

Decolonizing “The Digital” in the Classroom: Reflections on the Intersection of Colonial Latin American Art History and Digital Art History Pedagogy

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Abstract

This essay explores the challenges of using “the digital,” both scholarly and pedagogically, for understanding and analyzing colonial Latin American art. It argues that digital art history (DAH) tools and methods offer new ways to think about the non-neutrality of how we access, collect, and understand information discovered online. Specifically, it focuses on responses to a questionnaire and the development of a collaborative Omeka project (involving students) to consider how knowledge is produced in the digital environment. It reflects on issues of digital and visual epistemology, digital visibility, the ontology of art history, accessibility, and neocolonialism, and how these topics have been broached with undergraduate students in a class focused on Spanish colonial art.

Abstract

Este ensayo explora los desafíos de usar “lo digital,” tanto académica como pedagógicamente, para comprender y analizar el arte colonial latinoamericano. Sostiene que las herramientas y los métodos de la historia del arte digital (DAH) ofrecen nuevas formas de pensar sobre la no neutralidad de cómo accedemos, recopilamos, y entendemos la información descubierta en línea. Específicamente, se centra en las respuestas al cuestionario y en el desarrollo de un proyecto colaborativo Omeka (con estudiantes) para considerar cómo se produce el conocimiento en el entorno digital. Reflexiona sobre temas de epistemología digital y visual, visibilidad digital, ontología de la historia del arte, accesibilidad y neocolonialismo, y cómo estos temas han sido abordados con estudiantes en una clase enfocada en el arte colonial.

“[D]igital media is not neutral: It impacts the represented information and the ways society interprets it” [Kalay 2008, 1].

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Introduction: Colonial Latin American Art and The Digital

Digital visual media, such as images and videos, form an inescapable cornerstone of our lived experience. For those of us in higher education, the digital is altering not only how and what we research but also how and what we teach. In a similar vein as other specializations, the study of colonial Latin American art is being transformed.^[1] Art historians, finely attuned to the visual world and the meaning-making processes informing it, seem uniquely positioned to engage with and critique the digital realm that we increasingly inhabit and to teach digital, visual literacy.

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Despite art historians’ possible role to play in shaping and framing the digital world, there is still an ambivalence about what the digital turn has to offer art history. An assessment of the impact of “the digital,” and more specifically the digital humanities (DH) and digital art history (DAH), on the field of art history reveals that there are those who believe the

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digital turn has the potential to positively disrupt it (e.g., Honig 2018) and those who feel it has the potential to problematically disturb it (e.g., Bishop 2015). Regardless of where an individual's position falls on this spectrum, the digital is here to stay, and it is reinventing art history and the manner in which we access, engage with, assess, and frame visual culture. One wonders, as Nuria Rodríguez-Ortega (2013b) has, if Donald Preziosi (1991) could have imagined the impact the digital would have on how we “rethink art history,” a suggestion he first made about the art-historical discipline in the wake of post-structuralist and post-modern critiques of art and the (im)possibility of stable meaning.

For all these reasons, it is important that we equip ourselves with the ability to understand how the digital frames or reframes our understanding of visual culture and to effectively critique it. As art historians know all too well, framing devices construct a visual rhetoric, one that creates certain “epistemological and methodological assumptions,” in the words of Elli Doukarakidou [2015, 69]. Something as seemingly simple as substituting, in class, a high-resolution gigapixel panoramic 360° photo of the church of San Pablo de Ocongate in Peru [MAVCOR 2018] for a flat megapixel one can alter perception, experience, and belief about the object or space that the digital image indexes. The digital turn has thus prompted shifts in how we see the world and the ways in which we consume and produce knowledge. In the digital environment in which we increasingly live, learn, and, for those of us in the classroom, teach, it has become clear that we must consider digital technology as epistemology [Schilling 2014] [Rodríguez-Ortega 2009-2010]. Digital media is, as Yehuda Kalay states, not neutral, but creates, shapes, and disseminates knowledge in different ways than a hardbound book, a DVD, or a lecture delivered in a classroom. Similarly, Rodríguez-Ortega advises us to be mindful about how we perceive of the digital realm — not as a “neutral, innocuous space that delivers information” but as a “cultural, political, and ideological venue” [Rodríguez-Ortega 2013a, 132].^[2]

For these reasons it is imperative to think about not only the technological tools needed to engage in digital practices and meaning-making, but also the critical tools needed to think about what content to produce and how to produce it. I would add to this that we also need the critical tools to think about, assess, and communicate what and how we experience and interact with (i.e. what we consume) online. Even those of us who do not intend to make DAH tools or projects will encounter and use them, and most if not all art historians now employ digitized images for our teaching and research. The very way these digitized images are aggregated and framed has the potential to shift our field — ontologically, epistemologically, and pedagogically.

This essay grapples with some of the complexities that the digital poses for those of us who teach and research colonial Latin American art. It asks a number of questions: In what ways can DAH methods and tools, as well as digitized visual materials, help us to think more critically or differently about visual culture? What challenges exist when working with digital images, tools, and methods?^[3] To explore these questions, I draw on responses to a questionnaire and my own pedagogical experiences. The questionnaire gathered information about how others in the field of colonial Latin American art history approach the digital in their pedagogy and research. These responses serve as a launching point for a broader discussion of the ramifications of DAH pedagogy and research as it relates to the visual culture of colonial Latin America.^[4] Also serving as a springboard to wrestling with these issues are my own experiences with DAH pedagogy and the challenges it has presented to both me and my students when discussing and analyzing colonial Latin American art. In particular, I describe a course project that asks students to build digital exhibitions about Spanish colonial art using the content management system (CMS) called Omeka [Omeka Team 2018a]. Discussions about metadata and the use of digital images prompted the students and me to consider issues of digital and visual epistemology, digital visibility and storytelling, art historical nomenclature, the ontology of art history, digital colonialism and neocolonialism, accessibility, and labor — all in the course of a semester. These considerations aided students in not only thinking more critically about colonial Latin American art, but also developing digital and multimodal literacy with Web 2.0 technology.^[5] In focusing on these pedagogical experiences, I hope to highlight some of the greater implications of the digital world for the study of colonial Latin American visual culture and pay heed to how DAH pedagogy can both disrupt and disturb art history.

