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The Pleasures of Taxonomy: Casta Paintings, Classification, and Colonialism

Rebecca Earle

THE number of these natural productions is so great, their forms are so varied, the connections between them so loose and sometimes so difficult to perceive, that one is often uncertain how to determine the characteristics that constitute a Genus, and. . . one is confronted by Species that do not fit into any established Genus, or that seem to belong to several at once.” These were the challenges facing Ecuadorean savant Pedro Franco Dávila as he sought to organize his vast collection of stones, minerals, fish, plants, and other natural objects into a coherent classification. Franco Dávila, born in Guayaquil in the early eighteenth century to wealthy parents, devoted much of his life to amassing a vast, and vastly admired, collection of natural objects that later formed the core of the Royal Cabinet of Natural History in Madrid, of which Franco Dávila was the first director. In the 1760s he composed a three-volume catalog of some of his collection in which he offered his thoughts on the difficulty of reducing the diversity of the earth’s myriad productions to a single taxonomic system. A “simple, well-ordered distribution” of each species into its correct genus and each genus into its family illuminated the relationship between the different elements, but it was no easy task.¹

The challenges posed by classification were expressed with equal clarity by the distinctive Spanish American artistic genre known today as the casta painting. These remarkable paintings depict a different sort of family

Rebecca Earle is a professor in the History Department at the University of Warwick. This article has changed “through a diverse range of almost imperceptible . . . occurrences” to such a degree that colleagues who commented on earlier incarnations might not recognize this version. The author, however, knows how much she is indebted to Trevor Burnard, Sharon Fermor, Lauren Kassell, Elizabeth Kuznesof, Dana Leibsohn, Laura Lewis, and Carolyn Steedman, as well as to the anonymous readers for the *William and Mary Quarterly*: thank you.

¹ [Pedro Franco Dávila], *Catalogue systématique et raisonné des curiosités de la nature et de l’art, Qui composent le Cabinet de M. Davila. . .* (Paris, 1767), I: viii–x (“number,” I: ix, “simple,” I: viii). Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own.

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from the ones whose organization troubled Franco Dávila, but deep cultural lodes connected the two. Indeed, Franco Dávila's Cabinet of Natural History held an important and oft-visited collection of casta paintings. Casta paintings show family groupings consisting of a man, a woman, and their child (or, occasionally, children), all helpfully labeled with their "castes" (Figure I). Most were produced in Mexico in the eighteenth century. Individual paintings usually formed part of a set encompassing up to sixteen paintings by the same artist. These sets depicted families comprising—so their painted captions tell us—a "Spaniard," an "Indian," and their child; a "Spaniard," a "black person," and their child; and an "Indian," a "black person," and their child. They then generally traced the outcome of liaisons between the diverse offspring of these couples as well as between these offspring and more Spaniards, Indians, and black people. Casta paintings cataloged the human heterogeneity of Spain's New World empire by organizing its inhabitants into families and these families into larger series. A typical set might comprise individual paintings with captions similar to those shown in Table I.

The complex vocabulary—*tente en el aire, albarazado, calpamulata*—used in the captions that are diagnostic of casta paintings maps imperfectly onto the terminology more commonly employed in the archival record, and many scholars have shown that the taxonomies offered by casta artists cannot be read as straightforward snapshots of the socioracial hierarchies that actually characterized colonial Spanish America.² Indeed, Franco Dávila's lament about the difficulty of placing objects into the right families captures all too well the challenges confronting anyone who sought to organize the colonial population into a "simple, well-ordered distribution." A substantial scholarship now demonstrates that colonial Spanish American families were flexible structures, that socioracial categories were fluid, and that the vocabulary used to classify the colonial population was highly contextual. Women were often described by different caste terms at baptism and at marriage, and family members sometimes

² Important work on casta paintings includes María Concepción García Sáiz, *Las castas mexicanas: Un género pictórico americano* (Milan, 1989); Ilona Katzew, ed., *New World Orders: Casta Painting and Colonial Latin America* (New York, 1996); Natalia Majluf, ed., *Los cuadros de mestizaje del Virrey Amat: La representación etnográfica en el Perú colonial* (Lima, 2000); Magali M. Carrera, *Imagining Identity in New Spain: Race, Lineage, and the Colonial Body in Portraiture and Casta Paintings* (Austin, Tex., 2003); Katzew, *Casta Painting: Images of Race in Eighteenth-Century Mexico* (New Haven, Conn., 2004); Susan Deans-Smith, "Creating the Colonial Subject: Casta Paintings, Collectors, and Critics in Eighteenth-Century Mexico and Spain," *Colonial Latin American Review (CLAR)* 14, no. 2 (December 2005): 169–204; María Elena Martínez, *Genealogical Fictions: Limpieza de Sangre, Religion, and Gender in Colonial Mexico* (Stanford, Calif., 2008); Katzew and Deans-Smith, eds., *Race and Classification: The Case of Mexican America* (Stanford, Calif., 2009); Daniela Bleichmar, *Visible Empire: Botanical Expeditions and Visual Culture in the Hispanic Enlightenment* (Chicago, 2012).



