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Methodologies of Socio-Cultural Classification: Contextualizing the Casta Painting (1710-1800) as a Product of Time

by Pooja Chaudhuri

The “casta painting” appeared in the early 18th century Colonial Mexico (New Spain). The paintings illustrated different offspring produced from sexual unions between men and women of Spanish, native Indian and African descent in the Americas. Series of casta paintings came in sets of typically sixteen panels, each featuring a mixed race couple and their one or sometimes, two children over a period of multiple generations. The viewer's attention is drawn to phenotypic distinctions like skin color, styles of clothing and posture, all of which serve to racially distinguish each figure. The casta paintings were generally produced by *criollo* (creole) painters, a term used to refer to Spaniards who were born and raised in Spanish America. The paintings served to an extent, the viewing pleasure of *creole* elites in colonial Mexico, as well as in the Iberian Peninsula. Some casta paintings were commissioned by colonial officials who intended to take them back to Spain. Other sets were exhibited at the *Royal Cabinet of Natural History*, founded by Charles III in Madrid to display a plethora of objects and cultural artifacts from overseas territories belonging to the Castilian Crown. Over the course of the century, the paintings developed into elaborate taxonomic and ethnographic projects.¹

Conceptions of *raza*, or race are central to situating casta paintings in the history of Colonial Mexico. For the Spanish, '*raza*' converged with views on religion, occupation, gender and the separate functions of male and female bodies. Such complex vocabularies of race were articulated in the casta paintings as *mestizaje*, or race mixing between people of Indian, African, Spanish and Mixed descent in the Colonial Mexico. Not only do these paintings visually depict intimate spheres between people living in the colony, they point to a greater colonial preoccupation with classifying and categorizing reproductive outcomes from sex across racial boundaries.¹ Granted that the paintings circulated as artifacts of popular culture in elite Spanish circles, they relied on a system of racial logic that developed over the course of centuries as the Spanish encountered new ideas, people, and places.

Furthermore, casta paintings represent a map making project that place racialized bodies of men, women, and children as points of reference in a larger narrative of human action. Each painting serves as a stage for exposing narratives of race mixing, which were informed by a range of historical processes and changing discourses on gender, race, class and sexuality. This analysis of casta paintings posits them as maps of socio-cultural, racial, and gendered hierarchy. In addition, the paintings are targeted towards an elite Spanish audience and serve as instructive maps of both desirable and undesirable mixed race combinations. Their didactic purpose points to a desire on the part of painters to classify the population of Colonial Mexico within a map of sexual reproduction thereby, endorsing the colonial management of the most intimate relations among men and women in the colony.²

Over the course of different time periods, the term, 'race' has been woven with ideas of gender and class. In its modern twentieth century usage, race developed from biological explanations that defined it as a cluster of genetic characteristics linking a group of people together. Genetic similarities within a group are thought to determine phenotype like skin color, hair texture, and body structure. Ian F. Haney López argues against the idea that “racial divisions reflect fundamental genetic differences.”³ López cites several scientific findings which have shown that variations *between* two or more different populations (or, intragroup differences) exceed variations *within* a 'racial' group (or, intergroup differences). This argument supports the view that race is not biologically determined but socially and historically constructed. In other words, the notion of race as a social construct suggests that different racial systems rely on interactions between humans rather than on natural distinctions.

Moreover, because ideas about race have changed over time, racial logic has significantly transformed the 'social fabric' of different histories. Gender, class and sexuality are integral to this 'social fabric'.⁴ Race is therefore not a strictly genetic category and is instead enmeshed with gender, class and long histories of colonization; at different points in time the term has been associated more

with either the biological or the social. This understanding of race as a fluid category presents important insight into looking at the casta painting as a methodology of socio-cultural classification.

Race, gender and sexuality in the casta painting



Miguel Cabrera, *De español y de mestiza* (From Spaniard and Indian, Mestiza), 1763, oil on canvas 132 x 101cm.



Unknown artist, *De español y negra, nace mulata* (From Spaniard and Black, a Mulatta is Born), ca. 1785-1790, oil on canvas, 62.6 x 83.2cm.

