Visual Discourses of Colonialism, Interracial Sex, Resistance, and Nation-Building in Mexico, 1711-1810

In a world organized by white supremacy, interracial relationships can be interpreted as inherently subversive. Many colonial powers formulated and maintained laws that discouraged miscegenation and punished those who participated, or were thought to have participated, in interracial sex. What, then, makes the casta paintings of colonial Mexico so intriguing is the visual representation, and possible legitimization, of interracial relationships. The term “casta” is derived from the colonial Spanish model of hierarchy, la sistema de castas, or the caste system. The earliest known casta painting is dated from 1711 and has been credited to a member of the Arellano family.\(^1\) The earliest casta paintings are distinct from other paintings in the genre, but comparing casta paintings from the early eighteenth century to those at the height of casta paintings in the 1770s and 1780s demonstrates the evolution from the early paintings which focus more on race or caste stereotypes rather than relationships, and the later paintings which carefully depict interracial relationships between white Spaniards, enslaved and free Africans, Indigenous Mexicans, and multiracial people. Though little information exists about the

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majority of the casta painters, there is a clear lineage of casta painters training and influencing the next casta painters during the genre’s formative years.\footnote{Katzew, \textit{Casta Painting}, 15-22.}

As a genre, the casta paintings represent a visual discourse of the Spanish colonialism and the \textit{sistema de castas} in New Spain. As a discourse, the casta paintings reveal that though interracial relationships were not outlawed, and were even encouraged at times, these relationships carried certain social stigmas and consequences. Measuring the presentation of the \textit{sistema de castas} in the casta paintings alongside a thorough examination of secondary sources, I argue that the casta paintings reveal contradictions within the colonial discourse on social class, gender, and power. While the \textit{sistema de castas} was formulated to maintain white Spanish superiority, marginalized castes to used the system to their advantage in nuanced ways. Thus, interracial relationships, as illustrated in the \textit{casta} paintings both challenged and maintained colonialism in Mexico.

**Historical Overview of Colonized Mexico**

Understanding the casta paintings requires a brief assessment of colonial and pre-colonial Mexican history. Before the Spanish made their initial contact with what is now Mexico, it is estimated that around twenty million indigenous people inhabited Mesoamerica.\footnote{Alicia Hernández Chávez, \textit{Mexico: A Brief History} (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 1.} Constituting the Texcoco, Tenochtitlan, and Tlacopán peoples, the Mexica, or Aztec as they were named by Spanish colonizers, dominated the region.\footnote{María Martínez, \textit{Genealogical Fictions: Limpieza de Sangre, Religion, and Gender in Colonial Mexico} (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008), 92.} At the time of conquest, the Mexica society was a nomadic hunter-gatherer society that maintained long-distance trade as well as other complex
systems including political systems. In addition, the Mexica maintained a highly stratified society in which the position of leaders and plebeians was determined by ancestry or lineage often based on the matrilineal line. The Spanish first made contact with Mesoamerica in the 1520s, but conquest was slow, made in a series of small encroachments over several decades that rapidly escalated over the course of the sixteenth century. While in 1530 there were approximately two thousand Spaniards in the region, that number increased to ten thousand by the mid-sixteenth century as the Spanish settled in “New Spain.” As with many instances of European conquest, the colonizers spread diseases to the indigenous population and the population of indigenous Mexica in the region was decimated. Despite conquest and disease, however, indigenous people, cultures, and trade networks survived, and the Mexica began reconstructing their own identities to adapt to the transforming social and political landscape under Spanish rule.

The colonization of Mexico can be placed in a larger context of Iberian expansion from the metropole of Spain outwards and into the Americas. Spanish colonialism in Mexico was heavily influenced by the Catholic Church and bureaucracy in the Spanish Metropole. Upon arrival in Mesoamerica, the Spanish were quick to establish a two-republic system constituted by the República de Indios (Republic of Indians) and the República de Españoles (Republic of

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5 Hemández Chávez, Mexico, 3-4.

