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The Persistence of Early-Modern Metadata in Online Environments and the Endurance of Imperial Discourse*

La persistencia de los metadatos de la primera época en los entornos en línea y la resistencia del discurso imperial
A persistência dos metadados da primeira época em ambientes online e a resistência do discurso imperial

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Abstract:

Metadata informs our interaction with visual objects (images) found within digital contexts (websites) and has enduring, transhistorical impact on how we understand the world around us, but few attempts to critically study the impacts of metadata have been undertaken, particularly with respect to the ways it can gender and racialize the represented subject. This article seeks to explore how metadata functions, and deals with early modern images that have been digitized and that serve to generate metadata. By using the example of the visual culture associated with Bartolomé de Las Casas, this article traces the way metadata shapes the representation of Native Americans in online environments while critically reflecting on the consequences of existing metadata and the platforms that allow users to find information online.

Keywords: metadata, visual culture, early modernity, Las Casas, Native Americans.

Resumen:

Los metadatos informan de nuestra interacción con los objetos visuales (imágenes) que se encuentran en contextos digitales (sitios web) y tienen un impacto perdurable y transhistórico en la forma en que entendemos el mundo que nos rodea, pero se han realizado pocos intentos de estudiar críticamente los impactos de los metadatos, en particular con respecto a las formas en que pueden género y racializar al sujeto representado. Este artículo trata de explorar el funcionamiento de los metadatos y su relación con las imágenes de la Edad Moderna que han sido digitalizadas y para las que se han generado metadatos. Utilizando el ejemplo de la cultura visual asociada a Bartolomé de Las Casas, este artículo rastrea el modo en que los metadatos dan forma a la representación de los nativos americanos en los entornos en línea, al tiempo que reflexiona críticamente sobre las consecuencias de los metadatos existentes y las plataformas que permiten a los usuarios encontrar información en línea.

Palabras clave: metadatos, cultura visual, modernidad temprana, Las Casas, nativos americanos.

Resumo:

Os metadados informam da nossa interação com os objetos visuais (imagens) encontrados em contextos digitais (sites) e têm impacto duradouro e trans-histórico na forma em que entendemos o mundo ao nosso redor, mas poucas tentativas foram realizadas para estudar criticamente os impactos dos metadados, em particular em relação às formas em que podem gênero e racializar o sujeito representado. Este artigo visa explorar o funcionamento dos metadados e sua relação com as imagens da Idade Moderna que foram digitalizadas e para as quais foram gerados metadados. Usando o exemplo da cultura visual associada a Bartolomé de Las Casas, este artigo rastreia o modo em que os metadados dão forma à representação dos nativos americanos nos ambientes online, enquanto reflete criticamente sobre as consequências dos metadados existentes e as plataformas que permitem aos usuários encontrar informação em linha.

Palavras-chave: metadados, cultura visual, modernidade precoce, Las Casas, nativos americanos.

In 1552, Bartolomé de Las Casas (1474-1566) published his infamous treatise decrying Spanish violence in the Americas and proposing remedies that would improve the lives of Indigenous peoples throughout the Spanish realm (Las Casas, 1552). It quickly became translated across Europe and serves as one of the earliest

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published best-sellers on record. Foreign publishers furthermore invested into these volumes by providing visualizations of the text's claims in ways designed to attract the gaze of potential consumers outside of Spain (Andermann & Rowe, 2005; Beck, 2011, pp. 494-533; Lefèvre et al., 2012; Mitchell, 1994; Mitchell, 2002, pp. 165-184). Scholars later credited *Brevísima relación* as one of the founding texts for the disciplines of international law and international relations, and thus scholars continue to esteem both the text and its author as significantly impacting both the past and our present (Alker, 1992, pp. 347-371; Skinner, 1978; Skinner 2002; Todorov, 1992). While desiring to defend Indigenous peoples and improve their circumstances, Las Casas's text also sublimated them as weak, less capable, infantile, and strengthened the foundation for a custodial relationship with Europeans and later settler governments.

Scholars, authors, and artists, both past and present, characterise Las Casas as a saviour of Indigenous peoples because he argues against their enslavement while emphasising their gentle and docile nature (Brunstetter, 2012). It is in this context that we reframe Las Casas and his work, particularly because centuries of paintings, sculptures, engravings, and illustrations that depict the man presiding above Native Americans, who supplicate themselves before him on bended knee, appear in online results when we search for his name (Assimina & Wallace, 2009; Bryson, 2001; Bryson et al., 1994; Bucher, 1977; Bucher 1981). This visual culture associated with Las Casas, and with early-modern representations of race and gender, must be studied more closely, particularly once they become transubstantiated from the physical realm to the digital realm through the instrument of metadata. The use of metadata in this way resonates with what Walter Ong (1982) characterizes as the "technologizing of the word". In his case, however, it was the printing press and not online culture that gave the word significant power (Manguel, 2000), and the subject must be revisited today in terms of the increasing power of metadata to constrain and shape information.

Metadata informs our interaction with visual objects (images) found within digital contexts (websites) and it can powerfully operationalize racializing and gendered discourses in unexpected ways (Attig et al., 2004; Martinec & Salway, 2005; Smith, 2009; Staum, 2003). The historical complexity underlying this problem and its global and contemporary reaches requires our attention, particularly because content creators transfigure early modern descriptions of Native Americans into metadata used to define an image online. The saturation of such images from early print culture in contemporary digital culture has helped to ensure that Indigenous peoples in today's mass media appear as helpless victims, weak or blemished in comparison to the western settler-colonizer, which has helped, in turn, to maintain the same power relations throughout the Americas (Dyson et al., 2006; Hobart & Schiffman, 2000). Significantly, keyword searches in Google Image for terms including Indians and Natives in English, French, and Spanish retrieve images created for Las Casas' text where they are portrayed as being dominated by Europeans; these search results were indexed using the aforementioned key terms as metadata linking text to image. Lascasian images have also been extracted from their early-modern editions and reproduced online in order to visualize completely unrelated contexts, and we have yet to attempt to understand the consequences of metadata linking otherwise distinct content by way of a single image or word.

