prolongs possession and use of colonial lands and resources through different domains, such as war, law, science, history, and philosophy. In this point, the book goes on to present an alternative perspective to Alfred W. Crosby's original conceptualization of ecological imperialism. It highlights that the fundamental political categories embedded within ecological imperialism are underpinned by historical narratives and conceptual frameworks that perpetuate the expansion of extractive racial regimes.

II. The Capitalist Epistemologies of Ecological Imperialism

This book reveals how writing about historical processes associated with Western imperialism is an activity inevitably entrenched in ideas about human relationships to the environment and the Earth. Thus, it adopts the term ecological imperialism, first coined by Alfred W. Crosby to explain European colonization through the circulation of diseases, domesticated plants, and animals.¹² In his book *Ecological Imperialism*, Crosby introduced ecology as a crucial factor in European expansion, arguing that the “portmanteau biota” that accompanied Europeans in their wars and settlements helped them to eradicate whole societies in what he called the Neo-Europes. For Crosby, humans were not a planetary force but rather biological agents. As he had observed in *The Columbian Exchange*, “man is a biological entity before he is a Roman Catholic or a capitalist or anything else [...]. The first step to understanding man is to consider him as a biological entity which has existed on this globe, affecting, and in turn, affected by his fellow organisms, for many thousands of years.”¹³ Thus, Crosby's use of ecological imperialism primarily served to provide a historical perspective on European

12 Alfred W. Crosby, Jr., *Ecological Imperialism: The Biological Expansion of Europe, 900–1900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986).

13 Alfred W. Crosby, Jr., *The Columbian Exchange: Biological and Cultural Consequences of 1492* (London: Praeger, 1972, 2003), xxv. For an interpretation of how Crosby's vision of environmental history has evolved in the age of the Anthropocene, see Dipesh Chakrabarty, “The Climate of History: Four Theses,” *Critical Inquiry* 35, no. 2 (Winter 2009): 197–222, <https://doi.org/10.1086/596640>. Also in Dipesh Chakrabarty, *The Climate of History in a Planetary Age*.

“biological expansion” while leaving out the political dimensions inherent in the concept.¹⁴

In contrast to Crosby’s examination, this book focuses on how writing about new patterns of human-environmental relationships reflect on divergent perspectives regarding the expansion of empire-making ideologies and colonial infrastructures. Therefore, if imperialism in the Iberian world refers to the ability and intention to articulate and impose Catholic beliefs and universal values, ecological imperialism applies in this book to the intention to legitimate and impose principles and practices associated with the authority to govern human-nature interactions.¹⁵ Here, the book contends that empire-making processes—which is, processes arising from the annexation of lands and the extension of extractive regimes—are not only driven by military power but also by the intention and ability to alter and govern human-nature relations in subjugated lands.¹⁶ To excavate the strategies and ideologies sustaining the colonial capacity to govern human-nature relations, the book puts under scrutiny a heterogeneous set of responses that emerged from the expansion of extractive regimes in the context of Iberian globalization. Consequently, the analytical matter of this book is narratives that engendered theories and responses to those ecological empire-making forces structuring interactions between humans and the rest of nature in the early modern period.

In the last three decades, the notion that capitalism necessitates an ongoing externalization of ecological burdens and social conflicts in peripheral regions has infused a significant discourse centered on delineating the enduring nature of what Karl Marx originally termed primitive accumulation. This perspective has found resonance in the works of scholars such

14 Alfred W. Crosby’s definition of “ecological imperialism” focuses on explaining a form of “biological expansion” through a methodological approach that inverted the old question of natural—or rather ecological—determinism. For a criticism of Crosby’s notion of ecological imperialism, see Jason W. Moore, *Capitalism in the Web of Life: Ecology and the Accumulation of Capital* (London–New York: Verso, 2015), 80. For a previous reflection on the notion of ecological imperialism, see also John Bellamy Foster and Brett Clark, “Ecological Imperialism: The Curse of Capitalism,” *Socialist Register* 40 (2009): 186–201.