As Andrea Smith puts it, colonial relationships are themselves racialized and sexualized. Colonial relationships are marked by power relations which reflect a desire to dominate. Knowledge production becomes crucial to maintaining the power structures that necessitate social, economic and political domination of colonizers over the colonized.⁵ The painting by Miguel Cabrera titled, *De español y de india, mestiza, 1763* (From Spaniard and Indian, Mestiza is produced) suggests that Spanish men were endowed with superior characteristics to men of other races. Therefore, they were to an extent responsible for controlling female sexuality within their own racial group as well as in others.

The image is of a family triad; each member is dressed in sumptuous clothing implying the wealth and status of the family. The viewer's attention is first drawn to the indigenous woman facing forward, then the half turned child and last, to the man whose line of vision is directed toward his wife. The positioning of the Indian woman and child suggests that they are subject to the authority of the central Spanish figure. His head is turned away which indicates that he is gazing on the scene as an outside viewer might. The alignment of the figures in this painting suggests that the Spanish male is in a threshold identity of insider and outsider. He is part of the image and at the same time, participating in its construction. The woman and child however, are being put on display for both the Spanish male and the viewers of the painting.⁶ The scene itself is confined to a finite time and space. Just as in a map, the gazes of the figures serve as points of reference which signify a pattern of human interaction. The figures in Cabrera's painting reflect a pseudo-scientific and religious discourse on the body. In short, this particular image illuminates the importance of managing the Indian woman's body for the

purposes of producing new ontologies of race.

Attributing Cabrera's image to a longer history of change over time points to Spanish views on religion and biology. Assumptions about the differences in male and female physiognomies first appeared in Aristotelean theories on the crucial role of bodily fluids including semen, blood, and breast milk to the creation of new life. Ancient Greek philosopher, Galen, theorized that food changed into blood upon consumption which in turn transformed into semen in men and breast milk in women. In his work, *On the Natural Faculties*, Galen wrote, "nobody will suppose that bread represents a kind of meeting-place for bone, flesh, nerve and all the other parts, and that each of these subsequently becomes separated in the body and goes to join its own kind; before any separation takes place, the whole of bread obviously becomes blood."⁷ Thus, blood corresponded to a special activity or function in the human body.

According to these formulations, the 'female seed' was weaker than the male seed and, in effect, biological heredity was attributed to the male line of descent. Within this paternalistic view of reproduction, the woman received the characteristics of her male ancestors through blood and passed it on to her children when the blood transmuted into breast milk. These ideas took precedent in Spanish religious beliefs that impurities in blood were actually hereditary traits that could be passed down to subsequent generations. Therefore, control of women's sexuality and reproduction was crucial to preserving the purity of a lineage. Cabrera's painting identifies the Spanish male gaze as an omniscient and authoritative one. In casta paintings that depict Indian-Spanish or Black-Spanish, the Spanish body is generally male, while Indian, African, or mixed descent bodies are female. This suggests that Spanish men are in control of *all* female sexuality. The privileging of Spanish men inevitably emasculates men of other races. Thus, the underlying principles of patrilineal formulas of reproduction in the casta painting point to the interplay of colonialism, pseudo-science, and gender.⁸

Situating the casta painting as a colonial representation brings to light the heterosexual family unit. Within this sexual economy, women are both biological and social reproducers. In other words, women are held responsible for physically bringing more members of a community into existence and inculcating in them, the beliefs valued within a particular group. In the context of Spanish ideology, the offspring of sexual unions were thought to take after the father. This elevated the importance of having pure, well-bred women who would ensure that the 'male seed' was properly transmitted to the next generation. To quote V. Spike Peterson's work on heterosexism and nationalism, "hierarchical privileging of the masculine –in symbolic and political ordering– puts particular pressure on males to constantly 'prove' their manhood, which entails denigrating the feminine, within and beyond the identity of the group."⁹ The casta paintings speak to this conception of women as biologically and socially integral to the genealogy of a community.

However, not all women are represented in the same way in casta paintings. A painting by an unknown artist titled, *De español y negra, nace mulata, ca. 1785-1790* (From Spaniard and Black, a Mulatta is Born) depicts a colorful dining room scene.¹⁰ At the right corner of the image are two men of mixed descent sitting behind an oblong dining table. A young woman brings them a cup of tea. Directly in front of the table is a seated woman who appears to be stirring soup in a cauldron. Their heads are turned and eyes are directed towards what appears to be the focal point of the painting. A Black woman holds a cooking ladle in her hand, and is about to strike her partner, a Spanish man. Their toddler daughter stands in between them and attempts to disassemble the skirmish. A second Black woman reaches over another table to prevent her angry and violent friend from attacking the Spanish man. Representations of domestic violence in casta paintings are particular to Black women. Similar depictions of violence are absent from portrayals of women of Indian, Spanish and mixed descent.¹¹ Although this scene exhibits a complex set of human actions in a time frame of the present, it draws from ideologies that can be traced to Spanish involvement in the transatlantic slave trade.