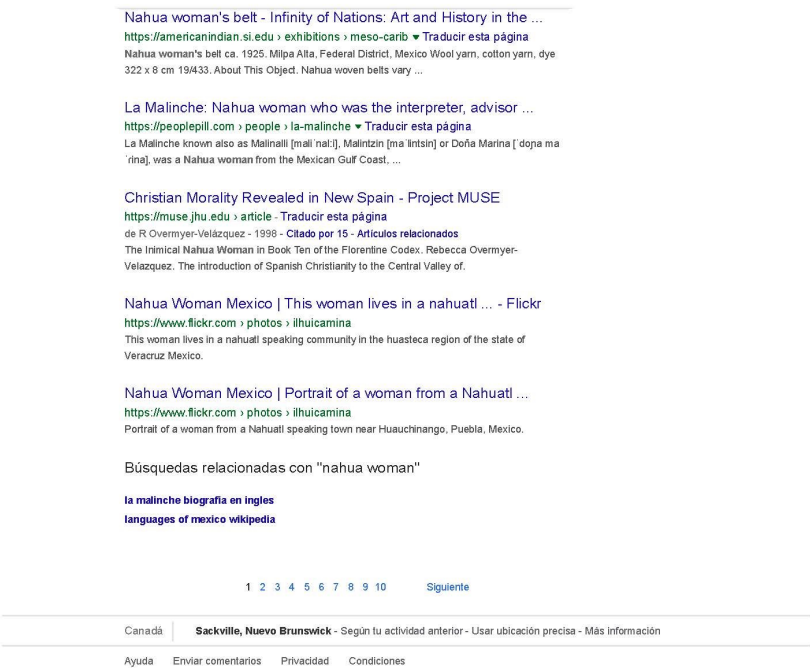
This connection between text and image is a technological problem of our time because metadata is responsible for transubstantiating physical objects such as illustrations and paintings into the virtual domain. Thus, platforms such as Google Image and other nodes of visual information, such as Alamy and Shutterstock, demonstrate the extent to how early modern constructions of indigeneity and gender remain today powerful signifiers of Native Americans. Scholars are only recently critically engaging with the structure and scope of metadata in the way attempted in this article (Gray, 2009; Green & Courtney, 2015, pp. 690-707). By exposing the cultural networks that quietly maintain and legitimate imperial discourses expressed by metadata from the past in today's world, we hope to build upon a considerable body of scholarship concerned with imperial discourse exemplified by the work of Edward Said (1993), among others (John, 2001). Using the example of how metadata represents Nahua women, we will then consider Lascasian visual culture, and

afterward circle back to women in order to problematize and ask some important questions about how metadata privileges white, primarily male supremacy, at the expense of women and people of colour.

Metadata at Work

To understand how metadata influences our ability to find content online, let us turn to one of the most commonly used platforms for visually locating information online. Google Image explains that its search console provides “a way to visually discover information on the web”, and in ways that allows the user to also locate adjacent information in either textual or visual form (Google, 2019a). Viewed from the perspective of identity and identity assignment, all search queries relating to people ascribe and define characteristics of their identity; search results will be different for “Indian woman” than for “Indigenous woman” (Coulthard, 2014; Forte, 2013; Harris, 2003; Matthews, 2008; Palmater, 2011), and search query data is also aggregated and sometimes converted into metadata. Thus, we need to be aware that the structure of our search queries may reinforce and reproduce imperialist, racist, and sexist discourse and constrain the breadth of information displayed in the results (Nakamura, 2008). If the user desires to have “Nahua woman” defined for them in either textual or visual form, Google’s search infrastructure provides the user with both textual and visual options and, of course, the user can toggle or tab between Web and Image results, as desired (Fig. 1) (Google, 2019b). In this way, the user can seek visually-defined information rather than textually-defined information, and consuming the visual source may save the user considerable time, depending on their level of textual or visual literacy, and also in a language when website contents appear in languages unfamiliar to the user. It must be noted that search results constantly evolve, and as this article demonstrates, thematic trends in the results across image platforms exhibit extraordinary consistency with respect to the representation of women and people of colour. While the search results discussed herein, completed in November 2019, will vary if attempted today, the overall tone of the results will remain the same for the foreseeable future.

FIGURE 1
Google Web search results for “Nahua Woman”



Source: Google Web, captured in Chrome 2019, November 27.

Metadata is responsible for populating the textually-defined search query with visual results that range, in the case of “Nahua woman”, from individuals wearing traditional clothing and dolls and figurines, to paintings and scenes of violence featuring a masked individual appearing to threaten a woman for an article titled “The Feminist Indigenous Candidate Running for President of Mexico” (see Fig. 1, third line of visual search results) (Castellanos, 2017). The first photograph accompanying this article, Reportaje-Marichuy-Zapatistas-11.jpg, defines the woman’s last name as well as her political party, but none of this information directly relates to the search query, and the visual featuring a masked individual appearing to threaten the woman who we learn from the article is the political candidate Marichuy does not appear in the article. Usually, metadata is easier to trace, as the painting that appears in top level Google Image results demonstrates (see Fig. 1, second line of visual search results, second from the right). It depicts a “Nahua Woman Original Mexican Oil Painting” which is also the file name for the photograph, by the company who is selling it for \$1,200 USD, Early California Antiques. The search results point to the marketplace Chairish, where the

item is described as “A striking oil painting of a Nahua, a descendant of the once mighty and feared Aztec peoples. Rare original Mexican calendar, 1940s-50s” (Chairish, 2019; Google, 2019c). As this last example demonstrates, many of the results comprise stereotyped cultural projections that implicate western readers-viewers, who may also be content creators, contributors, or consumers, and as will be explored in due course, they are complicit in this construction or invention of Indigenous identity (Dussel, 1995; Rabasa, 2015; Williams Jr., 2014).

Google encourages content creators to increase this important context situated around the images to enhance the usefulness of the search as well as improve traffic to one’s website. This relationship between metadata and search quality clearly translates into attracting the gaze of the web browser so that people may spend time on a website, which can have significant impacts if the site is supported by advertisers or is marketing products directly to consumers, converting the browsing user into an incidental or deliberate consumer of information and products. The basic tools available to content creators for generating metadata include textual descriptions such as image captions placed near the image as well as naming the image file descriptively (nahua-woman.jpg rather than img265983.jpg) (Alderman, 2009). Image sitemaps, furthermore, comprise XML files that compile all metadata for images found on a site and alert search engines to crawl websites for this content. Sitemaps collect six specific image properties: its definition as an “image” in its tag; the image location (URL); the image caption; the geographic location represented in the image, when relevant; and the URL where the image’s license can be found. Another feature that content creators may use is “alt text”, which makes the image accessible to vision-impaired users or even users whose internet connection is too slow to load an image. Alt text will appear when one hovers above an image and is readable using software that the vision-impaired might rely upon.

