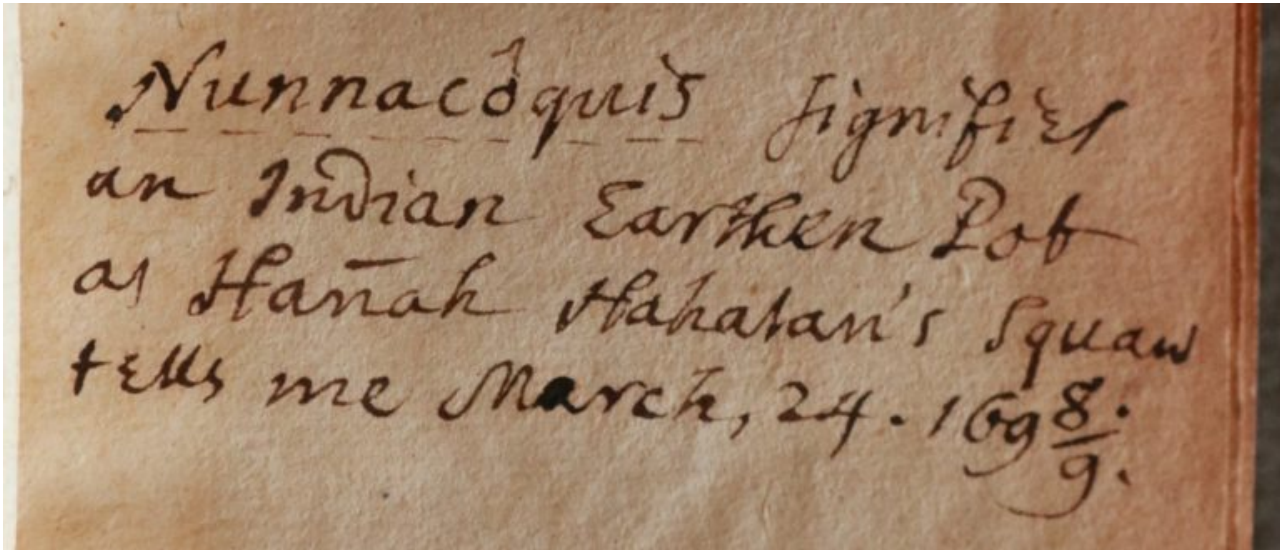
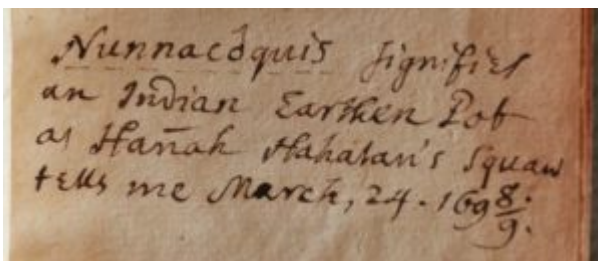


# Finding Nunnacôquis: A Tale of Online Catalogs, Marginalia, and Native Women's Linguistic Knowledge



Nunnacôquis signifies  
an Indian Earthen Pot  
as Hannah Hahatan's Squaw  
tells me March, 24. 1698/9.



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An inscription, "Nunnacôquis signifies an Indian Earthen Pot as Hannah Hahatan's Squaw tells me March, 24 1698/9," in Samuel Sewall's handwriting. Written on a front flyleaf of José de Acosta, *De natura novi orbis libri duo: Et de promulgatione Evangelii apud barbaros, sive, De procuranda Indorum salute, libri sex* (Cologne, 1596). Collection of the Massachusetts Historical Society.

The role of serendipity in the archives is not to be underestimated, especially when searching for people whom the collectors and keepers of the material did not consider to be important in their own right. A couple of years ago, I had just finished a short-term fellowship in the study of visual culture at the American Antiquarian Society and was rounding out my research time in Massachusetts with a couple of days of poking around the collections of the Massachusetts Historical Society. Although I had used their materials extensively for my first book, *Faithful Bodies: Performing Religion and Race in the Puritan Atlantic*, I had new research objectives for their catalog this time around. I was in the beginning stages of a new manuscript on cultural exchange through music and dance in processions in the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Americas, and I wanted to familiarize myself with parts of that world

and sources where the European language in use was not English.