In comparison to the natives, both free and enslaved Blacks were ranked the lowest on the social hierarchy. Early modern Christian interpretations attributed black skin color to the Curse of Ham,

a biblical incident from the Book of Genesis. In a drunken stupor, Ham saw his father, Noah naked. Thus, Noah placed a curse on Ham's son, Canaan that made his skin black. Enslavement of Africans was justified on the grounds that they were descendants of Ham and tainted by a divinely ordained immorality.¹² The fear of 'Blackness' as a condition was articulated in tropes that drew from concepts of *limpieza de sangre* or purity of blood. Black blood was thought to be so strong and resilient that it could not be absorbed by the purity of Spanish blood. Contrastingly, several theories postulated that Indian blood was weak, and therefore could be absorbed after generations of mixture with Spanish blood.¹³ Casta paintings that depict domestic violence map onto the bodies of Black women, the physical implications of 'Blackness.' In casta paintings for example, the violence particular to Black women is usually juxtaposed with the tranquillity and passivity of her partner, a Spanish man. Such characteristics and traits become racialized and abstracted to represent the relative hyper masculinity of Black women in comparison to women, and, to an extent, men of other races. In addition, characteristics like violence, which are associated with 'Blackness' facilitate the construction of 'Whiteness' as an uniquely Spanish attribute.

The idea that blood was a vehicle for transmitting moral, physical, and psychological traits like 'Blackness' is evident in the painting, *De Alvína y Español sale Negro torna atrás, ca. 1725-1800* (From Albino (woman) and Spaniard, a Black boy is born).¹⁴ The painting depicts time as linear and presents the idea that race moves backwards. This image presents a panorama of a city where wealthy couples can be seen strolling in the park surrounded by a high fence. Beyond this recreational area are several stuccoed buildings lining the sides of a relatively empty road. In the front part of the painting, three figures occupy an elevated area and gaze out across the park and the walls of the city. One of the figures, a Spanish woman, is seated in a chair and wearing an openly exasperated expression on her face. Her Spanish husband, positioned on the left side of the platform looks down at a dark-skinned child. The young boy faces his parents with his back towards the city. Both parents and child are dressed in sumptuous attire reflecting their evidently wealthy status as a family. This painting shows the seventh generation of a Black-Spanish lineage in which each subsequent child born has presumably mated with a partner of Spanish descent. Through this scene, the artist suggests that the last generation of a Black-Spanish racial mixture engenders a return to 'Blackness'.

The black child born to white parents is exemplary of the popular assumption that once it infiltrated into 'pure' lines of descent, Black blood could never be erased from family lineage. In the painting, the Albino woman (not the Spanish man) is responsible for transmitting the *defect* in blood to her child who, unlike his mother, physically displays 'Blackness' on his skin. Moreover, 'Whiteness' is a symbolic prerequisite for 'Spanishness.' The stigma associated with people of African descent becomes an apprehension to the resilience of Black blood even after seven generations of racial mixing and dilution with Spanish blood. These popular constructions of Black blood as impure relied on the notion of linear time. The return of Blackness suggests that the past was embedded in the present and the future. Implicated in the very language used to describe the *Negro torna atrás* is the idea of race moving backwards in time and, therefore, becoming less pure. Spanish religious doctrine, involvement in the Transatlantic slave trade, and centuries of wars with Muslims in North Africa determined the human relationships in the painting.¹⁵ By contrast, the Spanish had to devise new ways to contend with the native Indians, who were an entirely new and different group of people unknown to Europe at large before the fourteenth century.