Google, like other search engines, positions search queries as requiring answers and for this reason often populates a “Related questions” section positioned above or below the image results. This component tends to characterize the metadata that defines the visual search results. In the case of “Nahua woman”, the top three related queries coalesce around a specific cultural reference: “What does Malinche mean?” Google directs the reader to a Merriam-Webster definition for the term, “A man or boy dressed as a woman in a Mexican drama” (Merriam-Webster, 2019), and the article itself has no visual material. The second question deals with language (“Does anyone still speak Aztec?”) and directs the reader to OmniGlot.com where Nahuatl is defined (OmniGlot, 2019). The site offers visitors several video clips that feature women reproducing Nahuatl and that portray the language as belonging to the past, and one of them was titled “Nahua—When a Language Dies”, whose tags include Native, Natives, Native People, Indigenous, Indigenous People, Native Language, First Nations, Aztec, among others (YouTube, 2019). The only explicit textual mention of “woman” is in an embedded link to another video, “Inside an Apache Rite of Passage into Womanhood”. This last example also demonstrates how identity-related vocabularies change over time and can transform into a transhistorical chain of metadata that aggregates terms that relate, in this case, to an Indigenous woman from Mexico. The third question, “Why was Malinche a traitor?” directs readers to a ThoughtCo.com biography of the woman, titled “Biography of Malinche, Mistress and Interpreter to Hernán Cortés”, that explains how “Many modern Mexicans see Malinche as a great traitor who betrayed her native cultures to the bloodthirsty Spanish invaders”. The article is accompanied by a statue of her from a public domain photograph of the *Monumento al mestizaje* by Julián Martínez and M. Maldonado (1982) from Wikipedia (ThoughtCo, 2019; Wikipedia, 2019).

Terms such as Malinche, traitor, dead language, and Nahuatl comprise contextual vocabularies for describing images that appear in the search results, but in many cases, they do not appear in the image tags themselves. Scholars have begun to view these vocabularies as partly responsible for the persistence of imperial discourse (Johnson, 2011) and we see them appearing explicitly in other areas of Google’s search platform. Google Image often produces categories or sub-collections based on groups of keywords arising from the images’ metadata; for “Nahua woman”, they include Indigenous, mujer, Aztec, Aztec fashion, traditional,

pretty, Aztec tribe, and traditional dress. None of the top categories refers to Malintzín or to betrayal, yet this contextual metadata has become associated with “Nahua woman”.

With this variety of ways through which an image may be described, a Google Image search results page makes use of an image’s metadata but is also informed by a title generated automatically by Google extracted from the image title and from meta tags found on the image’s source page. Called “snippets”, Google additionally pulls upon content located on unrelated webpages and which might have some relationship to the metadata found on the image’s source page (Google, 2019d). This practice undergirds the character of the “Related questions” section of Google’s web results page for “Nahua woman”. The precise method employed by Google has not been transparently shared by the corporation, but one presumes that at the least unrelated pages possess textual or visual content that appears to match the inferred subject matter of the image based on its metadata. While Google claims that it cannot manually adjust these descriptive titles, it does encourage content creators to think about the quality of their descriptive metadata in the first place, as this will impact the quality of the snippets that Google generates for each image.

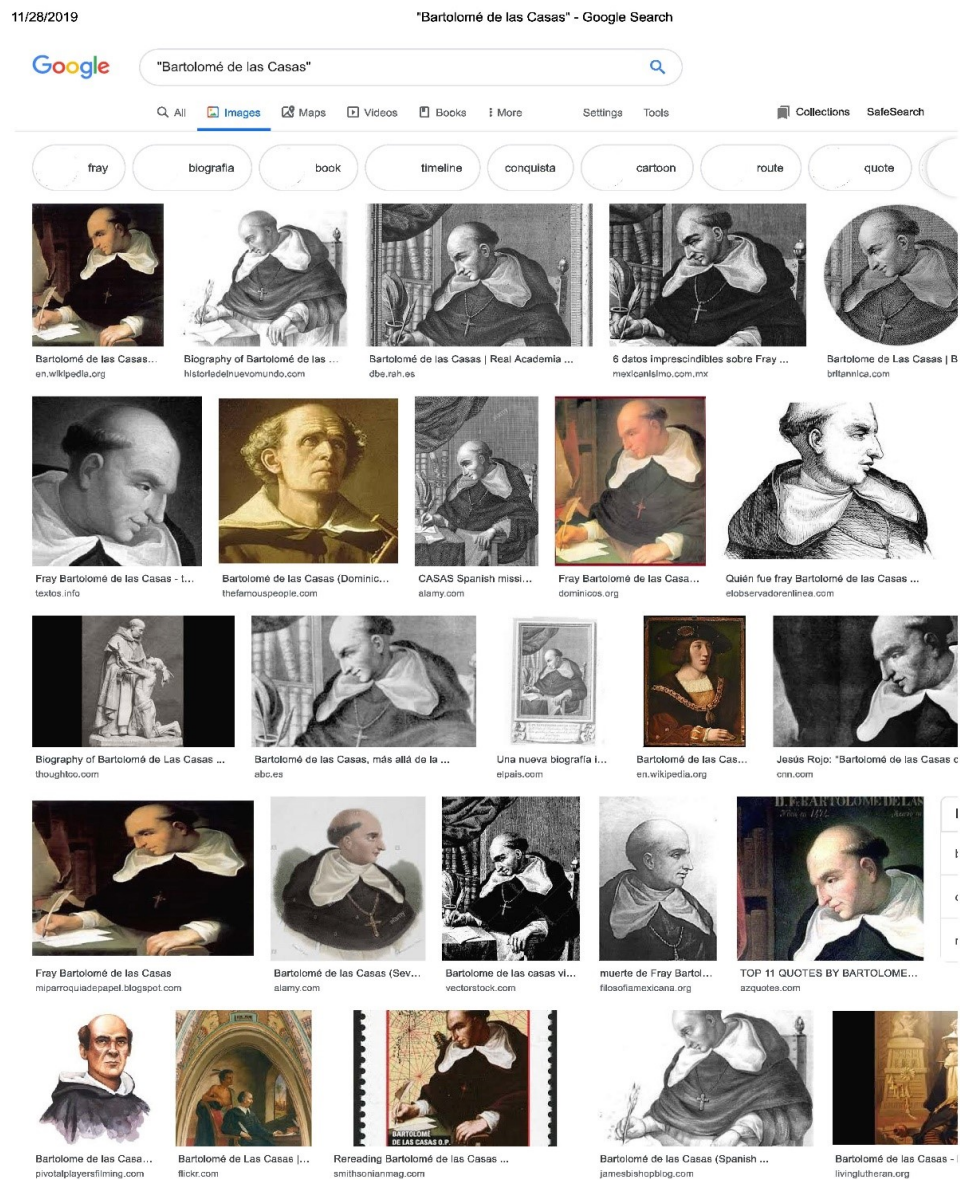
In this way, we can understand the quality of metadata to be fundamentally linked to and informed by humans who must provide basic categories of information in order for Google to make use of the data and hence for it to appear in a query’s search results. Google specifically addresses this point “Because the meta descriptions aren’t displayed in the pages the user sees”, which points to terms such as traitor, Malinche, and dead language being converted into snippets that later become associated with images that share some other meta descriptor—for instance, Nahua—and for this reason “it’s easy to let this content slide” by not giving it careful consideration (Google, 2019d).