Using the not-so-efficient vacuum approach to research in which one scans through a chunk of an archive's holdings based on publication or creation date (graduate students reading this article, beware! This approach does not generally line up with efforts to shorten time to degree), I decided to call up a 1596 publication by José de Acosta, *De natura novi orbis libri duo: Et de promulgatione Evangelii apud barbaros, sive, De procuranda Indorum salute, libri sex*. The part of the volume that I thought I was interested in, *De natura novi orbis*, was first published at Salamanca in 1588 and is one well-known example among many that collected and distributed European perceptions of the peoples and places that to them were new. The Jesuit priest drew on classical thinkers, Christian theologians, and his own experiences in Peru and Mexico to narrate his view of the hierarchy of human civilizations and the inferior yet improvable status of the Indigenous peoples of the Americas. This account spread more widely in the vernacular as the first two books of *Historia natural y moral de las Indias* (1590) and in an English translation first published in 1604. Although I don't (yet) read Latin, I thought it might be fun to see what I could puzzle out since I had read it in Spanish.

In addition to indulging this time-intensive post-tenure impulse, there was the added bonus that Puritan merchant, magistrate, and diarist Samuel Sewall had owned this particular volume, which also explains how it came to be part of the collections of the MHS. The online record for *De natura novi orbis* did not note any marginalia or signatures in Sewall's hand, but his part in the volume's provenance gave me a plausible scholarly rationale for needing to see the object rather than reading the text in digital format—I was performing due diligence in checking for any evidence of Sewall's reception of Acosta's ideas, not playing around in the catalog and paging items from the reading room simply because the power of touching books that are centuries old still amazes me. What follows is, in part, a cautionary tale about relying on catalog entries to indicate all the elements of an item's story, metadata or no metadata.

As it turns out, neither Sewall's nor Acosta's authorial activities are the inspiration for this piece. Instead, a Punkapoag woman's knowledge of Massachusetts and English is the structuring warp for the patterns of Indigenous women's work, land, language, identity, and community survivance in this particular piece of the archive. The immediately perceptible aspects of the text are of faded brown inked letters, traced with a scratchy quill that caught on the surface of the sixteenth-century paper made from cloth, a flyleaf of a book printed in Cologne in 1596 and later bound in leather, now aged into a soft and crumbling suede. The inked letters are in Sewall's hand, dated March 24, 1698/9, and they read, "Nunnacôquis signifies an Indian Earthen Pot as Hannah Hahatan's Squaw tells me."

My jaw actually dropped and my mouth formed a reading-room-appropriate silent "wow." Not only marginalia, but marginalia mentioning one Native woman by name and another by household position. While it wasn't exactly an unexpected place

for Indians to be (to lift Philip Deloria [Dakota]'s phrasing) since Acosta's text was about his impressions of Natives and Sewall was active in colonial missionary efforts, I had not anticipated this particular appearance. The librarian supervising the reading room didn't know anything about the inscription, so I took some photos and then returned the book to him so he could make sure the catalog entry was updated to mention Sewall's marginalia.

It had been long enough since I'd read Sewall's diary that I couldn't remember if he ever commented on vocabulary, although I was fairly certain that he had not written nearly as voluminously on language as had Massachusetts exile and missionary entrepreneur Roger Williams, author of the much-studied *Key into the Language of America* (1643). The word "nunnacôquis" and the object to which it referred also piqued my interest because I could not picture the context in which Sewall would have sought this information or Hahatan would have offered it. I wish I could say that I thought to look for an analysis of Sewall and his use of Acosta in the MHS *Proceedings* or at the very least in a specialized database, because it seems like those would be properly serious and scholarly modes of conducting research.

But I didn't. I Googled it.

Not Sewall's name, because that would return too many search results, but parts of the inscription. This research indicated that MHS members had once known of the inscription and discussed it at a meeting of the society, activity that was later published in its *Proceedings*. In 1893, Samuel A. Green connected "nunnacôquis" to a tract of land near present-day Ayer and Groton with the "Indian name" of Nonacoicus, a naming noted in the 1659 survey of the bounds of Simon Willard's farm. Green considered one version a variation of the other, linking the words not only by their syllables but also by familial and ecclesiastical connections: Samuel Willard, Simon's son, was the minister at the church where Sewall worshipped, so Sewall would have been familiar with the farm's name. Green reported correspondence from a lawyer in Ayer who parsed the etymology as meaning "earthen pot," a reference to a local plateau that sat opposite to where Nonacoicus Brook flows into the Nashua River. Five years later, he added another correspondent's explanation that the word's primary meaning was a different kind of "dry" pot, one made out of soapstone, and that the name, having lost its locative affix *-es-et*, recorded the existence of a soapstone quarry in the area rather than the shape of a landscape feature. This philologist living in Sag Harbor, Long Island, referred to a cognate "coquies" (meaning "earthen pot") that appeared on a vocabulary told by Unkechaugs in Puspatuck, L.I., to Thomas Jefferson, the only vocabulary which he personally recorded rather than gathered.