Beliefs regarding the Indians were partly shaped by the writings of Bartolomé de Las Casas, a sixteenth century Spanish Dominican priest. Published in 1539, one of his most influential pieces titled, *Short Account of the Destruction of the Indies* was addressed "to the most high and most mighty Prince of Spain, Our lord the Prince Phillip." The narrative chronicled Spanish assaults on "The simplest people in the world – unassuming, long-suffering, unassertive and submissive – they are without malice of guile [...]"¹⁶ He argued that all of humankind were God's creatures. And, although the Indians were indeed at a more primitive stage than the Spanish were, they nevertheless deserved to be

inculcated into the Christian faith. The placement of Indians in a time frame before the Spanish points to use of linear time for the purpose of justifying a map of progress. The Spanish viewed themselves in the present and formulated their goals around redeeming Indian savages from their backwardness. This conception of redemption is visible in the nomenclature of *mestizaje* which posited Indian blood as redeemable and Black blood as irredeemable.

One of Casas' most formidable adversaries was a humanist scholar by the name of Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda, who sought to legitimize Spanish colonization of the Indies. In 1544, he composed a Latin dialogue *Democritus Secundus* that drew from Aristotle's theory of natural slavery. According to Sepúlveda, the Indians represented inferior and irrational beings who were slaves by nature. As barbarians, they had to be controlled by rational Spanish rule. If they refused enslavement, then the Spanish were entitled to forcibly 'civilize' them.¹⁷ Both Las Casas and Sepúlveda exemplified opposing views on the subject of the Indians. Yet, despite their differing methods on controlling the Indian population of Colonial Mexico, the two prominent scholars used progress through time as a basis for their arguments on barbarism and backwardness.

The passage of the Laws of Burgos in 1512 was the legal precedent that set the stage for the theoretical debate between Las Casas and Sepúlveda. Emerging from the Crown of Castille, these were the first codified attempts to regulate the behavior of the Spanish in the Americas. The laws authorized the conversion of Indians to Christianity and prohibited their maltreatment. They also legitimized the *encomienda* system, whereby the Indians worked for their Spanish *encomenderos* (masters) in exchange for receiving the basic tenets of Christianity.¹⁸ According to Anthony Pagden, Sepúlveda failed to get much support for his argument especially in intellectual circles such as the universities of Salamanca and Alcalá because he did not articulate his views in theological terms. Las Casas' ideas gained popularity precisely because his argument was entrenched in Christian morality. Pagden argues that it was more Sepúlveda's secular reasoning rather than his denunciation of Indians that rendered his work unfavorable among elite circles.¹⁹

Even after the heated debates between Las Casas and Sepúlveda subsided, the controversy on the divinely ordained nature of Indians was a major concern in social and public spheres. The *Indios Bárbaros, 1715* (Primitive Indians) feature as one of the first panels in a *casta* set painted by artist, Juan Rodríguez Juárez.²⁰ The artist accentuates the barbarism of the three natives by drawing attention to the dark brown color of their skin and scant attire. The father wears a feathered headband and carries a bow in his left hand. On his back is a wooden quiver containing several arrows. The young child in the middle also sports a bow and looks as if he is about to shoot an arrow some distance away. Behind the child is a beautiful Indian woman, presumably his watchful mother. The woman has a cloth wrapped around the lower half of her body. Juárez positions the woman sideways so as not to expose her naked torso and breasts. Accessories such as clothing and technology which would have been associated with civilization are absent in the painting. Nevertheless, the Indians are captured as romantic and peaceful creatures of pre-civilization. The placement of the *Indios Bárbaros* as relics of the past reflects the ideology of linear progress.

The famous sixteenth century French philosopher, Michel de Montaigne articulated an admiration for the natives based on the presumption that they represented 'men in their original states' of innocence. His essay, *On the Cannibals* published in about 1580 provides an observation of the daily lives, gender dynamics and social structures of indigenous people in the New World. Montaigne refers to the natives as "viri a diis recentes" [men fresh from the gods]" claiming "that those people have no trade of any kind, no acquaintance with writing, no knowledge of numbers, no terms for governor or political superior, no practice of subordination or of riches or poverty."²¹ Although Montaigne uniquely deployed his account of the natives to ultimately critique the technological and religious extravagances and excesses in European society, his point of departure illuminates the commonly held view within European society of his time that the natives of the New World were innocent and childlike.²²