Identifying and analysing metadata is a straight-forward exercise, although in scholarly contexts it can be challenging to fully flesh out arguments when they rely upon the complex networks of a search console such as Google, as documenting one’s search pathways quickly grows onerous and these pathways constantly shift and evolve. It is even more difficult to understand how content becomes positioned in search results by providers such as Google, particularly if there are gendered or racial implications for this content. As our exploration of “Nahua woman” has demonstrated, characteristics have become associated with Indigenous women that did not explicitly form part of the image set’s metadata, in what can be characterized as an extraneous form of metadata embedded into the platforms we use to find information online. Furthermore, if content creators are not subject-matter specialists or conversant in suitable vocabularies for describing women and people of colour, they may reproduce descriptors that have problematic consequences for our ability to visualize humanity online. This outcome is particularly likely if content creators extract their metadata for an early-modern image from the original text that described the image, which might define a Nahua woman as an “Indian”, a “natural”, or even a “savage”.

This brief exploration of Indigenous women and metadata will inform our assessment of the representation of race and gender in metadata describing Las Casas’ seminal work, *Brevísima relación*. We will also return to the subject of using authentic references, for instance to Nahua rather than Native American, to describe Indigenous identity as a means of possibly overcoming the surrogate descriptors imposed in the western world upon Native Americans. This approach is informed by a critical body of work on ways to make space for Indigenous people within a settler-colonial milieu (Bell, 2014; Byrd, 2011). It is also worthwhile to consider how settlers in the Americas “play Indian” and exert their presence in the visual and textual realms, including through the instrument of metadata where Indigenous people exist contemporaneously (Banivanua Mar & Edmonds, 2010; Barbour, 2015, pp. 269-284; Deloria, 2004; Poulter, 2009).

Lascasian Visual Culture in the Digital Realm

Two metadata sets, which will also comprise search queries, will help us to reach an understanding of the visual culture associated with Las Casas and the reception of his most famous work: “Bartolomé de las Casas” (Fig. 2) and “Brevisima relación” (Fig. 3). Remarkably, the web search results for both queries when entered into English- or Spanish-language search engines point first to English-language resources such as Wikipedia, which demonstrates the popularity of this corpus among Anglophone audiences and foreshadows the shaping of Lascasian visual culture, as well as its metadata, by non-Hispanophone audiences. The Google Image results, however, emphasise Spanish-language webpages so that if one searched for textual results, information is first presented in English, whereas the visual results offer information first in Spanish. These different language preferences highlight another way that information online is shaped by metadata based on the language in which it was created.



https://www.google.com/search?q=Bartolomé+de+las+Casas&rlz=1C1SQJL_enCA872CA872&source=lnms&tbn=isch&sa=X&v

FIGURE 2.
Google Image search results for “Bartolomé de las Casas”
Source: Google, captured in Chrome, 2019, November 28.

