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The Remains of *Castas* in Latin America

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Casta paintings are a collection of works that were predominantly produced in colonial Mexico. These paintings are a representation of the different classifications of race between Spaniards, Blacks, and Indigenous people. The paintings emphasize clothing and setting as a way to distinguish social and economic standings in regard to race. Casta paintings are more than racial documentation; they are a guide to understanding how ideas and beliefs on race came to be in Latin America. This article explores the origins of casta paintings and their long-lasting impact in Latin America. Casta paintings are investigated in books, academic journals, essays, and lectures. Principle sources include scholarship by Ilona Katzew and Magali Marie Carrera. A major focus is how casta paintings came to be and how the ideas that went into their formation are still present in Latin America.

Keywords: casta paintings, race, lineage, collection, socio-economic

A woman of dark complexion and a man of lighter complexion stand together as they acknowledge their child but not each other. The woman, man, and child all posed for what appears to be a family portrait are each labeled according to their racial lineage. The classification of race in Latin America is called the casta system, and it has been an ongoing issue that started in 16th-century Colonial Spanish America. We get a glimpse of Spanish colonialism through casta paintings: a collection of works produced primarily in 18th-century colonial Mexico. The casta system was used to determine a person's socioeconomic ranking based on their blood lineage. Those closest to Spanish descent were considered higher up in society (see fig. 1). Casta paintings, however, are not an accurate depiction of individuals' racial lineage. These paintings are representations of interracial marriages and the classification of race between Spaniards, Blacks, and Indigenous people. As Ilona Katzew, author of *Casta Painting: Images of Race in Eighteenth-Century Mexico*, mentions, colonial art was not produced to "disseminate" but to "authenticate" what Europeans saw in Latin America (63). These paintings, however, were produced for several reasons, such as to establish distinguishing socio-economic features concerning race and to fulfill some of Europe's curiosity about the New World. When we look at Latin America's present attitude toward race, we see traces of the beliefs first portrayed in casta paintings, which leads me to further discuss the origins of Casta paintings and their lasting effects.

1. Spaniard and Indian produce a *Mestizo* (mixed)	9. *Lobo* and Indian produce a *Zambaigo*
2. *Mestizo* and Spaniard produce a *Castizo*	10. *Zambaigo* and Indian produce a *Cambujo*
3. *Castizo* and Spaniard proudce a Spaniard	11. *Cambujo* and *Mulato* produce an *Albarazdo* (white spotted)
4. Spaniard and Black produce *Mulato* (Latin for mule)	12. *Albarazado* and *Mulato* produce a *Barcino*
5. Spaniard and *Mulato* produce a *Morisco* (of Moorish decent)	13. *Barcino* and *Mulato* produce a *Coyote*
6. *Morisco* and Spaniard produce an Albino	14. *Coyote* and Indian produce a *Chamiso*
7. Spaniard and Albino produce a *Torna Atrás* (a step back)	15. *Chamiso* and *Mestizo* produce a *Coyote Mestizo*
8. Indian and Torna Atrás produce a *Lobo* (wolf)	16. *Coyote Mestizo* and *Mulato* produce an *ahí te estás* (you stay there)

Figure 1. A list of some of the different casta categories with translations of some of the terms (Carrera, *Pinturas de Casta*).

There are over 2,000 known casta paintings that emphasize a social and racial hierarchy among individuals of New Spain. We must take into consideration that casta paintings rose to popularity in the early to mid-18th century – almost two centuries after the casta system had begun. This time gap should help us understand that casta paintings are often polished representations of the casta system and European ideologies. While local artists were the ones who created these paintings, they were highly influenced by Spanish ideologies. This is because many of the well-known artists fit under the higher ranks of the casta system. Given that the paintings are based on subjective racial views, we cannot be certain that they authenticate the reality of what it was to live under the casta system. We may not be getting the full picture, so we can only assume life in the casta system was similar to what is shown in the paintings. As Katzew explains, "Europeans' fascination with non-European culture" is what brought Spaniards to the Americas (Katzew 63). Casta paintings reflect Spaniards' concern with "racial purity" (Katzew 67), which might not seem as evident in the first few paintings created that showed the colonies' wealth. As Black and Indigenous people began to adopt Spanish culture, however, we see people taking pride in being of closer Spanish descent. This pride becomes noticeably clear in casta paintings when we take a look at a complete series (roughly 12-16 separate paintings) that emphasizes the wealth brought on by the blood cleansing. The paintings that contain individuals with more Spanish blood are often posed more gracefully while surrounded by wealth. Considering that casta paintings reflect Spanish ideologies brought on by the Enlightenment and European interest in foreign cultures, it can be difficult to analyze these paintings solely based on their purpose. We also have to analyze the content and context to understand how they shaped Latin

America's ideologies.