FIGURE I

José Joaquín Magón, *De Mulato y Mestiza, nace Cuateron* [From a Mulatto and a Mestiza is Born a Quadroon], ca. 1770, Museo Nacional de Antropología, Madrid. In this typical casta painting, the parents are shown as both loving and industrious; the mulatto father has paused in his work as a cobbler to distract his child. (Shoemaking is one of the professions most often represented in such series.) The pair of lovebirds at the front of the composition reinforces the air of domestic harmony. Although a number of savants on both sides of the Atlantic claimed that mulattoes were sterile, the caption tells us that this mulatto has fathered the little baby.

disagreed about the caste of their own relatives. Indeed, one study of late eighteenth-century Chile found that during a twelve-year period nearly half the male heads of household in Valparaíso were ascribed different caste statuses in different official documents. The family, theoretically the basis of Spanish Catholic society, was scarcely a reliable bulwark against disorder. Spanish legislation regularly deplored the “disturbance to the good order of the state and the continual discord and damage to families” caused by ill-advised unions.³ Many colonial officials would therefore have

³ The 1776 Royal Pragmatic on Marriage, detailed in *Pragmática-Sanción a consulta del consejo, en que S.M. establece lo conveniente, para que los hijos de familias con arreglo á las leyes del reyno pidan el consejo, y consentimiento paterno, antes de celebrar*

TABLE I
TYPICAL CASTA PAINTING CAPTIONS

-
1. From a Spanish man and an Indian woman is born a *Mestiza*
 2. From a Spanish man and a Mestiza woman is born a *Castiza*
 3. From a Spanish man and a Castiza woman is born a Spaniard
 4. From a Spanish man and a Black woman is born a Mulatta
 5. From a Spanish man and a Mulatta woman is born a *Morisca*
 6. From a Spanish man and a Morisca woman is born an *Albina*
 7. From a Spanish man and an Albina woman is born a Throwback
 8. From a Spanish man and a Throwback woman is born a *Tente en el aire*
 9. From a Black man and an Indian woman is born a *China Cambuja*
 10. From a Chino Cambujo man and an Indian woman is born a *Loba*
 11. From a Lobo man and an Indian woman is born an *Albarazado*
 12. From an Albarazado man and a Mestiza woman is born a *Barcino*
 13. From an Indian man and a Barcina woman is born a *Zambaiga*
 14. From a Castizo man and a Mestiza woman is born a *Chamizo*
 15. From a Mestizo man and an Indian woman is born a *Coyote*
 16. Heathen Indians
-

Note: This example derives from Miguel Cabrera's 1763 series, which is housed in several different museums and a private collection.

esposales. . . (Madrid, 1776), 4 (quotation), is discussed in Steinar A. Saether, "Bourbon Absolutism and Marriage Reform in Late Colonial Spanish America," *Americas* 59, no. 4 (April 2003): 475–509. For Valparaíso, see Robert McCaa, Stuart B. Schwartz, and Arturo Grubessich, "Race and Class in Colonial Latin America: A Critique," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 21, no. 3 (July 1979): 421–33, esp. 422. See also Magnus Mörner, *Race Mixture in the History of Latin America* (Boston, 1967); Verena Martínez-Alier, *Marriage, Class and Colour in Nineteenth-Century Cuba: A Study of Racial Attitudes and Sexual Values in a Slave Society* (New York, 1974); Patricia Seed, "Social Dimensions of Race: Mexico City, 1753," *Hispanic American Historical Review* (HAHR) 62, no. 4 (November 1982): 569–606; McCaa, "Calidad, Clase, and Marriage in Colonial Mexico: The Case of Parral, 1788–90," *HAHR* 64, no. 3 (August 1984): 477–501; R. Douglas Cope, *The Limits of Racial Domination: Plebeian Society in Colonial Mexico City, 1660–1720* (Madison, Wis., 1994); Elizabeth Anne Kuznesof, "Ethnic and Gender Influences on 'Spanish' Creole Society in Colonial Spanish America," *CLAR* 4, no. 1 (1995): 153–76; Laura A. Lewis, *Hall of Mirrors: Power, Witchcraft, and Caste in Colonial Mexico* (Durham, N.C., 2003); Joanne Rappaport, *The Disappearing Mestizo: Configuring Difference in the Colonial New Kingdom of Granada* (Durham, N.C., 2014); Ann Twinam, *Purchasing Whiteness: Pardos, Mulattos, and the Quest for Social Mobility in the Spanish Indies* (Stanford, Calif., 2015).