These late nineteenth-century Anglo-American musings on the significance of this text were intended to display their authors' knowledge on what were presented as esoteric matters. This framing, in turn, was essential to their overall purpose of building the United States as a "civilized" and white nation. The narration of Indian disappearance authenticated the plot line of

America's passage into modernity with colonial New England as its birthplace, a process that historian Jean M. O'Brien (White Earth Ojibwe) has powerfully articulated as "firsting and lasting." Hobbyist philologists often distorted or fabricated southern Algonquian words and naming practices in service to the overriding purpose of writing Indians out of industrialized progress and substituting white New Englanders as the "first." This predilection makes it impossible to use their work as straightforward sources for understanding Native senses of place.

As I was cross-checking sources in an attempt to determine how accurate any of the associations that Samuel Green reported for nunnacôquis might be, I came upon another nest of nineteenth-century white New Englanders' deployment of "the Indian" to narrate an American (read: United States) cultural origin story that distorted, obscured, or ignored Native presence and place. The tangle of connections involved that giant of seventeenth-century Puritan missionary culture, John Eliot, and under-credited Native translators like James Printer who had the expert knowledge that made it possible to translate the Christian Bible into Massachusett. It also included key figures of mainstream American literary culture such as the poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow and authors and *Atlantic Monthly* editors William Dean Howells and Thomas Bailey Aldrich. Mixed in with the deliberate racism and tropes of vanished Indians, these documents also displayed a heavy dose of nineteenth-century posturing veiled as scholarly commentary, a veritable gem of snark.

While cavorting in the voluminous records of white nineteenth-century United States literary culture was diverting (especially the letter in which an author complained to an editor that he supposed he could keep his article to the requested length just as he could cut off his dog's body behind the ears, but that both articles and dogs were better with heads and tails), as a historian of the seventeenth century, I still wanted to know more about Sewall's interactions with Acosta's volume and why he chose to record the answer to his vocabulary question on this flyleaf rather than other paper. He was not in such desperate need of paper on which to write that he had to use every available blank space. And I was not convinced that the nineteenth-century philologists had it right, that Sewall had asked about the meaning of nunnacôquis because he was a member of Samuel Willard's congregation, whose father had once owned a farm referred to as Nonacoicus; or that the farm's name would have been in Sewall's mind because his diary showed that he often visited with the Ushers, who had bought most of its acreage from Simon Willard.

Perhaps Sewall's diary, published in a modern scholarly version, had a clue to his thought process: a mention of reading Acosta, or some mention of his ideas. No such luck. But his diary was not the only Sewall material available at a distance from archival holdings of his letters and papers. About a year before writing down the results of his vocabulary lesson, Sewall had finished and published *Phaenomena quaedam Apocalyptica ad aspectum Novi Orbis configurata. Or, some few lines towards a description of the New Heaven* (1697), a tract in which he argued that the Americas were the prophesied location of the

flashpoint of the Apocalypse and the following "New Jerusalem." Skimming through *Phaenomena* occasioned another sensation of synergy: Sewall made extensive use of Acosta in his tract. A full analysis of exactly how he did so is something for the future. For the present purposes, I was most interested in his earliest reference to Acosta, which comes in the first few pages as part of his initial case for America as the place for the new "Government of Christ" and serves as supporting evidence for occurrence of events described in Psalm 2:9 (King James version), "Thou shalt break them with a rod of iron, thou shalt dash them in pieces like a potters vessel." In the preceding verse (with which Sewall began the section), God tells kings and rulers who submit themselves to divine mandates, "Ask of me, and I shall give thee the heathen for thine inheritance, and the uttermost parts of the earth for thy possession." Here Sewall deployed scripture to equate non-Christian Indigenous people with pottery, explicit evidence that he was thinking about earthen vessels.