Gathering Data from a Questionnaire

To collect information from other scholars teaching and researching the visual culture of colonial Latin America, I distributed a questionnaire in English to the Association of Latin American Art (ALAA) listserv.^[6] The survey gathered data anonymously with both quantitative and qualitative questions to develop a mixed-methods approach.^[7] It asked a series of questions about how people teach or research colonial Latin American art using DAH tools or resources, and whether they use DAH projects like Smarthistory or tools like Omeka, and if so, how. It compiled information about how long a participant has taught, the subjects of courses focused on colonial Latin American visual culture, and the orientation of these classes towards DAH or DH.

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Fourteen individuals responded to the survey, offering a small, yet useful *n* to analyze the role of the digital in teaching and researching about colonial Latin American visual culture.^[8] The open-ended answers varied from a few words to lengthy paragraphs. Despite this variability, the responses prompted thought-provoking reflection on the role of digitized and digital art history among those of us focused on the visual culture of colonial Latin America. The collected data revealed a number of important concerns, among them (1) the broad way in which individuals define, understand, and use “the digital” when researching or teaching about colonial Latin American visual culture; (2) the perception that digitized and digital art history have the potential to advance the study of Latin American art and to complicate or decenter the canon, even if the specific ways in which this might occur seem vague and undetermined; (3) the importance of access to high-resolution images, archival materials, and scholarship to ease financial burden and collaborate across international borders; and (4) the need for more digital resources or projects, despite the large number of perceived challenges, which include the limitations of digital technologies, the time needed to learn digital tools and skills, and the reliability and trustworthiness of these tools and projects. The remainder of this essay explores these ideas in connection to pedagogical strategies and experiences with digital art history in an undergraduate class focused on colonial Latin American visual culture.

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Using and Defining Digitized and Digital Art History

The general consensus from the responses on the questionnaire is that working with digital tools and digitized visual materials offers clear benefits to any scholar or student of art history, regardless of their specialization.^[9] These benefits include access to materials from around the globe, the use of high-resolution images for study, the opportunity to create a visual archive of images currently split among international collections, or the invitation to engage with materials more slowly from anywhere at any time. The qualitative responses detailed the various ways respondents felt that DAH had impacted (or could impact) their research, teaching, the field of colonial Latin American art, and art history more generally. Many suggested that DAH provides new ways of interacting with data, helps us to ask new types of questions, and shifts how we understand visual culture. However, most respondents mentioned that they were unsure what these interactions or shifts might look like and whether they were sustainable. When asked if they themselves are active in DAH or DH, 42.9% responded yes, 35.7% maybe, and 21.4% no. Written responses suggested that some participants were simply unsure if what they were doing “counted” as DAH; for example, several wondered if using a university’s CMS in their colonial Latin American art classes meant they had familiarity with or practiced DAH. Others noted their reticence to answer “yes” because they were unsure how to define DAH altogether, noting that they could not align themselves with it if they do not know what it is, and if art historians more generally cannot agree how to define it.

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Respondents relied on a wide range of digital tools and methods for their research, but this use was more limited pedagogically.^[10] 69.2% answered that their classes are not oriented towards DAH; remaining responses were split between yes and maybe. A follow-up question asked participants to describe those classes that foregrounded, or at least incorporated to some extent, digital methods and tools. Several individuals incorporate textual analysis, mapping, image annotation, or the creation and curation of online projects (such as the development of an online exhibition using Omeka). Most commonly, though, respondents linked students to digital image repositories, essays, and videos from sites like Vistas [Leibsohn and Mundy 2015], Smarthistory [2018], and The Metropolitan Museum’s Heilbrunn Timeline (2000–2018). These answers further highlighted the confusion (and in some cases frustration) about how to define or understand DAH or what constitutes doing it or using it in the classroom setting.

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Digital Art History is one aspect of the Digital Humanities, and both have affected the development of the humanities more broadly. Those engaged with DAH cross disciplinary boundaries, incorporating not only art history and computer science, but also media studies and library and information science. As the questionnaire responses highlighted, defining DH or DAH is challenging, as there is no clear consensus around how to understand either [Kilroy-Ewbank 2018].^[11] Complicating matters further is that digital (or digitized) visual materials, image repositories, and databases are often not considered synonymous with DAH. Several scholars have articulated the difference between digitized art history and DAH (e.g., Drucker 2013; Rodríguez-Ortega 2013a, 2019; Bishop 2015; see also Zorich 2012; Baca and Helmreich 2013; Fletcher 2015; and Drucker, Helmreich, Lincoln, and Rose 2015). For them, creating and using digital repositories that “simply aggregate data and/or images” are examples of digitized art history [Rodríguez-Ortega 2013a, 130], whereas research that uses computational analysis (e.g., GIS mapping, data visualization, topic modeling, network analysis, data mining) is an example of DAH. I am reticent to separate digitized art history entirely from digital art history, however. The digitization of materials and their manipulation — cropping, whitening, framing, straightening, and deciding what to include or exclude — affect how we understand what we are seeing, advancing certain epistemological arguments, a position Barbara Mundy and Dana Leibsohn also address in “Digital Resources: The State of Digital Research on the Visual Culture of Spanish America” (2017), which provides a state of the field as well as describes potential issues with accessibility, collaboration, and the effects of the digital on ways of seeing (see also Rodríguez-Ortega 2018, 2019).