sympathized with Franco Dávila's call to "bring a little order to the families . . . to bring more order and coherence to our system."⁴

This similarity between the languages of scientific classification and colonial control is not coincidental, since neither natural history nor the power dynamics shaping New World colonialism operated in a vacuum. The classifications that underpinned early modern systems of knowledge in the Atlantic world embraced both plants and people and reflected a yearning for order that transcended any division between science and statecraft. Casta paintings embody these entangled, overlapping epistemologies in a number of ways.

Scholars have done an exceptional job of interpreting the casta genre, all the more so given the paucity of contextualizing information. Although these paintings number in the hundreds, the archival record contains relatively little material on commissions and prices. A few series were painted by well-known colonial artists whose careers are documented, but many are anonymous works with scanty provenance. Though scholars such as Ilona Katzew and Susan Deans-Smith have identified important documents related to patronage and contracts, it remains difficult to construct a detailed account of how most series came to be produced. We know that several Spanish viceroys ordered sets, as did other colonial and church officials, and we may assume that most paintings were owned by members of the colonial and metropolitan elite, but the circumstances leading to the production of the majority of the paintings are unknown. Similarly, while the occasional critic left written comments about the genre, such remarks are rare. Nor do we know how many series ended up where they are (which is mostly in museums and private collections in Mexico and Spain). Such lacunae notwithstanding, scholars now benefit from convincing interpretations of the stylistic origins of the genre, compelling debates about whether the images reflect local pride or imperial disdain, careful readings of individual series, and a much fuller understanding of their significance and relation to colonial culture more broadly. All analyses of casta paintings are indebted to this essential body of research.⁵

Nonetheless, an ambiguity at the heart of the casta painting remains undertheorized: the tension between the well-documented flexibility of colonial caste categories and the manifestly genealogical nature of caste

⁴ [Franco Dávila], *Catalogue systématique et raisonné*, 1: xiii–xiv (quotation, 1: xiii). As historian Bianca Premo has shown in her study of the colonial family, "because authority in the colonial Spanish American household contained gendered, racial, and generational dimensions simultaneously, patriarchy could never be rigid or stable." See Premo, *Children of the Father King: Youth, Authority, and Legal Minority in Colonial Lima* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 2005), 10 (quotation). Juan Pedro Viqueira Albán, *Propriety and Permissiveness in Bourbon Mexico*, trans. Sonya Lipsett-Rivera and Sergio Rivera Ayala (Wilmington, Del., 1999), offers a clear discussion of the Bourbon state's frustrated desire for order and coherence.

⁵ See 429–30 n. 3.

itself. Despite the ample evidence of individual movement from one caste category to another, the categories themselves have long been defined in entirely genealogical terms. In Sebastián de Covarrubias Orozco's seventeenth-century dictionary, for instance, the Spanish lexicographer defined a mulatto quite unambiguously as "the son of a black woman and a white man, or the reverse."⁶ The neat labels of *casta* paintings similarly give the impression that this was how caste categories operated: "From a Spanish man and a black woman comes a mulatto"; "An *albina* and a Spanish man produce a throwback." How is it possible for a condition to be both a straightforward reflection of ancestry and changeable over one's lifetime? Sometimes scholars have tried to square this circle by employing a vocabulary of "passing": individuals possessed a caste identity derived from their parentage but might "pass" as something else.⁷ Though this approach explains well the daily negotiations that comprised the social fabric of everyday life in the colonial Indies, it leaves unexplored the underlying ideas about corporeality that made caste fluidity more than a set of subterfuges or, at best, social conventions unconnected to the bodies they governed.