6 Martínez, Genealogical Fictions, 2-94.

7 Hemández Chávez, Mexico, 36-37.

8 Ibid., 38.

9 Ibid., 28, 40.

10 Ibid., 28.

11 Martínez, Genealogical Fictions, 92.
Spaniards). The New Laws of 1547 offered indigenous people the right to freedom, but these rights were mostly restricted to those who accepted both Spanish rule and Christianity. And the acceptance of Spanish rule was not uncommon amongst the Mexica. To a great extent, the expansion of New Spain was made possible by leaders of the República de Indios who cooperated with the Spanish and assisted in the further conquest of Mesoamerican societies. Furthermore, those indigenous people who could prove “purity” in their lineage were not subjected to enslavement. The Spanish, then, participated in the kidnapping and enslavement of African peoples to maintain their labor force, but not all Black people in New Spain were enslaved. Like the indigenous Mexica, some free Black folks in New Spain participated in the conquests and foundations of cities including Mexico City and Puebla. As a result, they were able to obtain titles and higher status than their enslaved counterparts. Ultimately, the attempted segregation of the two-republic Spanish-Indian model failed as the Spanish relied heavily on indigenous people and Black people to maintain imperialism through continued expansion. Furthermore, mestizaje, or racial mixing, between Spaniards and indigenous and Black folks produced mixed children and blurred the lines between the two formerly rigid categories of Spaniards and “Indians.” Spanish rule ended in 1810 when Mexico won its independence.

Limpieza de Sangre y la Sistema de Castas

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12 Ibid., 97.
13 Hemández Chávez, Mexico, 43-45.
14 Ibid., 48.
15 Martínez, Genealogical Fictions, 155.
16 Ibid., 121.
In order to analyze the casta paintings as a visual discourse, it is necessary to first explore the foundations of the sistema de castas as an evolution of racial and spiritual ideology in the Spanish metropole. Though the precise origins of limpieza de sangre, or purity of blood, are unknown, it is suspected that the concept emerged as a way to distinguish Christians from Jews in Spain.\(^{17}\) In the case of religious identification, “blood” served as a metaphor for a lineage tied to certain beliefs and practices. The blood metaphor emphasized the idea that religious values are transferable from parent to offspring similar to the passage of genetic traits through biological reproduction, and that people could be “infected” by ideologies like they can be infected by diseases.\(^{18}\) Thus, “[Blood] was a metaphor for indoctrination within the family rather than [a description of] biological reproductive processes.”\(^{19}\)

In the sixteenth century, these ideas were institutionalized by the “Statutes of Limpieza” and the Spanish Inquisition.\(^{20}\) During the Spanish Inquisition, there were two groups who were considered “impure.” First, there were the descendents of Jews and Muslims who had been deemed impure razas (races) during the sixteenth century. Second, there were the descendents of heretics whose parents had given up their Christianity and, thus, could not pass it on to their children.\(^{21}\) “Statutes of limpieza, which rested on gendered genealogical and reproductive principles, were modeled on certain heresy laws and their assumptions about links between kinship, blood, and religious identification.”\(^{22}\) In one questionnaire from the Spanish Inquisition,

\(^{17}\) Martínez, Genealogical Fictions, 28, 40.

\(^{18}\) Ibid., 40, 47.

\(^{19}\) Ibid., 47.

\(^{20}\) Ibid., 43-46.

\(^{21}\) Ibid., 47, 50.

\(^{22}\) Ibid., 52.
informants was asked to reveal the the religious status and geographic origins of a person’s parents and paternal and maternal grandparents. Despite these in depth investigations, individuals who would not pass as “pure of blood” could acquire a certification of purity if they had connections and could afford to pay for the service. The malleability of the categories of pure and impure became blurred as intermediate categories emerged.