11/28/2019

"Brevisima relación" - Google Search

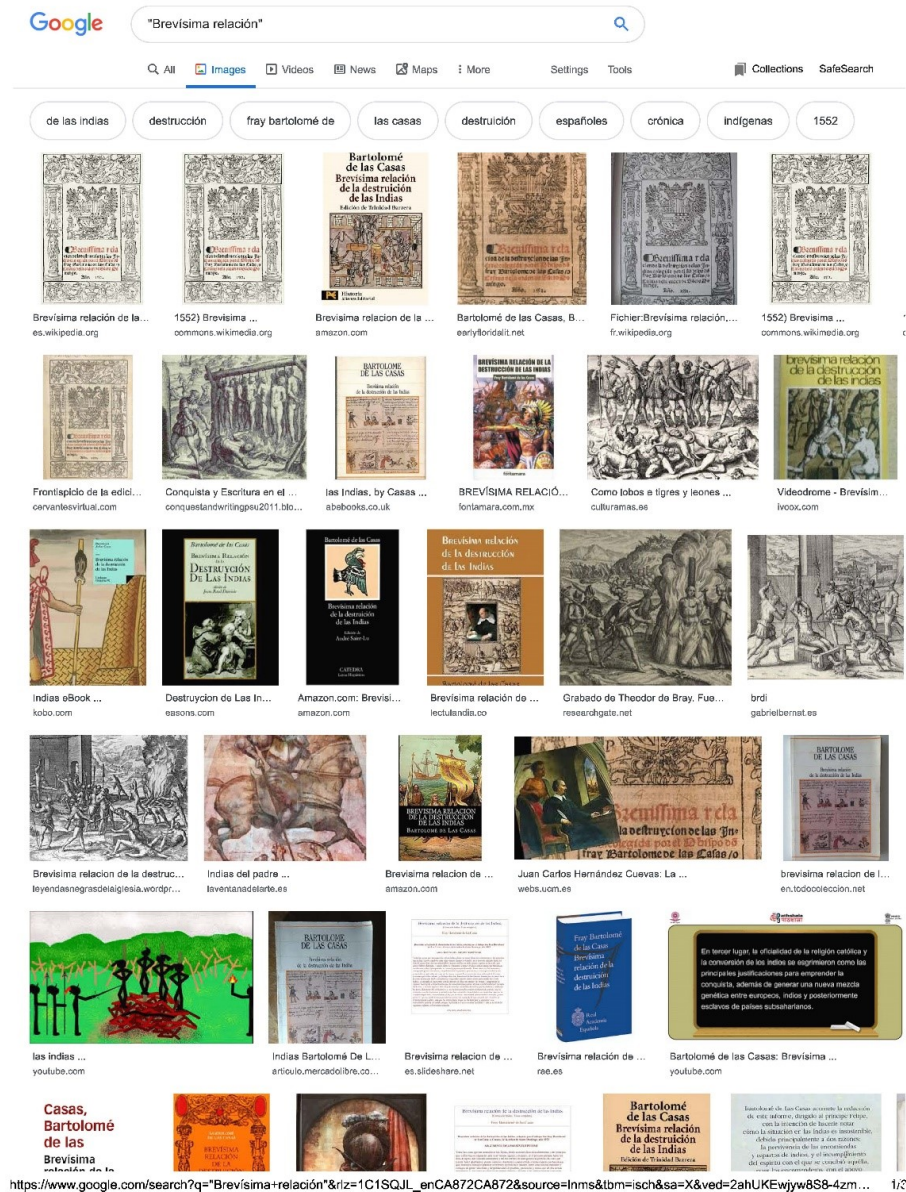


FIGURE 3
Google Image search results for "Brevisima relación"
Source: Google, captured in Chrome, 2019, November 28.

Both Google Image search queries produce a contrasting range of sub-collections. Whereas "Brevisima relación" has been tagged with alternate terms frequently found in the book's metadata (year of publication, other words frequently found in the book's title in editions produced over the centuries, as well as the genre of book)—that comprises the information that a library would use to catalogue the work in Spanish—"Bartolomé de las Casas" attracts a more complex array of collection terms in both English and Spanish, and that would not be used to catalogue the book. "Cartoon", "route", "quote", "citas [quotations]", and "statue" are unrelated to the book's metadata and their association with Las Casas requires further consideration, particularly the two terms that explicitly refer to visuality.

The "cartoon" sub-collection broadens the field of metadata associated with Las Casas to include illustrated images of white men harming or saving Native Americans, with explicit references to Christianity (Fig. 4). The

collection's tags also include Christopher Columbus (1451-1506), the encomienda system, and Theodore de Bry (1528-1598)—to whom we will return later on. The sources of these illustrations grow more complex upon closer examination, particularly when they come from image aggregators such as Alamy.com (the third search result), a company that sells stock images for various purposes, including to national and international media outlets (Alamy, 2019). Captioned “Old engravings. Depicted Bartolome de las Casas. The book ‘History of the Church,’ 1880 – Image ID: C95E5C”, Alamy offers it for sale from \$19.99-\$365 Canadian Dollars for a range of purposes, including personal use, newsletters, websites, marketing, and a royalty-free license. When we search Google for the image caption, we discover that the same image and metadata can be found on other commercial image aggregators, including Shutterstock where it appears as the fourth result in a collection called “Bartolome”, with the first three images featuring photographs of cities. These aggregators offer the image for different prices (Shutterstock, 2019). This instance demonstrates how metadata becomes reproduced on a larger scale as well as moored to completely distinct concepts, as Las Casas had not any relationship with any of the cities or the islands named San Bartolomé and St. Barthélemy located in Latin America, the Caribbean, and Spain.

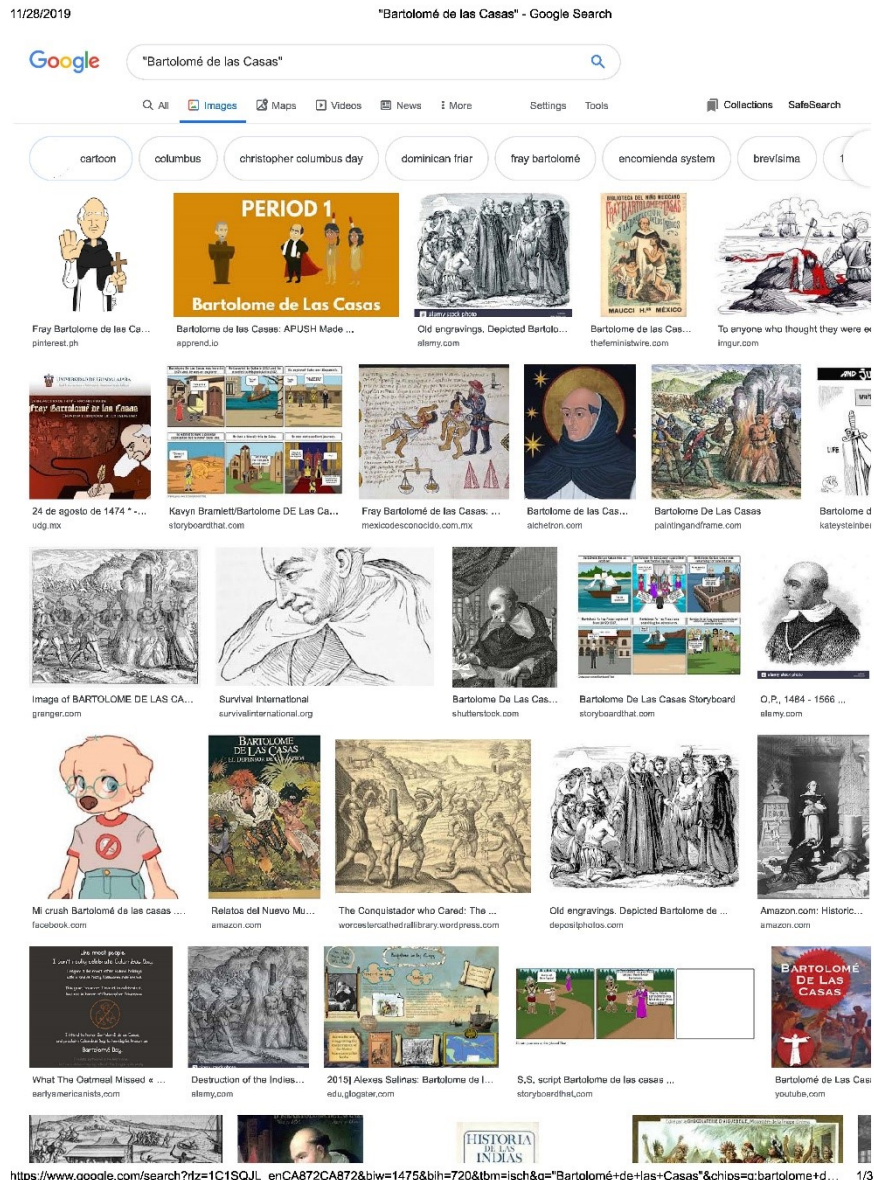


FIGURE 4
Google Image search results for “Bartolomé de las Casas” limited
to the “cartoon” sub-collection of this data set as captured

Source: Google Chrome, 2019, November 28

A closer inspection of Alamy's stock of images that mention Las Casas in their metadata reveals the sort of visual material that the company pursues—rights-managed or royalty-free images. Early-modern subject matter thus comprises an important revenue stream for Alamy because woodcut, copperplate, and lithograph engravings such as the one captioned “Old engravings” often come from already published books that are no longer in copyright and may or may not be cited as the source of the illustration. Alamy, like most stock image firms, instead credits the image's contributor, and this information makes its way into the image's metadata set, sometimes displacing that of the image's original creator, place of publication, and even subject-matter¹.