In the 18th century Spain began the Bourbon Reforms, which were so called because of economic and political laws implemented by various Spanish kings that belonged to the House of Bourbon. This was "a period of reorganization of the Spanish government" (Katzew 111), which made life in the Spanish colonies more rigid. Drawing inspiration from enlightenment ideas of a centralized government, Spain began to further enforce laws that controlled castas' clothing, living spaces, job positions, etc. For instance, Spanish men and women began to wear French-inspired attire to set themselves apart from those of the lower castas. *Mestiza* (meaning mixed race with Spanish and Indian) women did not have the same resources as Spanish and Creole women to dress in the latest fashion, so they resorted to shawls to cover up (Yturbide and Gage 76). While the Bourbon Reforms dictated the style people in New Spain could wear, authors Yturbide and Gage explain that part of the reason women were so preoccupied with covering up or wearing French-inspired clothes was that in 1582 the royal audience proclaimed that no *Mestiza*, *Mulata*, or Black woman would dress like an Indian without receiving punishment (Yturbide and Gage 77). This means that even though *Mestizas, Mulatas*, or Black women may not have had the appropriate resources to dress like a Spanish woman, they were still expected to differentiate themselves from Indigenous women who were on the lower part of the casta system, so associating with them was discouraged among the other castas.

While many of the artists that produced casta paintings are unknown, we have works such as those of Andres de Isla that emphasize individuals' attire. Individuals such as the ones in the painting *De Español e India, Mestizo* (From *Spaniard and Indian*, *Mestizo*) are shown wearing very distinct clothing to emphasize their respective castas (see fig. 2). The Indian woman is shown wearing a *huipil*, a rectangular, loose blouse, highly adorned with embroidered patterns, while the Spaniard wears a French-inspired coat and wig. Interestingly enough, paintings such as Isla's primarily focused on people's race and clothing rather than the environment they lived in because the Bourbon reform had just begun to take place, so the idea of labor and productivity within all the castas was not highly enforced yet.

Figure 2. Andres de Isla, De Español e India, Mestizo (From Spaniard and Indian, Mestizo). Ca. 1774, oil on canvas 89 x 69 cm. Museo de America, Madrid. CER.es (http://ceres.mcu.es/pages/Main). Photographed by Joaquín OTERO ÚBEDA.

Aside from the Bourbon influences on clothing, Spain also strongly focused on jobs and education, which is displayed in casta paintings. Any behavior that could be described as laziness was disapproved by Spain as reformers encouraged "agriculture and manufacturing" (Katzew 112). People were forced into these types of jobs with Spain's reasoning that the colonies would never work properly if people did not become productive members of society. We can see this type of reasoning as we take a closer look at casta paintings such as *No. 13 De Tente en el Aire y Mulato, Albarrazado*, and *No. 15 De Barcino y Cambuja, Campa Mulato* by Andres de Islas (see figs. 3 & 4). In both paintings, we see individuals of the lower class working in fruit stands, which helps to emphasize Spain's need for productivity among castas of lower status. We also begin to see Spain's beliefs on education through Europe's opinion on wet nurses. Although wet nursing was popular in the 17th century, it was believed that a child's education was influenced from the moment of birth, which included breastfeeding. Since wet nurses were often non-Spaniard women, there was a fear rooted in discriminatory beliefs that wet nurses would pass on their bad traits to a child. "[B]reast milk was regarded as a super-concentrated form of the lactating woman's own humors" (Earle 442). It was believed that wet nursing would lead to the downfall of the government as even the Spanish children would behave like individuals from the lower Castas. Therefore, we do not really see paintings with wet nurses. Instead, we get a few paintings of mothers nursing their children even though this was not as common among upper-class women (see fig. 5) (*De Español y Morisca, Albino*).