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It is more valuable perhaps to distinguish between digital inflection and digital centeredness. The former uses certain digital technologies to create something that is similar to existing modes of writing or teaching; for instance, asking students to reflect on an artwork in a blog post. Digital centeredness suggests foregrounding digital technologies to generate new types of questions, methods, or ideas that more traditional ones cannot or have not; for instance, creating 3D models [Hoobler et al. 2018], crowdsourcing to match print sources with colonial paintings [PESSCA], or mapping the locations of artworks described in archival documents [Rodriguez, Ferrer, Choe, and Anderson 2018].

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Most questionnaire respondents insinuated that the digital turn offers important benefits for pedagogy, research, and the very manner in which we determine what constitutes colonial Latin American visual culture, even if what DAH is remains amorphous. The increase, especially in the past decade, of projects revolving around colonial Latin American art supports this claim that DAH is beneficial (see also Mundy and Leibsohn 2017). These projects offer specialists and students alike the ability to learn about Latin American visual culture and its history in multimodal ways (such as with photographs, video, 3D reconstructions, 360-degree panoramas, text, music, and data visualizations), and even exposure to less canonical (e.g., Vistas), partial, or destroyed objects (e.g., Digital Aponte), architecture, and primary sources related to the visual, material record.

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A few survey responses indicated the importance of reaching out to different publics — scholars, students, anyone interested in colonial Latin American art, and those individuals who might develop interest in it as a result of searching the Web. Projects like Vistas, Digital Códice Mendoza [Codex Mendoza 2014], Project on Engraved Sources of Spanish Colonial Art [PESSCA], and Digital Aponte [Rodriguez, Ferrer, Choe, and Anderson 2018] also suggest the myriad ways that DAH projects can engage various types of audiences. The Digital Códice Mendoza, for instance, is bilingual (Spanish and English) and allows users to zoom in and pan across high-resolution scans of the entire codex, and offers transcriptions of the text as you hover over it. It is of interest to art historians, but also historians, paleographers, archaeologists, and so forth, and is accessible to anyone with the internet.

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A couple respondents mentioned that DAH has the ability to challenge entrenched ideas about the field of art history, and the role of colonial Latin American art within it. For example, one noted the importance of nimble online projects like Smarthistory as alternatives to textbooks that are not updated regularly. Smarthistory is, for lack of a better term, a not-for-profit open educational resource that focuses on world art. It is the result of collaboration among more than 400 art historians. New essays and videos can be added continuously and information updated regularly, helping to dispel the notion that art history — and colonial Latin American art by extension — is fixed.^[12]

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The idea that digital art history projects can reach wider audiences and disrupt the field of colonial Latin American art history is one that warrants greater discussion. Here, I would like to offer a few reflections and discussion points about

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how incorporating digital art history practices into undergraduate classes about colonial Latin American visual culture has encouraged better digital critical thinking by encouraging students to think about art history's ontological issues and nomenclature, descriptive metadata, and issues of colonialism (or neocolonialism), as well as the ways in which digital images have the potential to reframe how we understand the visual culture of this region and time period.^[13]

Art History's Ontological Issues and Descriptive Metadata

Art history has long been about classifying art based on style and iconography. One could argue that for much of its existence, the field has been focused on cataloging works of art and architecture to create, as much as possible, neat taxonomies. If we think back to the origins of the discipline, the art historians who shaped the formation of art history in the late eighteenth, nineteenth, and early twentieth centuries, from Johann Winckelmann, Aby Warburg, and Erwin Panofsky to Alois Riegl, Hienrich Wöfflin, and George Kubler, created classification systems and vocabularies still used today to discuss form and subject matter. They are systems largely centered around and stemming from European art. ^[14] In particular there has been a privileging of Italian Renaissance art and the stylistic terms used to describe art from the Italian Peninsula between 1400 and 1600, what Svetlana Alpers (1979) and others refer to as Italo-centrism. Many of these stylistic labels, such as Renaissance or Baroque, have also become temporal descriptors, denoting a time period (e.g., Maravall 1986) and sometimes a place, rather than a representational mode.

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The nomenclature of art history developed to describe European art has been appended to the visual culture of areas outside of Europe, including those areas, such as Latin America, in which Europeans invaded and colonized people and introduced new visual systems. Colonial Latin American art calls into question where we have centered the canon, the terminology we use to discuss art, and even the spaces and places where art is found. Periodizations describing European artistic trends do not transplant neatly (nor should they) to the Americas, creating what Ananda Cohen-Aponte [2017, 69] notes is one of many "unresolved issues" facing scholars who study colonial Latin American visual culture. Cohen-Aponte points to the "innocuous terminology" [2017, 69] applied to viceregal art, seeking to problematize it in an attempt to decolonize art history. Jeanette Peterson has similarly discussed how a term such as Renaissance "advances or impedes our ability to analyze and understand visual culture from the viceregal period" [2008, 322]. She asks, for instance, how do we categorize an "early seventeenth-century ivory figure of the Mexican Virgin of Guadalupe made by Chinese carvers working in the Philippines, transported across the Pacific in the Manila galleon fleet bound for Acapulco and ultimately destined for American and European consumers?" [2008, 331–332]. Do we simply note it as Renaissance or the more generic sixteenth century? Despite the challenges with applying these terms to colonial Latin American visual culture, it has proven difficult to omit them entirely, even in instances when they do not fit comfortably (e.g., Sullivan 1996; Peterson 2008, 322).