Conceptions of *Mestizaje*

Castas paintings were generally produced in Mexico City and Puebla, the metropolitan centers of New Spain. Prominent painters of the genre were born, raised, and educated in these two urban polities. One painter, José Joaquín Magón painted during the second half of the eighteenth century. One of his two casta series includes detailed inscriptions of not only the races of the figures depicted, but also traits that children received from both parents. María Elena Martínez provides a translation to English from Spanish of several of these racial labels in Magón's works. The first painting “[...] starts with the message that in 'the Americas people of different colour, customs, temperaments and languages are born' and then describes the mestizo born of a Spaniard and Indian woman as generally humble, tranquil and straightforward.” The third to last panel explains that a “Spanish boy born of a Spanish man and a castiza, takes entirely after his father.” The next series of images “begins by announcing that the 'proud nature and sharp wits of the Mulatto woman come from the White [male] and Black woman who produce her.” The sequence ends with a panel that “features a child called *torna atrás* [return backwards] and an inscription that describes him as having bearing, temperament and tradition.”²³ The casta series painted by Magón presents a glimpse into a few of the 'race mixtures' from Indian-Spanish and Black-Spanish sexual unions. Along with complex nomenclature for each mixture is a set of modifying qualities that attributes temperament, personality, and culture to children of mixed race parentage. The primary *mestizaje* in the *sistema de castas* are *mestizo*, *castizo* and *mulatto*. The rest border on the threshold of incomprehensibility exemplified by the race called *torna atrás*. The categorical clarity at the beginning of Magón's casta series is blurred by problems encountered in classifying people after several generations of race mixing.

By the time the casta paintings were produced, it was common knowledge that after three generations of 'race mixtures', the last union between a *castizo* (born of Mestizo-Spanish parents) and an *español* (individual of pure Spanish descent) produced a pure blooded Spanish offspring. This framework for Indian-Spanish race mixtures pointed to the ability of Spanish blood to absorb weak Indian blood. In contrast, the survival of Black blood even after years of race mixing with pure Spanish individuals represented a source of fear.²⁴ The painting discussed earlier, *De Alvina y Español sale Negro torna atrás* (From Albino (woman) and Spaniard, a Black boy is born), speaks to the apprehension of 'blackness returning' and compelling a lineage to return backwards or *torna atrás*.

Although not as prominently discussed by scholars of the casta painting and by far the most ambiguous of all the race mixtures, Indian-Black unions feature in almost all of the casta sets that were painted. One of Juan Juárez Rodríguez's paintings from the same casta panel that showcased the *Indios Bárbaros*, depicts an Indian-Black combination. This painting is titled *De Negro y de India produce Lobo* (From a Black and an Indian, a Wolf is born).²⁵ All the figures in the painting are dressed relatively well implying their middle class status. They also assume a front facing position, looking out towards the viewer. The man sports a top hat, breeches and a chain while the woman wears a white silk gown and holds a dark child in her arms. Perhaps the family is engaged in some sort of mercantile trade or owns a business.

A later image painted in 1763 by Miguel Cabrera, portrays *De Mestizo y de India, Coyote* (From a Mestizo and an Indian, a Coyote is born).²⁶ This painting depicts a Mestizo man and an Indian woman with their two children in an outdoor marketplace setting. The man holds a donkey that is tied by a rope and one of his children sits on top brandishing a whip in his right hand. Directly in front of the donkey is a basket filled with left over vegetables that might be eaten at home or sold in the market the next day. The woman carries a small child on her back in a makeshift sling and stands sideways facing the man. It is possible that this image illustrates a family of vendors returning home in the evening after selling their goods at a market place stall.

Although Rodríguez's and Cabrera's works were painted almost forty-eight years apart, their portrayals of race mixture remain consonant, especially in nomenclature. Apart from visual attributes like clothing, skin color, and surrounding that are used to denote the occupational and class status of

each family, the names of the mixed raced children come from zoological vocabulary. Martínez points out that the “term *mestizo*, which surfaced in the 1530s and by the next decade had become almost synonymous with illegitimacy, simply meant 'mixed' and had been used in Spain mainly to refer to the mixture of different animal species.” Similarly, the “term *mulato* was used to describe the offspring of Spaniards and blacks because they were considered an uglier and more unique mixture than mestizos and because the word conveyed the idea that their nature was akin to that of mules.”²⁷ The '*mulato*' was therefore a 'third species', crossbred from horses and donkeys.