We need a different model for thinking about the socioracial categories visualized in the *casta* paintings, a model that takes seriously both their fluidity and their genealogical character. Neither in *casta* paintings nor in colonial society was caste simply an inflexible, permanent attribute; it was nonetheless understood to be an embodied, genealogical condition. Caste was simultaneously genealogical and mutable, not only in practice but also in theory, because it was premised on an understanding of the human body that allowed inherited conditions to change both within an individual's lifetime and across generations. Approaching caste from this direction clarifies the underlying epistemologies that structured colonial society and helps connect *casta* paintings more explicitly to the broader debates about human difference that so captivated Enlightenment thinkers.

Ultimately, however, these paintings were produced and collected not simply because they visualized Atlantic debates about classification and human difference but also because these visualizations were interesting and pleasant to contemplate. They possessed both taxonomic and narrative power, which together agreeably roused the pleasures of the imagination.

⁶ Sebastián de Covarrubias Orozco, *Tesoro de la lengua castellana, o española* (1611; repr., Madrid, 1674), pt. 2, fol. 117v. See also Benito de Peñalosa y Mondragón, *Libro de las cinco excelencias del español que despueblan a España para su mayor potencia y dilatación*. . . . (Pamplona, 1629), 4th *excelencia*, chap. 5, fol. 80v; Juan de Solórzano Pereira, *Política indiana*. . . ., 2 vols. (1647; repr., Madrid, 1736), 217, 219; Estéban de Terreros y Pando, *Diccionario castellano con las voces de ciencias y artes y sus correspondientes de las tres lenguas francesa, latina é italiana*. . . . (Madrid, 1787), 2: 636.

⁷ This is the model employed, for instance, by Ann Twinam in *Purchasing Whiteness*, her magisterial study of the *gracias al sacar* legislation. See also Ruppaport, *Disappearing Mestizo*, 24–25, 32–33, for discussion of the concept of passing.

Pleasure was central to the aesthetics of painting and also to the practices of natural history. It moreover infused colonial ideas about race and sexuality. We need, in short, to reconnect the *casta* painting to the importance accorded to pleasure in the artistic, scientific, and colonial imagination.

TWO ASPECTS OF CASTE—its genealogical nature and its corporeal attention to physical appearance—seem to mitigate against the possibility of moving from one caste category to another. Neither aspect, however, is as straightforward as it might appear. Early modern Hispanic culture was underpinned by a profound commitment to genealogy as a crucial component of personal identity, but genealogy was by no means a rigid system of fixed relationships. Definitive family trees were elusive, in part because of what historian Robert McCaa calls “racial drift”—the tendency of individuals to move from one caste category to another over their lifetimes—and in part because, as one seventeenth-century Spanish writer noted, “very few people know who their great-grandparents were, or what they were called.”⁸ For this reason statements about lineage were usually couched in the language of reputation. Thus the witness in one eighteenth-century dispute affirmed that a woman was “accepted and held to be Spanish,” even though her mother was Amerindian, which should, in theory, have excluded her from the category of “Spaniard.” A declarant in another case stated that he considered Mercedes Cabrera to be Spanish “because he had heard it said that her parents were Spanish.”⁹ In a sense an individual’s ancestry was often provisional because it was based on what others believed. As one Central American cleric explained in 1811, whether someone was of African origin, for instance, could be determined only by “public opinion.” Consequently, he noted, “as public opinion is dependent on interests and passions this causes much discord.” “Perhaps,” he continued, “one might imagine that it would be easy to classify people by using church records, which state the class to which one belongs, but these documents are evidence only of the person’s age and Christian faith, and absolutely not of ‘quality,’ since any assertions on this front are only the opinion of the godfather, sacristan, or priest who completed the entry.”¹⁰ Indeed, even the certificates of blood purity issued by the Inquisition did not remain valid indefinitely, a tacit

⁸ McCaa, *HAHR* 64: 497 (“racial drift”); Peñalosa y Mondragón, *Libro de las cinco excelencias del español*, 4th *excelencia*, chap. 13, fol. 99r (“very few people”); Rappaport, *Disappearing Mestizo*, 38–39.

⁹ Verónica Undurraga Schüler, “Españoles oscuros y mulatos blancos: Identidades múltiples y disfraces del color en el ocaso de la colonia chilena: 1778–1820,” in *Historias de racismo y discriminación en Chile*, ed. Rafael Gaune and Martín Lara (Santiago, 2009), 341–68 (“accepted,” 359, “heard it said,” 356, quoting material from Fondo Real Audiencia, Archivo Nacional de Chile [ANC], Santiago). For a concise statement on the centrality of reputation to determining caste, see Twinam, *Purchasing Whiteness*, 62.