But there was even more to the connection with pottery than describing the empires of the Triple Alliance and the Inka in the time of initial Spanish invasion as shattered ceramic vessels, or as Sewall put it, "Christ's *Spanish-Iron* Rod walking amongst the earthen pots; whereby great Kingdoms, and Empires were quickly broken to shivers, with many millions of their subjects" (3). Sewall drew on Acosta for examples of the place of pottery and related implements in "the *Mexican Nation*," such as the ritual breaking of "all their Vessels, and stuff" at the end of each cycle of 52 years "which they call'd a Wheel" (3). More closely related to the marginalia on the flyleaf of *De natura novi orbis*, however, was his explanation that "the Pots wherein they boiled their fish, and flesh, &c. were made of earth; as also innumerable other vessels: most were enjoind to use no other" (3).

Earthen pots as metaphors for Indigenous peoples and an essay asserting America as the origin point of the millennium were getting closer to Sewall's inspiration for writing the note than the late nineteenth-century white literary posturing and appropriations of Indian languages. But I wanted to return to the text. Not the source of the paper on which the words were written, or the intention of the man who wrote the words. "As Hannah Hahaton's Squaw told me": the written record of a verbal exchange between a Punkapoag woman and an English man, the woman's name unrecorded by the man. In the proper light, this marginalia in Sewall's hand signals not just the history of Sewall and his use of Acosta, but of the woman who served in Hannah Hahaton's household. In the exchange with Sewall, she conveyed a minute fraction of her linguistic knowledge, knowledge that he then appropriated. The power that enabled this appropriation reminds us of the materiality of intellectual history, that the lineage of ideas does not exist independently of their embodiment. The full scope of this woman's individual intellectual story has not been preserved in this piece of the archive any more than has her name, but her translation of a word for an earthenware pot hints at women's skill in processing, storing, and preparing food and a worldview anchored by connections to other humans and to other-than-human beings that inhabit a particular place.

The uses and everyday activities that structure this short text are Punkapoag artifacts, even though its surroundings seem to suggest the dominance of European and Euroamerican influences. An English colonist inscribed the text on the pages of a book written by a Jesuit priest about Indigenous peoples, a text interpreted a century later by Euroamerican men with an interest in “vanishing” the Indian from their contemporary context to museum collections documenting the ancient past. By the time Sewall inquired about the meaning of “nunnacôquis” at the end of the seventeenth century, many of the pots used in Punkapoag and other “praying Indian” towns with concentrations of Native Christians were of European or Euroamerican manufacture. Archaeologist Stephen Silliman has argued for the classification of objects as Native American or European/Euroamerican according to their use and meaning in a given community, rather than their materials or supposed cultural origin. If ceramic tableware in a given setting was primarily used by Natives, then that tableware becomes a Native artifact, rather than being always and entirely European/Euroamerican.

To find out more about Punkapoag contexts and the lives of Native individuals, I turned to the named woman to see how tracing the threads of her experience might reveal broader patterns of Indigenous women’s lives. Hannah Hahaton’s name appears elsewhere in the colonial archive, on a deed also signed or marked by William Ahauton (other extant spellings of the last name include Nahaton, Nahawton, Nahuton, Ahawton, and Ahhaton) and three of their siblings. The 1680 document “conveys to Dedham all their interest in a tract of land as it lyeth towards the northerly side of the bounds of Dedham by the Great Falls in the Charles River and bounded upon the Charles River towards the East and upon said River up stream as the river lyeth and so continuing abutting upon said river until it came to the brook called Natick Saw Mill Brook,” closing the bounds with further details about topographical features and waterways. William and Hannah Hahaton’s leadership followed the violence and upheaval of the 1676-77 conflict often called King Philip’s War, including the English imprisonment of Mohegan, Massachusetts, and Nipmuc allies on a barren island in Boston Harbor. After the end of declared hostilities, the siblings moved from Natick to Punkapoag, another Native Christian community, near Blue Hill.

Scholars studying this category of texts have made suggestions about classification parallel to Silliman’s suggestions about that process regarding ceramicware. Although land conveyances were texts that very much existed as part of an English colonial legal structure, some of them also recorded the adaptive political performance of leaders who maintained connections to land. This process is clearer in a series of deeds that began just a few years later, written in Massachusetts and concerning land on Noepe (Martha’s Vineyard). In these documents, Wampanoag queen sachem Wunnatuckquannum witnessed the connection through her body as sachem between land and people, while fulfilling the increasingly intrusive requirements of colonial English law.