15 For a definition of imperialism in the Iberian world, see Anthony Pagden, *The Burdens of Empire: 1539 to the Present* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015). See also Giuseppe Marcocci, “Iberian Theories of Empire in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 83 (April 2022): 671–83, <https://doi.org/10.1353/jhi.2022.0032>.

16 In this book, the term empire-making process refers to a spectrum of actions and strategies involved in building and expanding an empire. The term directs attention towards the defining characteristics and power structures associated with the capacity to impose specific practices, infrastructures, and discourses regarding the definition of human-nature interactions in colonial and occupied territories.

as David Harvey, Joan Martinez Alier, Nancy Fraser, and Jason W. Moore among others. Since it seemed unusual to call an ongoing process ‘primitive’ or ‘original,’ David Harvey substituted these terms with the concept of “accumulation by dispossession.” In Harvey’s *The New Imperialism*, this term encapsulates the ways in which renovated capitalist epistemologies and strategies expand by dispossessing people of their assets, including land, property, and means of production.¹⁷ This means that the continuous process of accumulation encompasses intricate mechanisms of dispossession that have evolved over time by mobilizing different capitalist epistemologies—that is, ways of knowing that are inseparable from the extension of commodity frontier strategies in colonial territories.¹⁸ In dialogue with these debates on the relationship between imperialism, capital, and nature, this book excavates the multifaceted character of responses to the new patterns of environment-making associated with the expansion of European powers, analyzing how various writers responded to the extension of extractive regimes linked to Western imperialism. These responses, whether overtly sustaining the extension of new extractive regimes or not, played a role in the reconfiguration of modern attitudes, languages, and practices directing colonial patterns of human-initiated environment-making in the early modern period.

Before the industrial revolution, the repertoire of strategies associated with the extension of capitalist epistemologies was entirely dependent on the

17 In the context of the early modern Iberian expansion, this repertoire of strategies includes the commodification and privatization of land and communal resources, the forcible displacement of Indigenous populations, the erasure of Indigenous agency and labor, the violent imposition of forced labor and slavery, and the marginalization of alternative Indigenous modes of production, exchange, and consumption. For a comprehensive list of mechanisms of accumulation by dispossession, see David Harvey, *The New Imperialism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 145.

18 Jason W. Moore defines commodity frontiers and capitalism’s commodity frontier strategy from the fifteenth century onwards as central in the “repertoire of strategies for appropriating the unpaid work/energy of humans and the rest of nature outside the commodity system.” These frontiers were not mere geographical locations; rather, they represented dynamic processes and moveable sites where the vast resources from colonial peripheries were incorporated into the expanding capitalist regime. (Moore, *Capitalism in the Web of Life*, 63). This book applies this strategic repertoire to the analysis of early modern sources and responses to the ecological empire-making dynamics of the early modern period. For the debate on commodity frontiers, see Sven Beckert et al., “Commodity Frontiers and the Transformation of the Global Countryside: A Research Agenda,” *Journal of Global History* 16, no. 3 (December 2021): 435–50, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1740022820000455>. See also Jason W. Moore, “Capitalismo, Classe e a Fronteira Da Mercadoria: Em Defesa da Dialética, Contra a Aritmética Verde” (Prólogo), in *História das mercadorias: trabalho, meio ambiente e capitalismo mundial (séculos XVI–XIX)*, ed. Alex Gebara and Leonardo Marques (São Leopoldo: Casa Leiria, 2023), 21–39.