¹⁰ Florencio del Castillo, in *Diario de las discusiones y actas de las Cortes* (Cadiz, 1811), 8: 162 (quotations).

acknowledgment that an individual's ancestry, being reliant on reputation, was always provisional.¹¹

The centrality of reputation to determining identity reflects caste's relational character. That is, reputation was crucial not simply because it was difficult to construct accurate family trees but also because, more profoundly, caste was a language for discussing an individual's place within the networks of power that structured colonial society, as anthropologist Laura A. Lewis demonstrates. Caste, in her words, is best understood as "an integrated system of relations and dispositions rather than a series of distinct stations." Caste terms were claims about an individual's proximity to colonial power, expressed through a language of lineage. As Lewis shows, individuals regularly claimed or were ascribed caste identities derived not from their actual parentage but rather from their close association with "symbolic genitors" such as godparents or networks of acquaintances.¹² Since many people were embedded in multiple networks of association, it was quite possible to possess multiple, overlapping caste identities, all of which nonetheless drew meaning from an idea of genealogical relationship.

Nor did colonial actors necessarily agree on how to characterize someone's appearance. To be sure, appearance played an important role in early modern technologies of identification. Passports, registers, and other identity documents usually included some description of the individual's physical characteristics. These tended to focus on distinctive features such as scars, moles, and similar marks on the skin, in addition to height and perhaps hair color. For instance, the documents issued by the Spanish state authorizing travel to the Indies usually noted the color and fullness of a man's beard and whether an individual had any identifying marks such as missing teeth or birthmarks. When the bishop of Puebla traveled to Mexico in 1640, his entourage included Pedro García Ferrer, described in the official paperwork as "forty years old, with a blond beard, and the sign of a wound to the face below his mouth," and Antonio Lanzos, "nineteen, small and pockmarked."¹³ Other features, including skin color, proved more difficult to capture in words. Even the experts asked to pronounce on the identity

¹¹ Martínez, *Genealogical Fictions*, 61–87, 174–75.

¹² Lewis, *Hall of Mirrors*, 33 ("integrated system"), 25 ("symbolic genitors"); Rappaport, *Disappearing Mestizo*, esp. 5, 25, 95, 115.

¹³ Expediente de información y licencia de pasajero a Indias de Juan de Palafox y Mendoza, Mar. 15, 1640, Contratación 5422, N. 39, fols. 5r ("forty"), 4v ("nineteen"), Archivo General de Indias (AGI), Seville; Bernhard Siegert, "Pasajeros a Indias: 'Auto'-biographische Schrift zwischen Alter und Neuer Welt im 16. Jahrhundert," in *Wege des Kybernetes: Schreibpraktiken und Steuerungsmodelle von Politik, Reise, Migration*, ed. Anja K. Maier and Burkhardt Wolf (Münster, Ger., 2004), 260–76; Valentin Groebner, *Who Are You? Identification, Deception, and Surveillance in Early Modern Europe* (New York, 2007); Nancy E. van Deusen, "Seeing *Indios* in Sixteenth-Century Castile," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3d ser., 69, no. 2 (April 2012): 205–34; Rappaport, *Disappearing Mestizo*.

of defendants in legal cases often found it difficult to be precise about why they thought someone looked like an Amerindian or a Moor. Statements along the lines of “he is of a Moorish color” or “she looks Indian” were often the best these people could do. Historian Joanne Rappaport observes that people found it easier to itemize an individual’s clothing than to describe their skin color or overall appearance.¹⁴ Scholars have discovered many cases such as the one from 1548 in which a woman initially described as “lora”—a term roughly translatable as “brownish”—was later labeled first as “white” and then as both “morena” (dark) and “Indian-colored.” Indeed, historian Nancy E. van Deusen suggests that “color” terms such as *loro* actually described not individuals’ appearance but rather their status. By the sixteenth century, *loro* and its cognates were the words most commonly used to describe the color of “newly conquered or enslaved peoples,” regardless of where they originated; the term was not used consistently to characterize the color of people from any particular region.¹⁵ *Loro* thus seems to have been associated with servile status, at least for a time, rather than with a specific appearance. As Spanish doctor Francisco del Rosal explained in his 1611 dictionary, “we used to call slaves *loro* but now we say mulatto.”¹⁶ Nonetheless, *loro* clearly referred to color: Spanish sources defined it as a brownish color between black and white. In short, Spaniards employed a vocabulary of color to describe people, but they did not necessarily agree on what someone looked like if their color was, say, “loro.” Ancestry and appearance were thus central elements of caste, but neither was easily determined. Nor were color and lineage necessarily permanent.