The Commonwealth of Massachusetts today considers Punkapoag to be part of Blue Hill Reservation, a state park known for its variety of hiking trails, views of Boston, and Ponkapoag Pond. The eastern shore houses an Appalachian Mountain

Club camp with cabins as well as a promontory labeled “Missionary’s Point,” an invocation of the site’s earlier colonial history. To the west of the pond and the extending wetlands lies a paved footpath that runs along the edge of Ponkapoag Golf Course. Trail maps label the path as “Redman Farm Path,” named not after a racial epithet but after the family name of one of the early English colonists who settled there.

In the creation of the text at hand, the member of Hannah Hahaton’s household who shared her facility with Massachusetts and English preceded Sewall’s curiosity and his selection of the flyleaf of Acosta’s combined volume as the place to record the answer to his question while omitting the name of the source. The phrase contains her connection to ways of naming and knowing the land of first light that fought to survive colonial violence, and power structures that worked to dispossess Native communities and alienate and overlay their geographies. And its survival in alphabetic form is indicative of the literacy practices that are part of what made it possible for later generations of her extended kin to reclaim related knowledge and bring Wôpanâk (Wampanoag language) back into the world of living languages under the guidance of Jessie “Little Doe” Baird (Mashpee Wampanoag) and the [Wôpanâk Language Reclamation Project](#). Rather than shattered ceramics and the end times, the short notation of the English translation for *nunnacôquis* thus suggests overlapping worlds, the labor of hands and back, the meaning given by mind and tongue, the memory work of colonists to erase Indigenous understandings of the land, and past and current work by Native communities, Indigenous scholars, and non-Native scholars to remap and reclaim Native spaces.

## Further Reading

A good recent introduction to efforts to decolonize archaeology is Margaret Bruchac, Siobhan Hart, and H. Martin Wobst, eds., *Indigenous Archaeologies: A Reader on Decolonization* (London, 2016); for specific articles used for this essay, see Stephen W. Silliman, “[Change and Continuity, Practice and Memory: Native American Persistence in Colonial New England](#),” *American Antiquity* 74:2 (April 2009): 211–30; and Russell G. Handsman, “[Survivance Strategies and the Materialities of Mashantucket Pequot Labor in the Later Eighteenth Century](#),” *Historical Archaeology* (November 27, 2017): 1–19. For decolonization of scholarship more generally, see Jodi A. Byrd, *The Transit of Empire: Indigenous Critiques of Colonialism* (Minneapolis, 2011).

On Wampanoag assertions of sovereignty over land even within a colonial legal framework, see Stephanie Fitzgerald, “‘I, Wunnatuckquannum, This Is My Hand’: Native Performance in Massachusetts Language Indian Deeds,” in *Native Acts: Indian Performance, 1603-1832*, ed. Joshua David Bellin and Laura L. Mielke (Lincoln, 2012): 145–67. For scholarship on layered Native understandings of land and place and contested placemaking in Northeastern North America, see the foundational Kathleen Bragdon, *Native People of Southern New England, 1500-1650*



(Norman, Okla., 1996) and Bragdon, *Native People of Southern New England, 1650-1775* (Norman, Okla., 2009); and more recently Lisa Brooks, *The Common Pot: The Recovery of Native Space in the Northeast* (Minneapolis, 2008). A small sampling of scholars who have built on this work include Margaret M. Bruchac and Siobhan M. Hart, "[Materiality and Autonomy in the Pocumtuck Homeland](#)," *Archaeologies* 8:3 (December 1, 2012): 293–312, and Christine M. DeLucia, *Memory Lands: King Philip's War and the Place of Violence in the Northeast* (New Haven, 2018). Lisa Brooks's latest monograph applies collaborative methodologies to investigating the spaces of what the English and subsequent scholarship came to call King Philip's War in *Our Beloved Kin: A New History of King Philip's War* (New Haven, 2018). Another entry into this active area of scholarship is Micah A. Pawling, "[Wəlastəkwey \(Maliseet\) Homeland: Waterscapes and Continuity within the Lower St. John River Valley, 1784-1900](#)," *Acadiensis: Journal of the History of the Atlantic Region / Revue d'histoire de la region atlantique* 46:2 (November 8, 2017): 5–34.

Much of the preceding research also engages with the fiction of the supposed incompatibility of modernity and Indigenous peoples, a topic central to Philip J. Deloria, *Indians in Unexpected Places* (Lawrence, Kan., 2004) and Jean M. O'Brien, *Firsting and Lasting: Writing Indians Out of Existence in New England* (Minneapolis, 2010).