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Where does digital art history fit into these discussions about nomenclature and the ontology of art history? If we were to reconceptualize Peterson's question about the ivory figure of Guadalupe from the point of view of DAH, we might ask, how could we translate this object, one which resists easy classification, into tidy, "objective" metadata? After all, many DAH projects necessitate the creation of metadata about images. While not speaking specifically to the potential challenges and issues of inputting descriptive metadata in a digital environment, much of Peterson's discussion, as well as Cohen-Aponte's, revolve around similar issues.

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I would argue that there are DAH processes and ideas that can assist scholars and students to think more critically about the terminology used to describe colonial Latin American art in the digital environment. If one of the main reasons for engaging with the digital is to access information, as the questionnaire responses all noted, then how we input, organize, aggregate, and source that data is fundamentally significant. My own experiences with introducing students to metadata, as one step towards producing a collaborative online exhibition on Omeka, has stimulated important and thought-provoking conversations about how we describe, analyze, frame, and discuss colonial Latin American art.^[15] It helped students to develop digital literacy and to grasp more fully the non-neutrality of visual resources, DAH projects, and the Web more generally. It also increased their awareness of how we access information and how the presentation of that information affects what we know or think we know, how we see, and where we locate knowledge about colonial Latin American visual culture.

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To create their online exhibition with Omeka, students must learn about metadata. In the process of creating metadata, students must weigh the eurocentric (and colonial) bias of art historical nomenclature and terminology. Metadata is data about data to help create an archive or catalogue for retrieving information. It enables us to locate, evaluate, and use specific types of visual images (including video). Omeka uses Dublin Core elements to create metadata, and these elements include title, subject, description, creator, source, publisher, date, format, type, identifier, and coverage [Omeka Team 2018b].^[16] Most of the information in these fields are what some might call “indisputable information,” or objective information akin to what we expect to find in a caption or exam slide identifications. For example, the metadata for a photographic reproduction of Manuel de Arellano’s *Virgin of Guadalupe* ^[17] from 1691 at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art could read as follows:

title: Virgin of Guadalupe

subject: Madonnas (using the Library of Congress Thesaurus for Graphic Materials) or perhaps Mary, Blessed Virgin, Saint — Apparitions and miracles (using the LCSH, or Library of Congress Subject Headings)

author: Manuel de Arellano

description: A painting of the Virgin of Guadalupe, one of the most venerated Marian advocations in the world. It replicates the original tilma worn by Juan Diego.

creator: LACMA

source: LACMA

publisher: LACMA

date: 1691 (or the date of the photograph)

format: oil on canvas (or the type of digital file)

identifier: a URL to the LACMA collection page

coverage: Mexico

Beyond these metadata fields, users can also create tags to help identify and locate items. For Arellano’s painting, these might include “painting”, “sacred”, “Marian imagery”, “seventeenth century”, and so forth.

Deciding what to write in each field can be complicated, and tougher still when it becomes clear that this information that seems objective is actually a fiction of objectivity. Many metadata descriptions are subjective. As several scholars remark, “‘objectivity’ is defined by consensus, not by authority. Metadata needs to be a part of that consensus-building process” [Nilsson, Naeve, and Palmér 2004, 248]. For example, when entering tags about an item into the Dublin Core, what someone decides to include or exclude impacts how this item is discovered and engaged with in a digital environment. This is also the case when asked to summarize the content of the item in the description. Arellano’s *Virgin of Guadalupe* could be described in any number of ways. This is not solely an issue about quality control, but also whose voice (or voices) gets to be heard.

Descriptive metadata is thus a crucial component for how we access and even analyze visual artifacts. Yet descriptive metadata is indexed with words that must be input by people who bring their own interpretative lens to the process. Murtha Baca describes the inherent challenges to this process, and the problems it can pose for creating “objective” metadata. In her words,

Anyone familiar with art information knows that often the subject matter or theme of a work of art is not reflected at all in its title. . . . I can only find them [images] if the descriptive terms . . . have been applied to them by a human being who has looked at an image, interpreted the file, the visual information, and other available data, and made the decision to apply these data values to it [2002, 34].

But herein lies one of several challenges: What does this descriptive data look like? What terminology do we include or omit? Who decides what is important data to be indexed? In a specialization like colonial Latin American art history, a field filled with scholars actively critiquing the problematic terminology used to classify and analyze visual culture, how

do we generate objective, consistent descriptive metadata?

This question is repeatedly posed in my classes focused on the visual culture of the Spanish Americas. Early on in the courses, I ask students to create metadata (using the Dublin Core fields) for the open chapel murals of the convento of San Nicolás, Actopan, in Hidalgo, Mexico. This low-stakes activity, completed on paper in teams, helps them learn about Dublin Core elements before they actually complete their main course project on Omeka. They need to fill in the fields for title, subject, description, creator, source, date, format, identifier, and coverage.^[18] The results reveal to students the challenges with standardizing metadata and with using art historical terminology developed to describe European art primarily. For instance, for the title, most students write overly generalized descriptive titles (e.g., “Murals,” “Open Chapel,” or “Murals with Christian Subject Matter”). Each field presents its own challenge to students, but it is the topic of what to write for the creator that stimulates the greatest (and most passionate) debate.