The use of visual material produced in other eras, and the financial incentive to avoid paying copyright and royalty fees, also means that platforms where we consume visual material can be rife with ethical and values-related problems that do not necessarily reflect cultural and social norms of today's world. Yet, these

illustrations are being used to characterize information for today's readerships (Kratz, 2011, pp. 21-48). Of the 122 stock images relating to Las Casas at Alamy, only 23 are not reproductions of engravings, statues, and books that are out of copyright. 17 of those illustrations depict Native Americans expressing thanks and appreciation for Las Casas's interventions on their behalf, and 28 of them reproduce or imitate a famous portrait of Las Casas. Another commercial image site, Getty Images, offers a portrait of Las Casas in its search results for his name; and while citing the source of its portrait of Las Casas as coming from the 1791 illustrated book, *Retratos de los españoles ilustres*, it nonetheless offers the image for up to \$575 Canadian Dollars without any compelling reason for why it should earn this revenue when a high-quality digitized copy of the image can be easily found online for free (Getty Images, 2019).

The visual culture of early modernity, and certainly of Las Casas, should prompt scholars to investigate how metadata may also be reinforcing sexist and racist discourses that as a collective maintain a patriarchal, imperialising vision of western society, particularly in the for-profit marketplace where early-modern metadata is being colonized by "contributors" and concepts such as licencing and rights management. As some scholars have recently noted, the structure of metadata used to catalogue information for a library or archive categorically limits the presence of Indigenous peoples, which we can extend to other traditionally marginalized groups, including women, people of colour, and the economically challenged (Falzetti, 2015, pp. 128-144; Hunt, 2016, pp. 25-42; Kam, 2007, pp. 18-22). Some scholars have referred to this phenomenon as a form of globalized knowledge whereby we can understand that western knowledge—whose architecture traditionally has supported white patriarchy—is becoming increasingly globalized in its scope (Crowley 2011; Renn, 2012; Schreffler, 2007; Sha, 2002, pp. 73-100).

Returning to our Google Image results for Las Casas in the sub-collection Cartoon, we observe that the top twenty results feature objects and referents, as well as postures, in common with the Alamy results. Nearly every result features a white man in some position of authority, whether in the act of writing, evangelizing, educating, or soldiering. This authority is also expressed beyond these vocations in the form of positioning the white man above Native Americans. Meanwhile, Native Americans are portrayed less consistently—their racial and cultural features (for example, regalia) can be exaggerated cultural signifiers of their indigeneity or victimhood, and more than one search result portrays them as white or replaces these cultural signifiers with a reference to violence. Thus, Lascasian visual culture trends in two directions: one vein of representation presents the man and his work in a positive light that might enshrine or celebrate his Christian values and arguments against the enslavement of Native Americans, whereas the other vein of representation uses references to Spanish violence as a means of iterating Las Casas's work. Several search results point to educational sources such as Apprend.io and the Universidad de Guadalajara where lessons outline the man's accomplishments and celebrate, in the latter case, his birthday, characterizing him as a "cronista y defensor de los indígenas"; he wears a cross and is depicting writing (Universidad de Guadalajara, 2018). Several of the results feature or imitate a famous portrait of Las Casas that shows him in profile from the 1791 *Retratos de los españoles ilustres*.

These images must be considered in terms of how our values evolve over the centuries. Twenty-first century readers tend to value war and violence differently than our predecessors hundreds of years ago. Rather than a conquest, we usually refer to the arrival of Europeans to the Americas as an invasion, a change that exemplifies how values shift over time and therefore how readers and viewers' assessment of information also changes. More than one search result problematizes European presence in ways that also refer to Las Casas. The fourth result, from The Feminist Wire, relates to an article criticizing Columbus Day. It features a book cover portraying a white religious man beneath whom a kneeling Native American in prayer, and Native children, can be found. It originates from the Biblioteca del Niño Mexicano's *Fray Bartolomé de las Casas o la protección de los Indios* (Mexico: Maucci Hermanos, 1900), which ironically does not make its way into the image's metadata, although the information itself is metadata for the book as an object. Similarly, another post from the social media platform for hosting images, imgur.com, accompanies a post critical of Columbus

Day; it features emblematic representations of the Spanish as a European soldier and of Native Americans as a dead person with a sword sticking out of his back (imgur, 2015). This post includes several illustrations published by De Bry, and these examples also show us one of the data pathways linking Columbus—whose presence in the Americas initiates a centuries-long invasion causing extreme cultural violence—with Las Casas, who argued for better conditions and treatment of Native Americans, on the occasion of the holiday commemorating the former man (Las Casas, 1598; Dittmar, 2011, pp. 1133-1172; Sáenz-López Pérez, 2011, pp. 463-481)².

These results also highlight the ways that violence against Native Americans has become a signifier of both the Spanish invasion and Las Casas's arguments in favour of Indigenous welfare. Mexico Desconocido comprises a history and culture resource for the general public, and its search result features a white man cutting Native Americans and grabbing one by his hair. The image does not illustrate Las Casas or even Native Americans from the region of Mexico where he spent time; rather, it is from the c. 1550 Codex Kingsborough-Tepetlaoztoc (British Museum, London, Add. Ms. 13964) and the abusive figure is labelled Luys Baca (Luis Vaca). Alianza Editorial's 2018 edition of *Brevísima relación* exemplifies this practice in a slightly different fashion; its cover finds its way into the top 20 search results as well. The illustration itself was created by an Indigenous man, Felipe Guamán Poma de Ayala (1534-1615), to illustrate the sorts of abuses his people were experiencing in Peru, in this case the execution of Tupac Amaru Inka (Guamán Poma, 1615, p. 451). Again, we see white people higher in the image's register than Native Americans, who clamour and cry out in protest from below the scene of murder, and this order should be viewed as an essential element of the grammar of Lascasian visual culture (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006).