For two examples of the settler colonialist local histories most relevant to this essay that demonstrate the simultaneous reproduction, distortion, and appropriation of the Native past and present, see Samuel A. Green and Elizabeth Sewall Hill, *Facts Relating to the History of Groton, Massachusetts* (Cambridge, Mass., 1914); Daniel T. Huntoon, *History of the Town of Canton* (Cambridge, Mass., 1893).

For an important modern reference volume on Native placenames in the United States, turn to William Bright, *Native American Placenames of the United States* (Norman, Okla., 2004). Older compilations include John C. Huden, *Indian Place Names of New England* (1962); Eugene Green, and Rosemary M. Green, "[Place-Names and Dialects in Massachusetts: Some Complementary Patterns](#)," *Names* 19:4 (December 1, 1971): 240–51.

On the development of philology and the treatment of Native languages, see Gordon M. Sayre, "The Mound Builders and the Imagination of American Antiquity in Jefferson, Bartram, and Chateaubriand," *Early American Literature* 33:3 (1998): 225–49; Sean P. Harvey, *Native Tongues: Colonialism and Race from Encounter to the Reservation* (Cambridge, Mass., 2015); and Sarah Rivett, *Unscripted America: Indigenous Languages and the Origins of a Literary Nation* (New York, 2017). The latter two also consider Native languages as an important component in struggles for sovereignty and autonomy, drawing on Kathleen Bragdon and Ives Goddard, *Native Writings in Massachusetts*, 2 vols. (Philadelphia, 1988).

On Indigenous literacies more broadly, see David Murray, *Forked Tongues*:



*Speech, Writing, and Representation in North American Indian Texts* (Bloomington, Ind., 1991); Drew Lopenzina, *Red Ink: Native Americans Picking Up the Pen in the Colonial Period* (Albany, N.Y., 2012); Birgit Brander Rasmussen, *Queequeg's Coffin: Indigenous Literacies and Early American Literature* (Durham, N.C., 2012).

Examples of nineteenth-century philology and ethnology include John Wesley Powell, *Introduction to the Study of Indian Languages with Phrases and Sentences to Be Collected* (U.S. Government Printing Office, 1880); and James H. Trumbull, *Natick Dictionary* (U.S. Government Printing Office, 1903). Samuel A. Green's discussion of "Nonacoicus" can be found in *Proceedings of the Massachusetts Historical Society*, 2d. Series, vol. 8 (1894): 209-212. May Meeting, 1893.

For the authoritative version of Samuel Sewall's diary, see M. Halsey Thomas, *The Diary of Samuel Sewall, 1649-1729*, 2 vols. (New York, 1973). On Sewall's reading of José de Acosta, see Harry Bernstein, "Las primeras relaciones intelectuales entre New England y el mundo hispánico: 1700-1815," *Revista Hispánica Moderna* 5, no. 1 (1939): 1-17, and [Reiner Smolinski's introduction to Sewall's Phaenomena](#) in Samuel Sewall, *Phaenomena quaedam Apocalyptica ad aspectum Novi Orbis configurata. Or, some few lines towards a description of the New Heaven* (1697), ed. Reiner Smolinski, *Electronic Texts in American Studies* 25. For more on *Phaenomena*, see Mukhtar Ali Isani, "The Growth of Sewall's 'Phaenomena Quaedam Apocalyptica,'" *Early American Literature* 7:1 (1972): 64-75. On Acosta's hierarchical vision of humanity, see Alexandre Coello de la Rosa, "[Más allá del Incario: Imperialismo e historia en José de Acosta, SJ \(1540-1600\)](#)," *Colonial Latin American Review* 14, no. 1 (June 2005): 55-81.

For a scholarly edition in English of José de Acosta, *Natural and Moral History of the Indies*, translated from the first early modern Spanish edition, see José de Acosta, *Natural and Moral History of the Indies*, ed. Jane E. Mangan, trans. Frances Lopez-Morillas, introduction by Walter Mignolo (Durham, N.C., 2002). Sewall owned a copy of *De natura novi orbis*, more widely known as the first two books of José de Acosta, [Historia natural y moral de las Indias](#) (Sevilla, 1590). Sewall wrote his inscription on the Massachusetts Historical Society's copy of José de Acosta, *De natura novi orbis libri duo: Et de promulgatione Evangelii apud Barbaros, sive, De procuranda Indorum salute, libri sex* ([Cologne]: 1596). A digitized version of the same edition can be found [here](#).

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