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Almost every student struggles with what to write in the creator field, with descriptors ranging from “Anonymous artist” and “People” to “Indigenous artist(s)” and “Subjugated Artist.” Students read Carolyn Dean and Dana Leibsohn’s “Hybridity and Its Discontents” (2003), which generally sparks a heated discussion about how we talk about who produced colonial Latin American art and how we describe it. Students have not come to a consensus about what word or phrase is best to use, and by the end of class some students are visibly frustrated, confused, or even angry. One student noted in a written reflection that she felt “lied to” about the superficial objectivity of information in image captions, or in this case, with metadata found online.^[19] She elaborated further that the way metadata is presented gives us the impression that it is objective, suggesting it is indisputable, but now she realized that the personal biases we have inform the production of metadata.

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In the following period, I ask students to create tags of the same image, and they have ranged from “Last Judgment”, “polychromy”, and “mendicant art” to “bright”, “damaged”, and “early modern”. This generates another reflective moment in the class about the usefulness of tagging, but also the limitations and potential problems of indexing images more generally. The discussion eventually turns to the possibility of social tagging, a common practice on social media sites like Tumblr and Flickr (and even among museum sites like the Brooklyn Museum). Many students have noted that social tagging might circumvent some of the problems associated with the controlled vocabulary used commonly for metadata (like the Library of Congress [LoC] subject headings). With social tagging, more voices could be represented, and in different languages, providing more opportunities to find images like the Actopan open chapel. The general idea of social tagging certainly can aid in overcoming some of the limitations of controlled vocabularies or the “trickiness” of metadata fields, even if it creates its own challenges, such as too many tags, incorrect tags (e.g., misspelled words), or inaccurate tags (see Chai, Zhang, and Jin 2007; Ménard 2009).^[20] This user-generated tagging has been dubbed as “folksonomy,” or language created by “the masses” which in this case constitutes user-generated tags [Peters 2009, 1–7]. Despite the potential limitations of social tagging, many museums have adopted the practice as a way to further democratize museums and make museums more user-friendly [Alioto 2017]. The Brooklyn Museum’s *enconchado biombo* with the Siege of Belgrade and Hunting Scene, for example, currently has forty-four user-generated tags that range from the general (e.g., “screen”) to the specific (“oars”).^[21] By engaging in practices and discussions about metadata and tagging, students develop an awareness for the ways in which a single word alters meaning, and in some cases completely reframes how we understand an object or space, such as the Actopan open chapel, or allows users to locate information on the Web.^[22]

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This exercise not only prompts reflection and critique about metadata and art historical nomenclature, but also reveals some of the limitations of DAH in the process. As one student in this class stated, “if we can’t agree [on] what to write in most of these [Dublin Core] elements, then how will that affect how people locate our materials?” Another noted that she felt she would have an easier time with “inputting an image of Michelangelo’s Sistine Chapel but it is really hard to create clear information about some [colonial] Mexican art.” Yet another student’s response is telling of how important these thorny questions and considerations are: “[E]ven if we can’t agree on what to write [for the metadata], we still need to move forward. . . . Otherwise, people might not even know it exists if they don’t go to college or read books.” I believe what this student was hinting at is the same idea posed by Mark Turin in his essay on “The Devil in the Digital”: the notion that much of what many people learn today is “mediated through the digital. If something [is] not discoverable

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through an online search or a digital catalogue, it could appear to not exist at all" [2015, 125.] These students have determined some of the challenges of DAH. Many DAH projects rely on metadata, and metadata is created by people, with all of their biases and irrationalities. They had honed in on the very humanness of the digital humanities.

Digital Colonialism and the Digital Divide

Can the metadata we create about colonial Latin American objects be a form of digital colonialism? This is a question raised on several occasions in my classes. Metadata produces knowledge in the online environment, shaping how people relate to and understand Latin American visual culture. If the information that we create perpetuates colonialist discourse, overlooks the diversity of voices that lay claim to this cultural heritage, or simplifies the information so as to become anachronistic, then there is the risk of participating in acts of neocolonialism. In this complex digital world in which we live then, how do we responsibly create digital content without engaging in digital or technological colonialism? What ethical considerations are involved in the production of knowledge in the digital environment? And what does this look like for those of us who teach and research the visual culture of colonial Latin America?

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When I first developed this project, and as students continued to learn about Omeka and the Dublin Core elements for their course project, students decided that it would be useful if everyone in the team relied on the LoC Subject Headings (LCSH) and Classification for specific elements, such as creator. The LCSH are frequently used, not only in the U.S. but also internationally, and are considered a more traditional classification system. I initially agreed with the students' decision to proceed accordingly. However, as became clear to myself and students, even a quick scan of the LCSH reveals that they can unknowingly perpetuate colonialist, biased, and racist discourse. For instance, to familiarize students with the LCSH, I asked students to look at how monographs about Spanish colonial art incorporated them in the front matter.^[23] An examination of five recent monographs dedicated to the visual culture of post-conquest sixteenth-century Mexico included the LCSH "Indians of Mexico," often with further subject headings attached such as "Indians of Mexico — ethnic identity," "Indian art," or "Indians of Mexico — Missions — History — 16th century." The terms Indigenous or First Nation do not appear, and often the specific ethnic group or groups are omitted from LCSH unless the monograph is specific to one of them (and if the term exists at all). The use of terminology like "Indian art" is thus vague and reductionistic, but also reifies the colonialist discourse that so many postcolonial and decolonial thinkers have attempted to alter.