subordination of labor, land, and nature to the expanding world-economic landscape of the early modern period. In this book, locating the origins of contemporary environmental struggles within the early modern period, with its expanding conquests and extractive regimes, entails prioritizing the examination of global relations of power, capital, and nature over genealogies rooted in the history of imperial nations, industrial infrastructures, and the extraction and exploitation of fossil fuels.¹⁹ In the context of the reorganization of environmental dynamics that emerged through the expansion of Spanish colonialism, new techniques and epistemologies were crafted to consolidate the colonial capacity to govern human-nature relations in the newly annexed territories. Likewise, strategies of resistance emerged to dispute the environment-making patterns driven by Spanish imperialism. Moreover, interactions with non-European powers introduced Europe to novel perspectives, shaping ideologies and narratives regarding human interaction with nature on a planetary scale. Within this framework, new attitudes towards nature did not simply adhere to a Western genealogy of ideas and sensibilities; rather, they were shaped by divergent experiences that converged in zones of contact, extraction, and dispossession. As this book contends, the emergence of ideas and frameworks that shaped early modern attitudes towards nature cannot be confined to a singular Western episteme. Rather, they arose from conflict-ridden experiences stemming from the unequal distribution of social and ecological conflicts that unfolded during the early stages of globalization.

The fundamental political categories of ecological imperialism are rooted in the notion that the expansion of extractive regimes improved human-nature relations and that conquests and transoceanic navigations were the sign of human domination over nature and the Earth. From the second half of the fifteenth century, discourses about the capacity to transform the climate and environmental characteristics of colonized lands structured political ideas legitimizing European expansion. The Iberian expansion in Madeira, the Canary Islands, and the Caribbean engendered a collective memory associating deforestation and cultivation with the transformation

19 Whereas with the industrial revolution fossil empires could partially liberate their forces of production from the constraints of land and labor by creating mechanical energy outside of living bodies through carbonized solar energies, in the early modern world the primary way to increase forces of production was by generating new commodity frontiers where colonial powers expanded their extractive regimes. For the distinction between “somatic” and “exosomatic” energy regimes in pre-modern and modern periods, see J. R. McNeill, *Something New Under the Sun: An Environmental History of the 20th Century* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2000), 10–16. See also chapter 4 of Nancy Fraser, *Cannibal Capitalism* (London and New York: Verso, 2022).

of climates.²⁰ According to Richard Grove, following the fifteenth-century European expansion, “a sophisticated awareness developed of the growing capacity of man to radically alter his physical surroundings.”²¹ In other words, an awareness of anthropogenic climate change began to be experienced through the lens of Western colonialism. This implies that explorers were not only attracted in their maritime and continental expeditions by the hope of finding a paradise made of pristine landscapes and worldly richness, but they were also moved by their knowledge and ability to transform climates through the reproduction of colonial infrastructures and techniques of domination. Whereas narratives emphasizing the pristine and unused characteristics of colonized lands inspired possession and exploitation, references to undisciplined climates and hostile environments stimulated an approach that emphasizes the colonial orientation to appease and transform nature.

Yet, beyond prevalent narratives emphasizing the wild and unused characteristics of colonized lands, this book excavates alternative viewpoints, providing a much more heterogeneous and conflictual landscape of responses and interpretations regarding the reorganization of human-environmental interactions in the early modern world. The book puts under scrutiny the seven theses summarized in this introduction by detailing how the activity of writing about social and environmental change has been continuously marked by conflict-ridden experiences that arose from the patterns associated with European expansion. In doing so, it provides an analytical tool of narrative strategies to maintain a nuanced explanation of how different actors tried to impose, challenge, or contest political ideas and narrative frameworks associated with the environment-making of Western imperialism. The book thus offers an interpretation of Spanish ecological imperialism that details various strategies and responses offered by different Iberian and Indigenous actors. Through this lens, it makes visible how narratives concerning the political ecologies emerging from Spanish expansion were immersed in the increasingly uneven distribution of ecological and social conflicts during the early modern period. In sum, what

20 On the questions of deforestation, climate change, and the expansion of environmental, colonial frontiers from Madeira and the Canary Islands to the Caribbean and the Americas, see Jason W. Moore, “Madeira, Sugar, and the Conquest of Nature in the ‘First’ Sixteenth Century, Part I: From ‘Island of Timber’ to Sugar Revolution, 1420–1506,” *Review (Fernand Braudel Center)* 32, no. 4 (2009): 345–90, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41427474>. See also Jean Baptiste Fressoz and Fabien Locher, “Chapitre 1, La vraie découverte de Christophe Colomb,” in *Les Révoltes du ciel*.