The naming of race mixtures after animal breeding is reminiscent in the use of racial classifications such as the *Lobo* or Wolf (offspring of Indian and Black), and the *Coyote* (offspring of Mestizo and Indian). By no means was this system of classification rigid. However, in the words of Martínez, these zoological terms “carried significantly different cultural baggage.”²⁸ The assumptions that shaped Spanish colonial views on Indians and Blacks continued to operate through the *sistema de castas* influencing the nomenclature and group identities within *mestizaje*. The desire to order *raza* both pseudo-biologically and socially overlapped with Spanish scientific and religious histories of colonization.

Ideas pertaining to *raza* in the New World evolved along with the course of history.²⁹ The *sistema de castas* embodied the transformation and reappropriation of a racial logic that had existed in Spain. Spanish belief in the inferiority of Black people had been manifested in pseudo-scientific and in socio-religious theoretical debates. This system of racial classification changed when the Spanish first came to the New World and encountered a group of people they had never before seen. Las Casas, Sepúlveda, and Montaigne produced several theories on the natives that continued to develop over the the following centuries.

Purity of Blood in Spanish Religion, Culture and Society

The well known 1816 novel *Peroquillo Sarniento* written by José Joaquín Fernández de Lizardi begins with its narrator declaring, “I was born in this rich and prosperous city between 1771 and 1773, to parents who were neither wealthy nor mired in poverty; who were pure of blood, a purity that *gleamed*.”³⁰ This statement implies that purity was hereditary, a condition passed by parents on to their children. Indeed, the pervasiveness of the concept can be seen in the art, fiction and popular culture of colonial Mexico. Establishing the conditions of *limpieza* meant that a person was recognized by statutes of purity - born of pure-blooded parents of good social standing and class. Inability to claim *limpieza* precluded the possibility of accessing juridical benefits and, in turn, climbing up the social ladder. But, on what genealogical beliefs and practices was *limpieza* based? And how were these ideological frameworks implemented as statutes of *limpieza* within the context of colonial Mexico?

In the late thirteenth and fourteenth centuries anti-Semitic sentiment began rising in Iberia and in Europe. Violent attacks on Jews spread to major Iberian cities of Seville and Toledo causing deaths of thousands. Meanwhile, Franciscan and Dominican missionaries began converting large numbers of Jews to Christianity. Even so, these newly converted individuals or *conversos* were reluctant to renounce their cultural and community connections. The government issued several laws that limited and in some cases prohibited interactions between the new *conversos* and their old communities, but this kind of surveillance did not assuage religious tensions. In the middle of the fifteenth century, traditional Christians started questioning the commitment of *conversos* to Christianity. They held the belief that Jewish *conversos* were actually *Crypto-Jews*, or Jews in hiding who were secretly still loyal to Judaism. They later began calling themselves Old Christians (*cristiano viejos*) and relying heavily on genealogy to prove their ancestral purity of blood. The anxieties stemmed from the belief that the condition of 'Jewishness' was passed on through blood. Therefore, Old Christians isolated themselves as a privileged community refusing to sully their pure blood by reproducing with new converts. The notion that Old Christians were superior to Jews extended to Muslims and a few decades later, to heretics.³¹

The killing of Protestants and other religious minorities was institutionalized when the Holy

Office of the Vatican sent judges to serve on Inquisition tribunals that meted out punishments to heretics. The Inquisition confirmed that Jews, Muslims and heretics were plotting against the Holy Roman authority and needed to be either converted, deported or killed depending on the magnitude of the crime. By the sixteenth century, Spain had a considerable number of Jewish and Muslims converts to Christianity. Even though *conversos* were officially Christian, their blood was considered to be a vehicle for Jewish, Muslim, or heretical practices. This meant that *conversos* could theoretically never redeem their blood as it was already contaminated by a sullied ancestry. Impulses to control reproduction and female sexuality became stronger for Old Christians who sought to preserve their pure lineage. Therefore, blood was thought to transmit cultural, religious, and social practices strengthening the conviction that purity was determined by genealogy.³²

The purported differences in blood gave rise to the notion that Old Christians were a 'biologically' separate race distinguishable from less superior races of Jews and Muslims (Moors). These genealogical structures informed legal ones that demanded for *probanza* (proof) of purity. Probanzas determined whether male heirs were eligible to own property, join certain guilds, become part of ecclesiastical positions, teach at reputed universities, and access public offices. The statues of purity were approved by canon law and common law, generally encompassing both religious and secular jurisdiction.³³ Purity of blood was therefore enveloped in religion, biology, and law, all of which generated socio-cultural beliefs about exclusion. Race is usually viewed as a modern nineteenth and twentieth century invention attributed to biological differences. Martínez points out that to present *limpieza* within a rigid definition of race “renders biological and cultural/religious constructions of difference as mutually exclusive.”³⁴ Religion and culture functioned as race, especially in fifteenth and sixteenth century Spanish ideologies. Galen's theories on reproduction, for example, operated in the realm of quasi-biology and equally shaped religious and cultural notions of the purity and nobility of blood.