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One way in which it is possible to rectify some of these imbalances and problems is to do what the University of Alberta's Decolonizing Description Working Group (DDWG) has done, and what other institutions, such as the John Carter Brown Library, are seeking to do.^[24] The DDWG note that their aim is "to investigate, define and propose a plan of action for how UAL can more accurately, appropriately, and respectfully represent Indigenous peoples and contexts through our descriptive metadata practices" [Farnel et al. 2017]. As they describe, "appropriate subject access and descriptive practices are a social justice issue and a moral imperative." They provide examples of the transformations they have made to subject headings used in metadata, such as switching "Abused Indian children," the LCSH, to "Abused Indigenous children." In class, students have seemed excited about the possibility of such a project, especially the notion of descriptive metadata practices as they relate to social justice issues, and how this might alter how publics access and understand information they encounter on the Web. One student commented that she "never had thought about these things before, like how racist or gendered metadata could be. I'd really never thought about metadata at all." She reflected that the components of the Omeka project had even caused her to rethink what she sees on her personal social media accounts (like Instagram and Facebook) and YouTube.

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The process of creating this course project raises the question of how we can be mindful of not replicating colonialism in new ways. As discussed above, the process of metadata creation seems simple enough on the surface, but in reality is a more complex venture. As Roopika Risam advises, we must be wary of the violence that occurs in "discursive forms," such as "reproducing colonial influences in the production of digital knowledge and centering epistemologies and ontologies of the Global North . . . which in turn decenters those of Indigenous communities and the Global South" [2018, 2]. For those of us who practice art history, we must be cognizant of how metadata — and digital tools and projects beyond this — has the ability to act as a neocolonial dynamic, and one that situates the Global North as "the

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Access and the Digital Divide

Access to materials, whether to digital photographs (or videos) or to archival or scholarly materials about colonial Latin American visual culture, impinges upon what and how we teach and research. High-resolution images are essential for teaching and research, and more than half of the survey’s respondents mentioned the need for their greater availability. Among the many reasons increased accessibility is needed, respondents listed the high cost of travel and the many international collections that now possess colonial Latin American objects, as well as the lack of high-res images in repositories like ArtStor or Bridgeman Images. For the latter, there is also a fee to acquire them. Moreover, as the academy continues to rely on adjunct labor with absurdly low pay, the need for free, open access to materials was noted as imperative. One response indicated that with greater access to objects and places that are less well known (if at all) the conversations around colonial Latin American art could also noticeably shift.

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Besides access to high-resolution digital images, participants noted that certain digital tools or projects also could bypass pay-walled journals with costly subscriptions or academic presses that sell materials at high costs, all of which are largely inaccessible without access to a university library. As one respondent noted, DAH projects about Latin American visual culture challenge how and where knowledge is stored; rather than solely in academic journals or printed books, DAH projects have the potential to remove burdensome financial costs, to provide free access to anyone untethered to a university system, and to allow for more collaboration across international borders.

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While access to more visual and textual materials was noted as a priority for researching and teaching about Latin American visual culture, respondents also noted that digitization initiatives and DAH projects have important limitations. One respondent worried about the implications of a project’s obsolescence. Several commented on the issue of collections (visual or archival) that do not have the funds or equipment to digitize their materials, or individuals who do not receive funding to produce and maintain a project online. Their concern is that research agendas and general trends in the field could therefore be determined on what is and is not available digitally. Mundy and Leibsohn (2017) agree that a canon of Latin American visual culture has formed around what has been made more available in the digital domain. This is also true for printed texts, such as those digitized for Google Books. Any library that has not provided access to Google Inc. will have considerably less traffic, which affects current and future research. This could then profoundly alter the production of knowledge about Latin American colonial history and art, as well as the cultural heritage of the many peoples and countries who have a connection to it. In my viceregal art class, this was certainly the case. Students tended to rely primarily on sources that could be found online, such as e-books through the university’s library portal, Google Books, the Getty Research Portal, or the John Carter Brown Library.

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Open access to knowledge and to visual materials are important, and the immediacy they afford us has the potential to upset problematic aspects facing the academy (such as budget cuts, less time to travel, and the increase in adjunct labor) and the destruction or loss of cultural heritage. But who gets to grant this access? And should all knowledge and imagery be made more accessible? Risam (2018) and Afanador Llach (2019) rightly remind us that the notion that information is and should be free is an assumption of the Global North, one that does not necessarily accord with Indigenous communities of the Global South. Even universal access to the Web is, as Rodríguez-Ortega states, a myth [2013a, 131; see also 2018]. A huge portion of the world’s population is still without access to the internet, and it is worth reflecting how the digital practices we engage in could potentially further this digital divide.

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The issue of access is also one of language. English is the lingua franca of the Web, which can be another barrier for anyone who does not know or use English [Afanador Llach 2019] [Rodríguez-Ortega 2013a, 131]. It can deepen the digital divide. Many DAH projects centered around colonial Latin American art are in English, though there are also examples of bilingual projects (e.g., Digital Códice Mendoza) that offer excellent models for moving forward. As students in my class have wondered, what attempts have been made or can be made to sidestep the perpetual dominance of the Global North as gatekeepers to knowledge? Collaboration, as noted in the questionnaire responses and among students, seems to offer an appealing solution to how we can ensure greater accessibility and perspectives.