When the Spanish arrived in Mesoamerica, they brought ideas of limpieza de sangre with them. In fact, Spanish emigrants were required to present their purity of blood certificates in order to join the expeditions, though some Spaniards with “impure blood” were pardoned by the King and others purchased their certificates as mentioned in in the preceding paragraph. At this time, as emigrant certification requirements were being strictly enforced by Philip II, limpieza de sangre developed a secular significance beyond its religious origins. When Spanish ideologies of blood purity arrived in New Spain, they merged with the ideas of blood and lineage held by the Indigenous Mexica. While the Mexica’s ideas surrounding blood and lineage differed from those of the Spanish, in their writing, indigenous Mexican historians present ideas of succession that are derived from Spanish ideas of monogamous marriage and illegitimate birth. Mexica concerns with purity of blood simultaneously upheld the social hierarchies of the indigenous society and reinforced the colonial system.

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23 Ibid., 67-68.
24 Ibid., 87.
25 Ibid., 129.
26 Ibid.
27 Ibid., 115.
28 Ibid., 95
The *sistema de castas* incorporated certain ideas related to *limpieza de sangre* but also diverged in important ways. As aforementioned, the Spanish deemed indigenous people who were cooperative “pure.” But contrary to the original restrictions of *limpieza de sangre*, indigenous people did not need Christian lineage to be considered pure as long as they adopted the Spanish model during colonization. Still, the classification of “pure” that the Spanish and certain indigenous Mexicans occupied, placed them at the top of the social hierarchy in New Spain with indigenous people listed directly under Spaniards as second on the list. The offspring of Spaniards and indigenous people (*mestizos*) are listed in the third place on the list. Contemporary scholars are inclined to view the *sistema de castas* as a strictly racial hierarchy, but this explanation is oversimplified. During the period of Spanish colonialism, *raza* (race) was still more closely associated with the identities of Jews and Muslims while *casta* (caste) was more closely linked to concepts of lineage and ancestry which were somewhat linked to religion.

For example, *criollos* (native-born people of Spanish descent), as a category distinct from Spaniards, used “religiosity, Old Christian ancestry, and Spanish bloodlines” to assert their own purity of blood and be placed alongside Spaniards in the social hierarchy rather than alongside mixed people. Again, blood is used as a metaphor for the generational transfer of a certain set of values and beliefs and a certain status. The ideas of mixing resembled the metaphoric ideas of mixed blood from the Spanish metropole during the inquisition but took on more secular

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29 Ibid., 48.


32 Ibid., 140.
meanings. One’s caste, rather than one’s race, determined one’s “purity” and their subsequent placement in the hierarchy of the *sistema de castas*.

By the mid-eighteenth century, the black, *mestizo*, and *mulatto* population had risen from 270,000 to 700,000, a quarter of the total population in New Spain at the time. To a certain extent, this population growth can be tied to the absence of Spanish women in the colony and the Crown’s permission of Spanish-Indian unions in 1501. In this sense, *mestizaje* between Spaniards and indigenous Mexicans supported the colonial mission by meeting the needs of the Spanish settlers. On the contrary, because the social order of the two-republic system was predicated on the differentiation of Spaniards and indigenous people, these unions also threatened the stability of the social categories. The *sistema de castas*, with its plethora of stratified social class categories, was a necessary invention in order to maintain Spanish authority and white superiority in New Spain. Rather than defining themselves strictly in opposition to indigenous peoples, Spaniards and *criollos* could now define themselves in opposition to both indigenous peoples and the term “castas” which came to represent a broad category comprised of all people of mixed race and/or African descent. The next section will explore the *casta* paintings as a visual discourse through which to view colonial ideologies and anxieties around *mestizaje*.

**Analyzing the Casta Paintings as a Visual Discourse**

Spanish colonizers and indigenous historians left accounts of New Spain in legal documents, proclamations, newspapers, memoirs, and books. These are the texts that that have

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34 Katzew, *Casta Painting*, 40.
informed the discussion above through secondary sources, and the information in these texts reveals the written discourses in New Spain during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The casta paintings contribute to this discourse and act as a site for studying how artists in New Spain interpreted the *sistema de casta*. Juxtaposing a visual reading of the casta paintings alongside historical information provides insight into the variety of ways people in New Spain made meaning of *mestizaje* in the mid-eighteenth century when the bulk of casta paintings were produced.