The association of violence against Native Americas with Las Casas is not a surprise, and several of the search results explicitly point to images created for De Bry's 1598 edition of Las Casas' *Brevísima relación*. This work is responsible for solidifying the visualization of violence against Native Americans with Spaniards; scholars usually refer to the framing of Spain's activities in Europe and in its colonies as the Black Legend (Greer et al., 2007). Today any scene of violence iterates Spanish abuses in the New World in ways that can be referential to Las Casas and certainly informs Lascasian visual culture. A quarter of the top search results features images from De Bry's 1598 edition.

An analysis of the "Brevísima relación" search results reinforces these observations that Lascasian visual culture has been shaped so that Spanish violence characterizes the book in ways not intended by its author, as there has never been a Spanish- or Latin-language edition of the work that became illustrated before the twentieth century. The search results nonetheless favour the frontispiece of the 1552 edition and this data is housed on a distinct array of websites compared to the search results for the book's author. Whereas Las Casas attracts primary commercial websites that make use of related metadata to sell or position information for the consumer, the book is either positioned as a consumable product in and of itself on websites such as Amazon or as a source of knowledge on websites such as Wikipedia and Cervantes Virtual. Nearly all top results feature title pages or frontispieces from various editions of the book, and several of the De Bry illustrations from his 1598 edition are shared between the two search results, which suggests a high degree of common metadata. The use of early-modern engravings, moreover, allows modern publishers to reproduce visual content cheaply and without paying royalties. The modernity of the book is emphasized by the sub-collection tags, which include three references to electronic books as well as the notion of making a "first purchase". The presence of this content suggests that the book's metadata has grown to include the format in which the data is made available—in this case, as a branded form of electronic book—and the web browser or reader herself becomes implicated in the metadata with the notion of purchasing the book.

A general observation about this brief assessment of Lascasian visual culture through its metadata can be made concerning the absence of any Native American-focused material beyond their presence as either victims of Spanish violence or thankful recipients of Las Casas' goodwill and of Christianity. The search results under study exhibit a conflation between scenes of conversion where a missionary converts Native

Americans to Christianity, who gaze upward at the missionary in thanks and reverence for God—such as the one captioned “Old engravings”—and Indigenous people in the same posture gratefully gazing upon Las Casas as the defender of their rights and freedoms. This representational trend converts Indigenous peoples into either perennial victims or the recipients of western grace. Significantly, Lascasian visual culture layers referents for Christian evangelization upon those for human rights and freedoms. From a different perspective, the expression of metadata in textual form allows us to problematize metadata in terms of textual culture in the Americas. Textuality has for centuries been viewed by Indigenous peoples as an instrument of violent colonialism, and it cannot surprise us to find metadata performing a similar function when it comes to the representation of Indigenous peoples online (Arnold & Dios Yapita, 2006; Ashcroft, 2014; Boone & Mignolo, 1994; Calloway, 2013; Cheyfitz, 1997; Gonzalbo Aizpuru, 1990; Niño-Murcia & Salomon, 2011; O’Brien, 2010; Robertson, 2005).

Finally, throughout the image results, Indigenous woman were rarely portrayed in this data set’s collective metadata, which leaves us questioning whether women as victims of physical violence or as thankful subjects possess distinct meanings than when men fulfil these roles. Indeed, when we search simultaneously for “Nahua Woman” and “Bartolomé de las Casas”, the top search results transform into illustrations from the Mexican codices, such as the Florentine Codex, which were illustrated by Native Americans (some of whom were women). Scenes of violence become displaced for the most part by representations of Indigenous customs and history. And unlike the separate searches for “Nahua woman” and for “Bartolomé de Las Casas”, when their metadata is joined the stereotypical referents become replaced with a critical mass of Indigenous self-representation (Muehlebach, 2003, pp. 241-268). In contrast, the same exercise repeated for “Nahua man” and “Bartolomé de las Casas” offers the frontispieces of *Brevísima relación*, references to La Malinche, and to Pocahontas, women viewed throughout the western world as essentialized emblems of Indigenous femininity (Fig. 5) (Jager, 2016). There thus seems to be a gendered aspect to metadata that scholars need to better understand.