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Collaboration, Image Design and Manipulation, and the (In)Visibility of Labor

Final issues that warrant discussion are collaboration, image design and manipulation, and the labor involved in creating digitized materials or DAH projects. In the classes on viceregal art described above, each team crafts their own Omeka exhibition, with the team designing a theme and an introductory statement that frames each individual's entries.^[26] Students are graded on both components, as well as the feedback they offer to their team members. As noted above in the metadata discussion, there are steps that students must learn before they create these online exhibitions. They need to understand how to create metadata, as well as to determine how to source images in the public domain or take their own photographs, upload images as items, create and arrange pages, and write for diverse publics [Kilroy-Ewbank 2017a] [Kilroy-Ewbank 2017b] [Kilroy-Ewbank 2018]. It requires scaffolding of smaller assignments from the semester's beginning.

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After our discussion about metadata and how to create it, another assignment asks teams to decide on their exhibition's theme after visiting a local museum collection of Spanish colonial art, such as LACMA's. Students are asked to photograph their chosen objects that will form the core of their individual component. Before they observe objects on display at the museum, I initiate a conversation about what these photographs could or should look like, how many they might take, and whether the photos might need to be "corrected" or manipulated in some capacity. This conversation usually begins with quizzical looks. As one student later reflected, "I've never been asked before [in an art history class] to consider how I take photos or what I might need to do to make them look beautiful." This discussion inevitably returns us to the importance of how we frame or reframe art, how digital images shift the production of knowledge and our understanding of colonial Latin American art, and how the choices we make to show or not to show specific aspects of an object or building can alter how someone understands it. We watch a Smarthistory video to discuss how the visual choices made in it might affect how we understand a specific work of art and how the visuals create an argument.^[27] On occasion, it has also raised thought-provoking discussions about labor, both visible and invisible, that broached larger issues involved in digitized and DAH, namely how we assign credit for the work being done.

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To provide a brief example, one team framed their exhibition around sacred imagery. One student chose Arellano's *Virgin of Guadalupe* to probe localized sacred imagery specifically. At LACMA, he brought his expensive camera and took dozens of photographs in the manner of Smarthistory's Steven Zucker, the student's cited model [Zucker 2018]. He not only took photographs of the entire painting but numerous details, as well as photographs of the painting from the side and in relation to objects displayed near it, from far away within the gallery space, with visitors in front of the painting, and in black-and-white. The student either already knew or learned how to use image manipulation software like Adobe Photoshop because his resulting images also included callouts, highlights, color correction, complicated cropping, and straightening.

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During the peer review process, this student's component was met with both wonder and anxiety by his fellow teammates. They were concerned that his images were of such high quality so as to make their own individual essays look less legitimate or less serious. Most students took photos on their smartphones and had not manipulated them; they were blurry, dark, and crooked, and some had not captured portions of the object itself. The team member with high-quality photographs offered to share his expertise but wondered if the time he spent helping his teammates to improve their resulting digital images would negatively impact his own project because he would have less time to focus on it.

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In the end, the process prompted an unexpected but important conversation about how digitized images affect our perceptions of digital projects and about the labor involved in creating them. I was reminded of Daniela Bleichmar's discussion of colonial Latin American art and visual epistemology, or "the role of visibility as a way of knowing, and the process of observation, collecting, representation, and circulation that were integral to the production of knowledge" [2015, 240]. Pairing Bleichmar's essay with the work they were doing in class proved especially generative, with students finding compelling parallels between processes and projects of the past with those in their digital present. Importantly, it also encouraged students to revisit online projects that we had discussed in class to think critically about

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how the material is presented and how this creates a digital and visual argument. It also stimulated a great deal of dialogue about the need for more accessible high-resolution images of colonial Latin American visual culture, a point that the questionnaire's respondents repeatedly emphasized.

Another important point the above example illuminates is the labor involved in digitization, whether of books or images, or in digital work, such as working collaboratively. A great deal of labor goes uncited, unnoticed, as has been addressed more recently by many working in the Digital Humanities (e.g. Keralis 2016; Graban, Marty, Romano, and Vandergrift 2019). In her written reflection, a student pointed out that the invisibility of this labor calls to mind the invisibility of labor used to create the art and architecture of the sixteenth-century Spanish Americas. Even when the creator of digital content is known, such as the photographer who took certain photos and made them available on Flickr Commons, there is a great deal of labor that might go unaccounted for. Image manipulation can be time consuming, and to get it "just right" varies depending on the creator. Individuals responsible for digitizing materials in museums, archives, or libraries, whether for an institution's website (such as The Metropolitan Museum of Art or Mexico's Archivo General de la Nación) or a large corporate entity (such as Google Books) are almost never named. Crowdsourcing, for projects like PESSCA or the recent ALAA digital art history resources page, is not free or visible labor, as a recent blog post on the Getty Iris also mentions [Deines, Gil, Lincoln, and Clifford 2018].^[28] The concern of my student, who offered to share his photoshopping expertise, about his time and labor raised this issue on a micro-scale within the classroom.

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A Final Reflection

"Creating metadata and making an [Omeka] exhibit were totally new experiences for me. . . . Both processes made the art [of the Spanish Americas] far more accessible to me and help[ed] me develop better critical thinking skills about what I see online. . . . They also made me feel uncomfortable because I think my generation just assumes all stuff online is true, even when teachers tell us it isn't. But now I kinda get it." This statement, in a student's final reflection, sums up much of what I have been discussing here and the relationship between the digital, colonial Latin American art, and pedagogy. As is clear from this class project, digital art history can disturb and disrupt how students approach colonial Latin American art. As I hope this essay demonstrates, while the digital turn offers many positive ways in which we can rethink and reframe art history and specifically the visual culture of colonial Latin America, it seems mindful to be wary of the notion that it can create a false perception of a techno-utopia in which all creators and users are equal, and information is always readily accessible and objective.