When the Spanish arrived in predominantly Aztec Mexico, existing theories on *limpieza de sangre* underwent significant changes due to the unique demography of the New World, one that did not consist of Jews, Muslims, or heretics. Early Spanish colonialism differed from French and British industrial colonialisms that initially sought to extract raw materials from colonies to serve the developing industrial economies. With the conquest of Mexico, the Spanish improvised a system that incorporated the natives as independent republics of the Castilian crown. In coming centuries, the administration of New Spain encouraged the preservation of Indian villages not only to serve as sources of labor, but as good Christian subjects to Spain. This implied connection between the metropole and its periphery was reinforced by both secular and church institutions. The Church missions set up in New Spain converted natives to Christianity seeking to make better subjects out of them. The new converts were often referred to as 'Neophytes' who, like innocent children, needed to be initiated and educated as proper Christians.³⁵

Prominent scholars of the *casta* painting, like María Elena Martínez, Magali M. Carrera, and Ilona Katzew have argued that they visually reflect an the emergence of *criollo* identity. In attempts to differentiate themselves from Spanish rule and culture, *criollos* in colonial Mexico began to look to an *Amerindian* past for a 'native' culture. Anthony Pagden points out that “the only past to which the *criollos* could lay claim, the only past they clearly did not share with their mother country, was that of the very peoples their ancestors had conquered.”³⁶ Pagden identifies the first such attempt to appropriate an ancient Indian past in the works of seventeenth century Mexican scholar, Carlos de Sigüenza y Góngora. This distinguished scholar's project “took the form of an iconographic programme for a ninety-foot-high triumphal arch erected in September 1680 to welcome [...] the new viceroy of New Spain to Mexico City.” Curiously, the arch was decorated with accomplishments of Aztec emperors which Pagden concludes, speaks “clearly to those who cared to listen, about the political status, and cultural inheritance of what its creator [Góngora] called 'our *criollo* nation'.”³⁷ Conceptions of *criollo* nationalism further help to contextualize the *casta* paintings as historical

narratives. It is a genre that is instructive to the *criollo* male (the central, authoritative figure in many of these paintings) of the social, cultural and physical implications of *mestizaje*. Through depictions of the control of female bodies and sexuality, the paintings legitimize *criollo* claims to a 'Mexican' national and political tradition derived partly from the ancient *Amerindians*. Furthermore, these visual narratives of race mixing illuminate the growing isolation of the '*criollo* nation' from its 'mother land' on the Iberian Peninsula.³⁸

María Elena Martínez argues that the casta paintings can be partly understood within a context of scientific and ethnographic cataloguing that was taking place under the umbrella of scientific enlightenment in Europe. However, it would be misleading to attribute this genre of representation solely to such European taxonomic impulses and ignore the historical trends that deeply influenced ideologies of race, class, gender, and body. To paraphrase Martínez' work, the casta paintings must be placed in connection to discourses of *limpieza de sangre* (purity of blood), relationships between Spain and colonial Mexico and deepening socio-political anxieties that began informing a distinctive *creole* consciousness.³⁹ In short, intersections between race, body, and gender were determined by early modern Spanish histories of Christianity, which, when reappropriated to the unique demography of the colonies, transformed immensely. These constantly changing ideologies on *limpieza* or purity were mapped onto the figures depicted in the casta paintings.