In practice, as many scholars have shown, colonial actors relied on individuals’ clothing, overall lifestyle, and social networks to perform the difficult work of translating their existence into the language of caste. The importance of both clothing and reputation in the diagnosis of caste can be seen clearly in a 1759 court case from New Granada. When asked to describe Clara Reina, one witness responded that “because her clothes were red he asked others about her quality and they said she was a mestiza-quadroon.”¹⁷ Indigenous garb, in turn, might in itself make

¹⁴ Rappaport, *Disappearing Mestizo*, 198.

¹⁵ Van Deusen, *WMQ* 69: 223 (“newly conquered”). Van Deusen provides an illuminating discussion of the historical contingency of appearance. This 1548 example is from *ibid.*, 227–28.

¹⁶ Francisco del Rosal, *Origen y etymología de todos los vocablos originales de la lengua castellana* (ca. 1611), Ms. 6929, fol. 396, Biblioteca Nacional de Madrid (quotation); Van Deusen, *WMQ* 69: 229.

¹⁷ Material from Genealogías, ANC, quoted in Jaime Jaramillo Uribe, *Ensayos sobre historia social colombiana* (Bogotá, 1969), 195 (quotation), 211; Christopher H. Lutz, *Santiago de Guatemala, 1541–1773: City, Caste, and the Colonial Experience* (Norman, Okla., 1994), 54–62, 79–112; Martin Minchom, *The People of Quito: 1690–1810: Change and Unrest in the Underclass* (Boulder, Colo., 1994), 158, 190; Berta Ares Queija, “Mestizos en hábito de indios: ¿Estrategias transgresoras o identidades difusas?” in

the wearer into an Indian. Diet played a similar role; people who ate like Amerindians were often considered Indians, no matter their ancestry.¹⁸ For this reason, the colonial archive is full of complaints about individuals who changed their clothing or living habits and thereby “became” a different caste.¹⁹ It is worth noting that such documents use a language of transformation, not of “passing.”

This fluid world might appear different from the universe depicted in *casta* paintings, but in fact these paintings capture well caste’s reliance on cultural practices such as eating and dressing, both in their detailed depictions of clothing and in the settings in which different castes are represented. For example, certain castes routinely wear characteristic items of clothing—or perhaps it would be more accurate to say that certain characteristic garments determine the caste of their wearer. The indigenous *huipil*, or smock, shown in Figure II is one such garment. Anyone wearing a *huipil* in a *casta* painting is either an Indian or the daughter of an indigenous woman. This garment in itself makes these women into Indians or descendants of Indians. Likewise, certain tasks, such as preparing chocolate or serving *pulque* (an agave beer), are performed only by specific castes (Figures II–III). In these paintings clothing and activities are often a better indication of caste than appearance; despite the rich variety of skin tones employed by *casta* artists, it would be difficult to distinguish between different castes on the basis of appearance alone. Overall, *casta* paintings demonstrate very clearly the centrality of context, lifestyle, and relational networks to colonial caste categories, even as they simultaneously employ a language of genealogy and appearance to communicate these classifications.

But how could an embodied condition mutate through a simple change in clothing or lifestyle? In what ways was this mutability consistent with the belief—affirmed not only in the straightforward captions of the *casta* painting but also in the authoritative statements of generations of officials—that caste was essentially genealogical? To reconcile these seemingly incompatible conceptions of caste, we need to consider the underlying ideas that provided the foundation for all forms of embodied identity in early modern Europe and shaped the meaning of caste identity in the Hispanic world, enabling it to be both genealogical and fluid.

Passar as fronteiras: Actas do II colóquio internacional sobre mediadores culturais, séculos XV a XVIII, ed. Rui Manuel Loureiro and Serge Gruzinski (Lagos, Portugal, 1999), 133–46; Martínez, *Genealogical Fictions*, 104–5; Van Deusen, *WMQ* 69: 205–34; Rappaport, *Disappearing Mestizo*, 53.

¹⁸ Jeffrey M. Pilcher, *¡Que vivan los tamales! Food and the Making of Mexican Identity* (Albuquerque, N.Mex., 1998); Mary J. Weismantel, *Food, Gender, and Poverty in the Ecuadorian Andes* (Philadelphia, 1998).

¹⁹ For a typical complaint about Amerindians “becoming mestizos” by changing their dress and hairstyle, see Bernabe Nuñez de Paez, Informe, Doctrina de San Pablo, July 4, 1692, *Historia*, vol. 413, fol. 10 (see also fols. 11, 13), Archivo General de la Nación, Mexico City.