![Fig. 1: De Español y Negra Nace Mulato, C. 1790, Oil on canvas, 62.6 cm x 83.3 cm. Art and Art History Department, University of Texas, Austin.](image1)

![Fig. 2: No. 4: de Español y Negra, Mulata. C. late seventeenth century. Oil on copper. 36 cm x 48 cm. Museo de América, Madrid.](image2)

Produced in the late seventeenth century, figures 1 and 2 feature remarkably similar scenes, almost as if the artists used the same models for the images. Both of these images portray a pairing of a white Spaniard and a Black woman, which would have been one pairing out of up to sixteen other paintings in the sets. What is striking about these two paintings in particular is the illustration of violence between the two people depicted as parents in the image, and in each example, the young mixed race child’s body appears to beg the parents to stop. Based on the contents of the room (pots, pans, food, and other women in the case of Figure 1),
the setting of these paintings is a kitchen, presumably in the well-dressed Spaniard man’s home. The Black mother is shown wearing plain clothes and an apron in Figure 2. She also wields a spoon as she attacks the Spaniard. Presumably, the Black woman in both paintings is either his servant or an enslaved worker on the estate. Figures 1 and 2, taken together, illustrate the colonial anxieties around Spanish-Black *mestizaje* in New Spain. Here, the painters enforced the colonial discourse of anti-Blackness by asserting that Spanish-Black relationships inevitably end in violence.

*Fig. 3: De Español y Negra, Mulato. 1760-1770. Oil on Canvas. 78.8 cm x 97.2 cm. Art and Art History Department, University of Texas, Austin.*

In contrast, Figure 3 illustrates a different iteration of Spanish-Black *mestizaje*. Figure 3 is similar to Figures 1 and 2 in that it is set in a kitchen, and the Black mother is shown in plain clothes and stirring food. However, there is no domestic violence in this image. Rather, the artist illustrated a rather intimate scene with the Spanish father feeding the mixed race child as the Black mother looks with what could be interpreted as a fond and loving gaze. A pair of fine earrings glisten from the Black woman’s ears, which could indicate that the Spaniard gives her expensive gifts. This painting positions the couple as a potentially romantic partnership rather than an abusive, perhaps exclusively sexual, relationship. Because it portrays the couple as romantic, the Black female figure is presented as having chosen the relationship, a sign of her own agency. This opens up the possibility for consent in interracial relationships. Figure 3,
contrasted with Figures 1 and 2, shows a contradiction within the colonial discourse about whether interracial relationships should be portrayed positively or negatively.

Similar to the ideological conflict over whether to portray couplings of Spanish men and Black women as positive or negative, the casta paintings reflect contradictions in the portrayal of relationships between men of African descent and Spanish women. The men in Figures 4 and 5 are of African descent as *mulattos*, but their dress suggests that they may hold Spanish titles in the colonial administration or military and are, thus, presented as having a fairly high social status. Figure 5 depicts a relationship between a *mulatto* father and a Spanish mother. The parents’ and child’s dress implies a high socioeconomic status. The placement of the father’s hand next to the child’s face as the mother cradles the child indicates some level of affection between the couple and child. Nevertheless, Figure 5 is an exceptional painting within the casta genre. Not only are there very few paintings that depict men of African descent partnered with white Spanish women, but the other example in my archives that features a similar relationship portrays the pairing in a different light that reflects colonial anxieties around Blackness.