Conclusion

Casta paintings represent a quest to understand and claim an *authentic* past which “became a matter of pressing urgency in a society like the Mexican *criollo*, [...] itself engaged in the practice of fabricating its own origins.”⁴⁰ Placing race in on a linear time scale bolstered the ideology that certain race mixtures were more progressive than others. Even the nomenclature of mixed races posits some racial lineages as moving backward or forward in time. Producing desirable lineages that would lead to racial progress points to the importance of controlling female sexuality to determine which women were ideal mothers. The casta genre brings to light the idea both gender and race are powerful tools used for many different purposes. These tools of identity formation are constructed on time frames of past, present and future where the redeemable races were depicted as progressing towards an imagined perfection. Yet, however *concrete* Spanish racial logic might seem, it was after all, socially constructed to support the needs of a specific group of people at a particular moment in history. The material impacts of this system of race were nevertheless immense and far reaching. A study of casta paintings indicates that changing contours of race were products of both deliberate craftsmanship and inadvertent historical occurrences.

Notes

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Glossary of Terms

Casta: Meaning 'mixed'. The 'casta' painting for example, represented a genre of art that was concerned with depicting the mixed races in the New Spain (colonial Mexico). Scholars argue that the paintings were not actually referred to as 'casta' at the time they were produced.

Castile: A historical region that was once the Kingdom of Castile and later became the Crown of Castile that incorporated the Crown of Spain, the Crown of Aragon and the Kingdom of Navarre. The Crown of Castile also included overseas territories, New Spain among them. Castile is used to denote a loose grouping of territories that were thought to belong to the Spanish monarch. It should not be thought of as nation.

Castizo(a): In the casta paintings, castizo(a) is the offspring of a mestizo(a) and a Spanish.

Conversos: Newly converted Jews, Muslim and Protestant heretics into Catholics.

Criollo: The Anglicized version of *criollo* is creole. The term referred to Spanish who were born in the the colonies belonging to the Castilian. In the eighteenth century criollos claimed to have descended from pure Spanish blood lines.

Cristiano viejos: Old Christians or those who regarded themselves as true, untainted Christians/Catholics. This meant not having Jewish, Muslim or heretic blood in their genealogies.

Encomienda System: Initially, the *encomienda* was granted to Spanish *conquistadores* and their heirs giving them the right to collect tribute that natives owed to their king. The system positioned the Spanish as administrators in the New World. By the sixteenth century, *encomiendas* were owned by Spanish *encomenderos*. In short, they constituted a system of labor extraction, tribute and religious conversion of the natives.

Español(a): An individual of 'pure' Spanish descent.

Gachupín: a derogatory term used by people of the Castilian overseas territories to refer to a Spanish person born and raised in Spain.

Gente de razon: Refers to people of reason or people of good breeding. Elite *criollos* of New Spain identified as people of reason in order to differentiate themselves from the rest of society.

Hombre bien: Refers men of good breeding. In the context of eighteenth century colonial Mexico, the hombre bien were *criollo* men.

Indio(a): An individual of native Indian descent.

Libros de castas: Book of mixed-bloods that was first used in parish churches of New Spain to record names of mixed race people.

Libros de españoles: Book of Spanish that catalogued all those individuals who claimed to have

descended from the 'pure' bloodlines.

Limpieza de sangre: The purity of blood. An idea that came out of socio-religious and pseudo biological discourses on race, gender and lineage.

Mestizaje: Referred to the process of biological, cultural and social mixing of different people in New Spain.

Mestizo(a): In the casta paintings, mestizo(a) is a racial mixture produced from the (hetero) sexual union between a Spanish and an Indian.

Mulatto(a): In the casta paintings, mulatto(a) is the offspring of an individual of African descent and one of Spanish descent. African is interchangeably used with Black.

Negro(a): An individual of African descent.

Neophyte: Those who were beginners in Christian doctrine and culture. This term was extensively used to refer to newly converted natives in the New World.

Probanza: A certificate of proof of purity in blood (or a statute of purity) issued by religious and judicial authorities in Spain. Possessing a probanza meant that a person was eligible for many social and political benefits.

Raza: The highly ambiguous Spanish term meaning race. It should not be confused with modern twenty-first century notions of race derived from the study of genes and strong connections to nationalisms and state formation.

Sistema de castas: Literally translated to mean 'system of mixed-bloods'. It can be understood as a system of racial logic that developed and evolved over time in New Spain. The principles underlying the *sistema* were influenced by a distinct colonial Spanish history in Europe and the Americas.

Torna atrás: Literally means a return backwards. Also refers to the seventh generation of a Black-Spanish lineage, in which every subsequent child has mated with a person of pure Spanish descent.

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