FIGURE II

Anon., *De Español, y Yndia, sale Mestizo* [From a Spanish Man, and an Indian Woman, Comes a Mestizo]. Mexico, early eighteenth century. Oil on canvas. Brooklyn Museum, New York, Bequest of Samuel E. Haslett and Charles A. Schieren, gift of Alfred T. White and Otto H. Kahn through the Committee for the Diffusion of French Art, by exchange, 2011.86.1. The indigenous woman serving *pulque* (a fermented drink made from agave syrup) to her son wears a beautifully woven *huipil*, a garment that in casta paintings is worn exclusively by “Indias” or their daughters.

CORPOREAL IDENTITY IN THE EARLY MODERN ERA was inherently mutable. All bodies were understood by early modern Europeans (who were the ones who created the colonial language of caste) to comprise a balance of humors that was responsible for an individual’s complexion or temperament, terms that jointly described both appearance and personality. Spanish writers thus attributed the splendid beards and energetic personalities they considered characteristic of the nation’s men to a predominance of yellow bile.²⁰ People’s

²⁰ For an introduction to humoralism with a focus on Spain, see Luis García Ballesster, *La búsqueda de la salud: Sanadores y enfermos en la España medieval* (Barcelona, 2001); Carmen Peña and Fernando Girón, *La prevención de la enfermedad en la España bajo medieval* (Granada, Spain, 2006). For vernacular and learned humoralism in Spanish America (and for the Spanish temperament), see Rebecca Earle, *The Body of the Conquistador: Food, Race and the Colonial Experience in Spanish America, 1492–1700* (Cambridge, 2012). For early modern Europe more generally, see Nancy G. Siraisi,



FIGURE III

José de Alcívar (attrib.), *De Español, y Negra. Mulato* [From a Spanish Man and a Black Woman, a Mulato], ca. 1760–70. Denver Art Museum Collection: Gift of the Collection of Frederick and Jan Mayer, 2014.217. Photo courtesy of the Denver Art Museum. The mulatto son approaches his Spanish father with the deference appropriate to his likely status as the son of an enslaved woman. He bears a brazier to allow his father to light a cigarette. His mother, meanwhile, prepares chocolate. The differences in the parents' clothing—he sports a stylish and expensive banyan, or loose housecoat, made of painted cotton imported from India, while she wears a modest laced bodice—further hints at their different social positions, even as this domestic scene reveals the intimate nature of their relationship.

complexions were determined in large measure by the qualities they inherited from their parents, but these qualities were neither fixed nor permanent. Changes in behavior, thought patterns, air, water, food, and levels of activity could result in dramatic changes to the individual body and its humors. This transformation, in turn, would produce a change in the person's overall character and appearance. One could, for example, develop a phlegmatic complexion "by eating phlegmy foods, or by living in a very damp region, or through

Medieval and Early Renaissance Medicine: An Introduction to Knowledge and Practice (Chicago, 1990); Lawrence I. Conrad et al., *The Western Medical Tradition, 800 BC to AD 1800* (Cambridge, 1995).

being old,” as the Spanish doctor Juan de Cárdenas noted in 1591.²¹ An individual’s complexion was therefore likely to change over his or her lifetime. Even the characteristics that a man passed on to his children might depend on the foods he had recently consumed because these could alter the quality of his semen. Similarly, the unruly forces of a pregnant woman’s imagination might imprint themselves firmly on her baby; many writers discussed how a woman could affect the appearance of her child by thinking very hard about a certain thing during pregnancy or conception.²² As historian Silvia De Renzi notes, “nothing was so fixed in the inherited temperament that it could not be altered.”²³ Corporeal identity was naturally fluid, both during an individual’s lifetime and across generations.

These ideas, originating in classical antiquity, powerfully shaped European views about human nature and the human body through the Middle Ages and early modern era. Although the transformation of scientific inquiry under way in the eighteenth century is sometimes said to have demolished this earlier understanding of the human body, belief in the agency of what learned people called the “six non-naturals”—environment, diet, levels of activity, sleeping patterns, ingestion and excretion, and emotional state—persisted, and scholars frequently invoked these familiar forces to explain the evolution of dark skin, just as their predecessors had done in earlier centuries. Spanish philosopher Benito Jerónimo Feijóo y Montenegro, for instance, observed in the 1730s that dark skin was due to the effects of climate—more specifically, the vaporous exhalations of the earth—which both darkened the body directly and affected the region’s waters and foodstuffs, the consumption of which reinforced the climate’s impact on the body’s humors.²⁴

²¹ Juan de Cárdenas, *Problemas y secretos maravillosos de las Indias* (1591; repr., Madrid, 1945), fol. 183v.