21 Richard Grove, *Green Imperialism*, 24.

this book shows is that writing about anthropogenic environment-making processes reflects specific dynamics of domination that Indigenous writers, Spanish chroniclers, and natural historians grappled with as they negotiated the terms of Western ecological imperialism.

III. Planetary Human Agencies in the Contact Zone

One of the central lines of inquiry in this book refers to the examination of historical agencies defining the environment-making processes that emerged from Spanish expansion and imperialism. The book interrogates the concept of human agency over nature by excavating cultural entanglements and environmental narratives within contact zones. The examination of human agencies in Spanish narratives responds to the crucial question of how early modern authors understood, in various ways, the capacity of humans to shape and govern nature. This vital question intersects directly with a broader exploration of how various actors documented the colonial capacity to shape and dominate the environment, and how Indigenous communities and individuals responded to the extractive goals of Spanish imperialism. The book reveals how strategies to silence the agency of Indigenous peoples over nature were central to the formation of a system of domination structured upon racial hierarchies and configurations. Likewise, it shows how Indigenous authors, when adopting European frameworks, were able to challenge prevailing discourses and narratives enclosing Indigenous life and knowledge into the extractive patterns of Spanish imperialism.

Another meaning of historical agency refers to Western ways of thinking about other-than-human beings as disposable resources without agency. This perspective becomes evident when Western forces come into play, treating nonhuman natures as resources to be captured and incorporated into an expanding world economy without regard for their local forms of autonomy. This extractive paradigm enables a framework of action that operates upon local realities at different levels. First, treating nonhuman natures as disposable resources that can be moved and traded implies subordinating local webs of life and ecosystems to the expansive processes and accumulation cycles of capitalism. Second, this form of subordination needs a complementary element that refers to the Western capacity to silence Indigenous connections with nature and the environment. This intentional suppression of Indigenous agencies and knowledges at play in extractive regimes stands as a central tactic of Western imperialism, legitimizing the extraction of value without fair compensation. An essential aspect of this

book is its endeavor to unveil the extensive scope of Western imperialism's extractive ambitions, which reach well beyond the realm of physical resources. The book explores the complex landscape of non-compensated extraction of Indigenous knowledge and ways of life, aiming to reveal how this extraction permeates political categories, conceptual frameworks, and historical narratives. As the book delves into Indigenous responses in the contact zone, it seeks to emphasize the capacity of Indigenous communities and actors to adeptly use Western frameworks and categories in their resistance against the ideological forces of the Spanish extractive regime.

The book's four chapters offer a valuable analysis of how different actors responded to environment-making processes by legitimating, silencing, or challenging the disruption of local forms of life by Spanish and European powers. The four chapters of the book analyze a corpus of narratives—chronicles, natural histories, treatises on war, codices, legal and historical accounts—as the product of mediations between translators, writers, and informants mostly taking place in the Philippines, the Americas, and Europe. The book commences its exploration by scrutinizing the profound impact of Iberian encounters in China, igniting intricate debates concerning imperialism, war, and the expansion of extractive colonial regimes. Transitioning to the second chapter, the focus shifts to Spanish natural histories that detail the expansion of extractive zones through the suppression of Indigenous agency. It provides an examination of accounts and strategies that legitimized the extension of extractive regimes through the erasure of Indigenous agency and labor. The third chapter is centered around Indigenous responses within the contact zone, delving into the theories and approaches that explore the convergence of ecological humanities and Indigenous studies. Furthermore, the third chapter presents a compelling analysis of the work by Felipe Guamán Poma de Ayala, highlighting its significance as an antecedent of what is now recognized as an environmentalism of the poor. Finally, the book culminates in its last chapter, unraveling the complex interplay between narratives of affluence and racial capitalism through a comparison of Dutch and Iberian legal, scientific, and historical accounts.