Figure 3. Andres de Isla, No. 13. *De Tente en el Aire y Mulata, Albarrazado* (From Hold-Yourself-in-Mid-Air and Mulatta, *Albarrazado*), 1774, oil on canvas. 75 x 54 cm. Museo de America, Madrid. CER.es (*http://ceres.mcu.es/pages/Main*). Photographed by Joaquín OTERO ÚBEDA.

Figure 4. Andres de Isla, *No. 15. De Barcino y Cambuja, Campa Mulato* (From *Barcino* and *Cambuja, Campa Mulato*), 1774, oil on canvas. 75 x 54 cm. Museo de America, Madrid. CER.es (*http://ceres.mcu.es/pages/Main*). Photographed by Joaquín OTERO ÚBEDA.

Figure 5. Unknown artist, *De Español y Morisca, Albino* (Spaniard and *Morisca* Produce an Albino). Ca. 1775-1800, oil on canvas 50 x 64 cm. Museo de America, Madrid. CER.es (*http://ceres.mcu.es/pages/Main*). Photographed by Joaquín OTERO ÚBEDA.

The overall body of work, including these three paintings, emphasizes the racial ideologies of New Spain. However, to further understand casta paintings, we must look at the origins of the casta system. As people began to grow interested in the New World, Spaniards of high status began traveling to colonial Mexico and other Latin American countries. The curiosity that led people to come to the Americas also led them to marry Indigenous people. In turn, Indigenous people were suddenly becoming individuals of high status in Spain thanks to their spouses. For instance, Ana Maria Lorenza Garcia Sairy Tupac de Loyola, daughter of a Spanish gentleman and Inca princess, married nobleman Juan Enriquez de Borja, turning her into the first marquise of Oropesa, Spain (Dueñas-Anhalzer 33-34). Marriages between Indigenous people and Spaniards were favorable primarily when it came to acquiring land and other property in the Americas (Dueñas-Anhalzer 34). Interracial marriages such as that of Ana Maria Lorenza Garcia Sairy Tupac de Loyola, however, became unfavorable when Spain began to fear for the strength of its government, believing that incorporating minorities into high-ranking positions would weaken its power.

Interracial marriage came to be a prominent issue for Spain when the two republics of New Spain failed – the republic of the Spanish and the republic of the Indians (Dueñas-Anhalzer 34). The two republics of New Spain were created to keep Spaniards' and Indians' lives separate. Ironically, this was not the case as Blacks, Indians, and Spaniards started mixing to the point where it was exceedingly difficult to distinguish the different races. This was an issue, considering Spain saw Indians as savages and therefore did not want them influencing Spaniards. Thus, around the mid-16th century, the *casta* system was implemented in America. This system of castas racially classified individuals based on their blood lineage as a means to control individuals who were neither considered Spanish, Indian, nor Black. Due to the casta system, we also begin to see an array of names given to the different mixtures between people of different races. A number of these names were even extremely derogatory – *Mulato* derives from the Latin word mule, and *Torna Atrás* translates to "a step back." As shown in various paintings, all the casta categories that came about resulted in a hierarchy based on race which often influenced individuals' socioeconomic status. As shown in Fig. 1, *Español* and *Indio* produced a *Mestizo*, a *Mestizo* and *Español* produced a *Castizo*, *Español* and *Negro* produced a *Mulato*, etc. (Carrera).

Since Spain could not keep track of interracial individuals through the two republics, castas became a significant factor in distinguishing people's race and socioeconomic status. As previously mentioned, castas created a racial hierarchy as the crown implemented discriminatory laws such as allowing only white individuals to hold certain positions (Dueñas-Anhalzer 35). The casta system did not stop individuals from working their way

around discriminatory laws because, as author Dueñas-Anhalzer explains, the racial sentiments behind castas were primarily based on phenotypes rather than genotypes (35). This means that while the idea of castas was defined in terms of genes, people often relied on appearances when claiming to belong to a certain casta. White-passing individuals who had money were treated with the same respect as full-blooded Spaniards. Church registries often helped keep track of individuals' lineage, but even so, there are multiple accounts of people who are said to belong to different casta groups in different documents. At the end of the day, the casta system focused more on the color of people's skin and how they behaved in society. Nevertheless, *Mestizos*, *Mulatos*, Blacks, Indians, and other castas still dealt with racial discrimination. Consequently, casta paintings are not necessarily an accurate representation of real-life individuals' races, considering that race is biological and therefore cannot solely be used as a distinguishing factor. They were produced as a way of documenting cultural boundaries within different races in colonial Mexico.