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I dedicate this essay to Linda Rodriguez, who passed from this life too soon. She offered excellent feedback on this essay early on, for which I am so grateful. I also thank Hannah Alpert-Abrams, Clayton McCarl, and the two DHQ peer reviewers for their helpful feedback. Any errors are my own.

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This essay was written in the spring and summer of 2018.

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Notes

[1] I alternate between the terms "art" and "visual culture" with full understanding that there are important differences between them. For the sake of space, I do not unpack the manifold meanings of either term.

[2] See also Rodríguez-Ortega 2018.

[3] Conversations with Beth Harris and Steven Zucker, the founders of Smarthistory.org, have been influential on my own thinking about digital art history pedagogy. See also Harris and Zucker 2015.

[4] The questionnaire asked general questions about digitized and digital art history, teaching, and Omeka, as well as about the open-educational resource Smarthistory. Originally, this essay also addressed a case study of using the production of Smarthistory videos as a model for collaborative DAH pedagogy and practice. However, because of the limitations on length for this essay, the discussion of Smarthistory has been omitted, as have the questionnaire responses about it. This data will be used for a separate essay to be published elsewhere.

[5] For a useful discussion of Web 2.0 and the ontology of the digital, see Evens 2012.

[6] In hindsight, the questionnaire should have also been written in Spanish and distributed on other listservs. ALAA is a U.S.-based association but with an international reach.

[7] Quantitative questions provided basic information in a yes/no/maybe format. Each participant's qualitative responses were also analyzed using thematic analysis (coding of written text into themes).

[8] Most participants have been teaching for at least six years (more than 60%), and 38.5% for more than ten. The types of classes people teach vary from undergraduate surveys on colonial Latin American art and architecture, to smaller classes focused on a region or specific century and undergraduate or graduate seminars on a specific theme (such as portraiture in the Americas or eighteenth-century Mexican painting).

[9] When asked if DAH tools and methods offer new approaches to teaching or researching the art of colonial Latin America, almost all respondents answered yes (76.9%). 23.1% answered maybe.

[10] Responses describing the impact of the digital on research were the most varied and detailed, indicating the numerous ways in which information is searched, retrieved, collected, and analyzed. Most commonly, respondents use museum websites to source images and access digitized archival materials. Beyond these, respondents listed the importance of general Google searches, and the use of specific Google tools like Scholar and Books, as well as Wikipedia, Academia.edu, Zotero, Dropbox, Videoconferencing, spatial and textual analysis, spreadsheets, and social media (e.g., Twitter).

[11] I would also argue, as others have before me, that soon the "digital" will be dropped from digital art history [Hohensee 2018]. Rodríguez-Ortega's essay (2019) also notes that special journal volumes on DAH will likely no longer be published.

[12] A series of recent blog posts on Smarthistory expand on this very idea [Hohensee 2018].

[13] These classes include Spanish Colonial, Latin American (1492–present), and Global Renaissance art.

[14] Matthew Lincoln has also made this point (2014).

[15] While most questionnaire respondents used (or at least knew of) Smarthistory, few used Omeka in any of their classes. 42.9% use Smarthistory in their classes. Only 7.7% employed Omeka. One participant noted that she uses it herself but had not yet introduced it to students. The two respondents who did incorporate Omeka asked students to create digital exhibitions of artworks.

[16] Dublin Core is centered around fifteen "core" elements that were created in an attempt to standardize metadata by providing specific standards for inputting data across fields.

[17] For the image, see <https://collections.lacma.org/node/220044?parent=589011>.

[18] For explanations of each of these fields, see Omeka Team 2018b.

[19] Students were asked to write a short, written reflection after each class period.

[20] For more on the challenges of creating collaborative metadata in the classroom, see Richardson 2020.

[21] To see the image, its metadata, and social tags, visit <https://www.brooklynmuseum.org/opencollection/objects/207337>.

[22] I am reminded of Cohen-Aponte's recent discussion about decolonizing the global renaissance, encapsulated by her discussion about terminology. She notes the important ramifications of changing just one word, such as if we were to change the sentence "viceregal art...as art that just so happened to *coincide* with colonization" to "art produced *under* colonization" [2017, 74].

[23] The LCSH used are not determined by the authors themselves.

[24] In 2017, the JCBL posted a position for a postdoctoral fellow for data curation in Latin American and Caribbean Indigenous languages. As stated in the job description, "The goal of this project is to assess how digital tools and metadata created through collaborative processes across a hemispheric arc can serve scholarly and non-scholarly communities now and into the future." See <https://www.clir.org/fellowships/postdoc/applicants/john-carter-brown-library-brown-university/>.

[25] See also Fiormonte 2016 for another discussion about the Global South, the production of knowledge, and DH.

[26] See Kilroy-Ewbank 2018 for another example of this practice.

[27] I typically have students watch Smarthistory videos *not* related to Spanish colonial art, including *Augustus of Prima Porta* (<https://youtu.be/3i8iou6tXqY>) or Polykleitos's *Doryphoros* (<https://youtu.be/EAR9RAMg9NY>).

[28] PESSCA is the Project on the Engraved Sources of Spanish Colonial Art (<https://colonialart.org/>). ALAA is the Association of Latin American Art, and its digital resources page is found here: <https://associationlatinamericanart.org/digital-resources/>.

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