Portraying a situation of domestic violence in what appears to be a kitchen, Figure 4 bears some resemblance to Figures 1 and 2. In contrast, this scene shows a white Spanish woman grabbing a the clothes and hair of a *mulatto* man with furrowed eyebrows that express anger. The *mulatto* man is positioned against a table in a casual stance with one arm stretched out to push the Spanish woman. Their *morisco* child tugs at the mother’s skirt perhaps to pull her from harm. An image like this could have been used by as part of the Spanish discourse which declared unions between Black men and Spanish women threatening as they marked the contamination of Spanish lineage.\(^{36}\) This idea of racial contamination contradicts with the idea

\(^{36}\) Martínez, *Genealogical Fictions*, 158.
of the sistema de castas as a system based on caste or class rather than race. Black and mulatto men often held titles given to them by the Spanish for assisting in the conquest of Mesoamerica, which gave them a higher social status, yet the colonial discourse still felt threatened by the possible contamination of Spanish blood. However, because this discourse of blood contamination did not hold true in the examples of relationships between Spanish men and Black women, it is more likely that the anxiety around mestizaje between men of African descent and white Spanish women had more to do with a masculine discourse of ownership over women.

While one might expect the casta paintings to function as illustrations of the way colonialism and social hierarchy were maintained in New Spain, these visual readings have shown how the genre portrayed conflicting ideologies about mestizaje during the eighteenth century.

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37 Ibid., 155.
Each casta artist illustrated the paintings in ways that revealed the meaning they personally assigned to interracial relationships. The casta paintings do, to some extent, serve the colonial powers in their presentation of the colonial discourse. However, viewing a collection of casta paintings as a whole illuminates contradictions within the colonial discourse. These contradictions ensured that the sistema de castas could never be a strictly enforced system of hierarchy and discrimination. The creation of the castas as a category may have served as a way for white Spaniards to distinguish themselves as pure of blood, but the category also created the conditions for racial solidarity within the group.

Conclusion

To summarize, mestizaje was both essential for the colonization of Mexico and in opposition to the values on which the sistema de castas was founded. The characterizing feature of New Spain, the sistema de castas, operated in highly nuanced ways and can not be essentialized to a simple hierarchy based on race or religion. Rather, castes in New Spain were constructed through metaphors of blood and purity that the Spanish colonizers brought with them from the metropole during the sixteenth century. The colonial discourse of mestizaje was multifaceted and full of contradictions, and the casta paintings serve to reveal some of these contradictions. On one hand, unions between Spaniards and indigenous women were approved by the crown in the early sixteenth century. Additionally, to complete their expansionary project, Spanish colonizers relied on the voluntary labor and assistance of indigenous people and free Africans and often offered official titles to these groups. On the other hand, maintaining colonialism relied on the maintenance of white supremacy. For the Spanish, this meant asserting the purity of their own blood in opposition to the impure blood of others from the Jews and
Muslims in the Iberian Peninsula to Indigenous people, Africans, and mixed race people in New Spain.

The castas threatened the stability of the colony, particularly mestizos who had two claims to the land due to their indigenous and Spanish heritage and men of African descent who threatened Spanish masculinity when they married white Spanish women. Despite colonial anxieties around interracial relationships, no formal legislation was passed to prevent these unions from forming, and as castas grew more upwardly mobile, the sistema de castas eventually lost its power as a way to subjugate mixed race people. This is presumably why the production of casta paintings tapered off in the late eighteenth century. From the foundation of the sistema de castas, indigenous people and castas always found ways to resist subjugation by using the system to their own advantage. In the early nineteenth century, these groups repurposed the casta identity for revolutionary means. Actualizing the fears of the Spanish of a “casta coalition,”38 Mexican revolutionaries deployed the concept of “castas” as a conglomeration of people with a common mixed identity, to achieve Mexican Independence in 1810.39 While the function of the casta paintings may have at first been to reinforce the white supremacist colonial ideology, the casta paintings now serve as a visual discourse through which we can learn how people made meaning of interracial relationships in New Spain.

38 Katzew, Casta Painting, 41.
39 Hemández Chávez, Mexico, 101.
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