Under the title “War, Trade, and Imperialism in Iberian Narratives of China,” the first chapter analyzes Iberian narratives about China and their role in shaping European ideas about human relationships to the environment. As the chapter demonstrates, narratives about China were influential in decentering perceptions about the capacity of European powers to govern nature and manage vast territories and societies. Drawing from a diverse array of sources, it reveals how China served as a countermodel for

historians, challenging prevailing notions and legal frameworks regarding the legitimacy of Spanish colonialism. Ultimately, it asserts that Iberian narratives about China paved the way for a new paradigm, wherein racial hierarchies and environmental dynamics played crucial roles in justifying the ongoing, illegitimate appropriation of Indigenous lands, labor, and resources.

Chapter two argues that the suppression of Indigenous agency over nature provided the framework upon which European natural historians built an authority over human-environmental processes in colonial territories. Entitled “Silencing Indigenous Agency through Natural History,” it focuses on José de Acosta’s *Historia natural y moral de las Indias* (1590). The chapter delves into environmental theories developed by Acosta as part of a broader movement aimed at suppressing Indigenous historical agency over nature. It demonstrates how these principles were based upon the extension of colonial property regimes in the Indies. Ultimately, the chapter demonstrates that natural histories solidify hierarchies of domination between humans and the rest of nature, wherein Indigenous agency is subordinated to the extractive goals of Western imperialism.

Chapter three focuses on Indigenous narrative strategies and responses to the colonial reorganization of human relationships to nature. It argues that Indigenous historians underscored the pivotal role of native communities in the colonial reconfiguration of human-nature relations, aiming to challenge the extension of extractive regimes in the Andean region. Titled “Indigenous Responses in the Contact Zone,” it focuses on the writings of Felipe Guamán Poma de Ayala (ca. 1550s–1616). It contends that Guamán Poma’s work contains a set of responses that arise from the struggles of impoverished communities, underlining the need to confront the violent expropriation of Indigenous resources. The chapter argues that Guamán Poma’s *First New Chronicle* is a direct result of the ongoing conflict between non-capitalized environments and the expansive dynamics of capital accumulation. Instead of focusing on Indigenous writings to uncover non-Western ecologies, this chapter examines how Indigenous authors have employed European languages and frameworks to challenge extractive environmental regimes that obscure the suppression of Indigenous life and agency over nature.

Chapter four interrogates how narratives of abundance were grounded in racial constructs. Entitled “Affluence and Racial Capitalism,” it explores the works of Dutch and Iberian scientists, jurists, and historians who composed their pieces within European networks, examining perspectives on the extractive potential of nature in different maritime and colonial

environments. Through this examination, the chapter contends that legal, scientific, and historical narratives legitimized the extension of extractive regimes through the consolidation of racial configurations. By focusing on narratives that celebrate the abundance and accumulation of resources, this chapter reveals how racial frameworks and configurations are structured upon the extension of environmental conflicts into zones of contact and extraction resulting from European expansion.

To conclude, the book offers a comprehensive lens through which to view the contemporary planetary crisis, exploring the historical foundations of Western ecological imperialism and its resonating impact on current discussions encompassing war, ecology, and imperialism. It provides an interpretation on how ecological imperialism, rooted in the past, continues to shape modern ideas and decisions pertaining to the imbalances of power and domination arising from war, climate emergency, and neocolonial struggles. In its ultimate essence, this conclusive retrospective examination underscores that writing the planetary crisis from the edges of the poor transcends contemporary narratives, stretching far beyond our current context. It reaches into various forms of collective action and social engagement that have woven through the histories of European imperialism over the past five centuries. In doing so, the conclusion invites the reader to confront the historical underpinnings that have shaped our understanding of the planetary crisis through historical texts and processes deeply rooted in the long-standing expansion of Western forces beginning in the early modern period.

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