While casta paintings are said to have been created for different reasons, the content of all these paintings can be narrowed down to race. As previously discussed, Spain's concern with race is what influenced castas' lifestyles. For instance, Katzew discusses a manuscript by Basaras that describes Indians as barbaric and focuses on Indians' miseries (Katzew 163-165). While the casta painting series portrays a certain pride in being of closer Spanish descent, the individuals depicted had been manipulated into thinking that the more native blood one has, the more inferior one is. This type of manipulation is evident when we translate some of the casta names and see that the Spanish government encouraged blood cleansing. For example, a Spaniard and a *Mulato*'s offspring would have been labeled as a "Torna Atrás" or a "step back" (Carrera). In other words, Spain insinuated that if a Spaniard married a person who was mostly Spaniard but had a small percentage of Black, then the full-blooded Spaniard would be taking a step backward in their lineage. Individuals in lower castas realized that the only way to be treated fairly was by adopting everything Spain had to offer.

Casta paintings are no longer produced, but some of those 18th-century views on race are still present in Latin America now. Currently, Latin America no longer operates under a casta system, but racial sentiments remain as *Mestizaje*, the mixing of races, is still a relevant topic in Latin America. The racial tensions we see in casta paintings are mirrored by the current sentiments found in Latin America. Edward Telles and Denia Garcia discuss a research study conducted in eight Latin American countries to see people's opinions on *Mestizaje*. While *Mestizaje* was discouraged through the casta system, most Latin American countries today see *Mestizaje* as an opportunity to improve the country through diversity (Telles and Garcia, 148). However, because Latin American countries no longer openly condemn *Mestizaje*, any form of racism that takes place is often overlooked, thus undermining Black and Indigenous people's struggles (Telles and Garcia 132). Additionally, some countries protect Black and Indigenous rights, but as racial tensions have decreased, other countries argue that mixing of races is an approach to getting rid of Black and Indigenous people (Telles and Garcia 132).

While the eight countries' thoughts on *Mestizaje* are a combination of in favor, against, or neutral, it is clear that these are the remaining ideas of the casta system. Today, *Mestizaje* in Latin America varies depending on the countries' "racial composition" (Telles and Garcia 133). For instance, in Mexico and Brazil – where many individuals are of mixed-race – *Mestizaje* is strongly promoted as a means of surpassing the white population, whereas in other countries such as Uruguay, "whitening" (Telles and Garcia 134) is still valued despite other Latin American countries' appreciation for *Mestizaje*. Castas have certainly made an impact in today's Latin America whether we notice it or not. As previously mentioned, some countries prefer having a primarily white population while others favor *Mestizaje* to decrease the white population. This study, however, does not represent the ideologies of every individual within these countries, of course. Whether countries do or do not prefer *Mestizaje*, the Black and Indigenous populations are still being disregarded. Racism is still evident in some parts of Latin America. Even if it is not as clear as in the casta paintings, we still see racial preferences and discriminatory actions.

Overall, it is difficult to define the meaning of casta paintings because, as Katzew explains, this is not

a "monolithic genre" (Katzew 201). While some argue that these paintings are an objective representation of colonial Mexico, others argue that they are a subjective representation of Spain's views on race. Regardless, these paintings give us insight into the casta system that has left its long-lasting imprint in Latin America. While *Mestizaje* and other effects brought on by the casta system may seem minimal today, we still see some racial preference toward the white population within some countries in Latin America. On the other hand, some countries are working toward creating a more diverse population while fighting against discriminatory laws and ideologies. Casta paintings are a piece to the puzzle that is Colonial America. Regardless of meaning, they help us understand how Latin America got to be the way it is today.

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