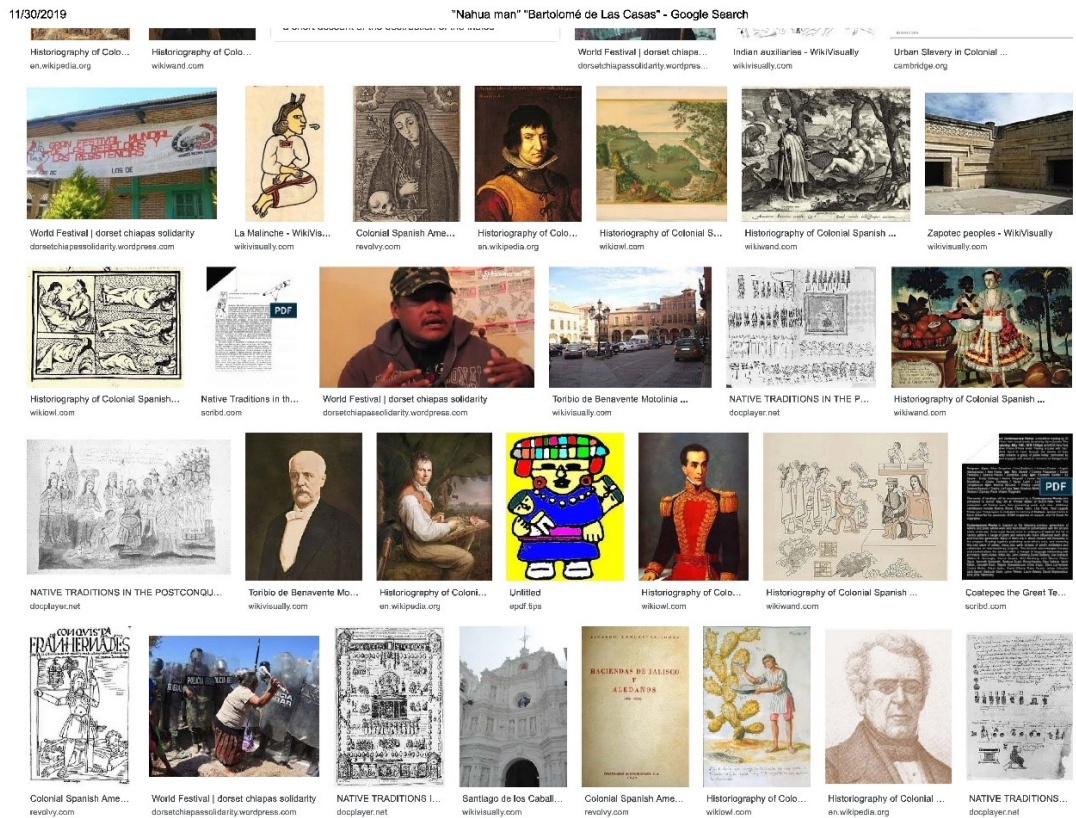
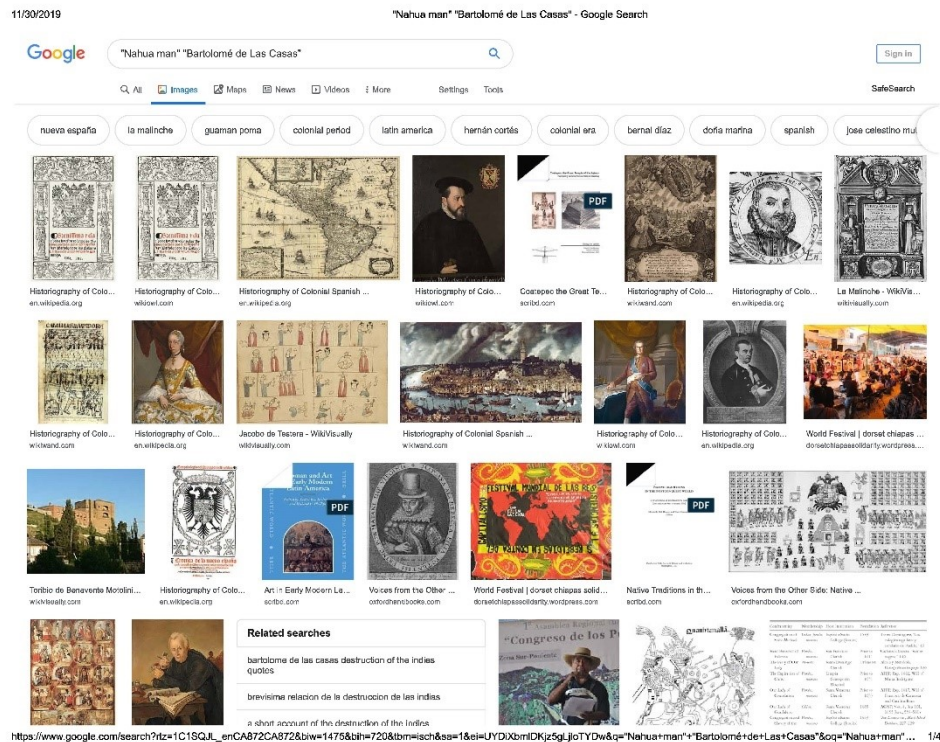


FIGURE 5
Google Image search results for “Nahua man” and “Bartolomé de las Casas”



Source: Google Chrome, 2019, November 30

Conclusion: Imperial Persistence

The different qualities of information emerging from a gendered framing of Lascasian visual culture expose relationships between masculinity and the dataset under consideration whereby an explicit mention of masculinity (“Nahua man”) resulted in many of the same results that appeared when searching for Lascasian material without this gendered framing. In fact, by adding this masculine referent, problematic representations of women emerge that are entirely absent when the framing is feminine in nature (“Nahua woman”) or when no gendered frame is used. Masculinity for this dataset becomes not only a projection and characteristic of Las Casas, which one expects to a degree because he is male, but also it appears to be linked to imperial discourse in ways that femininity is not.

Scholars of imperialism have observed that patriarchy comprises a central element to the colonial project, whose actors also tend to be idealized examples of masculinity, whether in the form of conquistadors, missionaries, princes and kings, pioneers, pilgrims, and settlers on the frontier, or in terms of the respected historians who chronicled or studied the past, most of whom were men before the twentieth century. This reality implies that textual culture has been primarily manufactured and used by white men as well, which builds upon Walter Ong’s view that the word became technologized much in the way that metadata has become today, and dovetails with Ruth Oldenziel’s observation that technology has grown increasingly masculine in the modern era (Oldenziel, 1999; Ong, 1982). Viewing textuality this way allows us to see the visceral connection it shares with technological endeavours as mutually masculine domains. Our knowledge of the past cannot escape patriarchal ways of knowing and seeing the world, which evidently impacts early modern metadata, whose creators and target audiences were male and includes captions or explanations of book illustrations, and book frontispieces and title language in addition to the subject-matter featured in visual form. Today, early modern metadata also includes the entire document, if relating to a book because technology allows us to scan the contents of the book and to leverage them as metadata in search consoles

such as Google. In this light, early modern metadata remains more available today than it was in the past when the contents of a book could not be machine read.

Because our knowledge of the past is colonized by this form of information imperialism, it may prove impossible to overcome the persistence of imperialism that privileges white male experiences and ways of knowing without some deliberate intervention into the metadata profiles such as the one we have explored for Lascasian visual culture. Based on this study, changing its character might be achieved through the assertion of a female and authentic Indigenous presence in the metadata. Taking this step should allow other aspects of Las Casas' work to take prominence over images of Native Americans subjugated and abused, as these images reinforce imperial discourse and could possibly show some idealized outcome of the Lascasian project—namely, Indigenous people possessing human rights and freedoms.

By creating datasets that explicitly include women and Indigenous people—beyond the white heteronormative man—we may find ways of accessing the early modern period that help overcome the fact that our sources are imperialist, patriarchal, and the knowledge contained in them colonized by the white male gaze. This action would effectively build new pathways that connect metadata nodes in ways that better reflect our values today.

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Notes

- * Research article
- 1 Unfortunately, a search for the source of this illustration, which was presumably published in 1880, has proven fruitless.
- 2 De Bry's edition was published first in Latin, was thoroughly illustrated, and was translated into several European languages alongside the illustrations within a decade.

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