²² J[uan] Huarte de San Juan, *Examen de ingenios para las ciencias* (1575), ed. Esteban Torre (Barcelona, 1988), chap. 15, pt. 3; Juan de Pineda, *Primera parte de los treynta y cinco dialogos familiares de la agricultura christiana* (Salamanca, Spain, 1589), vol. 1, dialogue 5, sec. 9; Benito Jerónimo Feijóo y Montenegro, “Sobre el influjo de la imaginación materna, respecto del feto,” in *Cartas eruditas, y curiosas. . .* (1742; repr., Madrid, 1777), 1: 56–71; Joseph [José] Gumilla, *El Orinoco ilustrado, y defendido, historia natural, civil, y geographica de este gran rio, y de sus caudalosas vertientes. . .* (Madrid, 1745), 1: 95–100; Allen J. Grieco, “The Social Politics of Pre-Linnaean Botanical Classification,” *I Tatti Studies* 4 (1991): 131–49; Joan Cadden, *Meanings of Sex Difference in the Middle Ages: Medicine, Science, and Culture* (Cambridge, 1993); Marie-Hélène Huet, *Monstrous Imagination* (Cambridge, 1993); Staffan Müller-Wille and Hans-Jörg Rheinberger, eds., *Heredity Produced: At the Crossroads of Biology, Politics, and Culture, 1500–1870* (Cambridge, Mass., 2007).

²³ Silvia De Renzi, “Resemblance, Paternity, and Imagination in Early Modern Courts,” in Müller-Wille and Rheinberger, *Heredity Produced*, 61–83 (quotation, 63).

²⁴ Benito Jerónimo Feijóo y Montenegro, “Color etiópico,” in *Theatro critico universal*, vol. 7 (1736; repr., Madrid, 1778), discurso 3. For theories about the origins of dark skin in previous centuries, see Mary Floyd-Wilson, *English Ethnicity and Race in Early Modern Drama* (Cambridge, 2003); Earle, *Body of the Conquistador*.

Most eighteenth-century savants agreed that, beyond climate, lifestyle played a powerful role in shaping the body. Jews, for example, owed their pallid faces and hooked noses partly to their diet and sedentary ways, in the view of French abolitionist and revolutionary Abbé Henri Grégoire.²⁵ Food, in particular, was considered fundamental to determining physical appearance, including skin color. As Denis Diderot explained in the *Encyclopédie*, “color depends a lot on climate, but not entirely. There are different causes which must influence color, and even the form of features; among these are food and customs.”²⁶ In a typical eighteenth-century blend of anatomical and humoral language, an anonymous French essayist, writing about the origins of black skin, observed: “Transport black men and women to temperate climates, give them healthy food and appropriate clothing; the friction of this environment will no longer take place; . . . the nature of the blood and the bodily humors will change; the children that will be born from these people, or at least their grandchildren, will have the reticular membranes a few shades less black than those of the people from whom they came.”²⁷ (The reticular membrane was a layer of skin identified by seventeenth-century Italian physician Marcello Malpighi as containing a dark substance said to be responsible for black skin.) French naturalist Georges-Louis Leclerc, comte de Buffon, likewise affirmed in his enormously influential multivolume *Histoire Naturelle* that the descendants of a black person transported to a colder climate would eventually become white, especially if they ate the local foods and adopted local customs. Overall, he explained, physical appearance was caused by three forces: “The first is, the influence of the climate; the second is, the nourishment; and the third is, the manners.”²⁸ To be sure, not all participants in these enlightened discussions agreed on all particulars—whether dark-skinned people could become paler was a matter of debate—but the conviction that the human body and its humors were materially shaped by climate, diet, and lifestyle formed the background against which all arguments were framed.²⁹

²⁵ Alyssa Goldstein Sepinwall, “Eliminating Race, Eliminating Difference: Blacks, Jews, and the Abbé Grégoire,” in *The Color of Liberty: Histories of Race in France*, ed. Sue Peabody and Tyler Stovall (Durham, N.C., 2003), 28–41, esp. 34–35.

²⁶ Denis Diderot, “Humanity (Type),” 1765, in *The Encyclopedia of Diderot and d’Alembert Collaborative Translation Project*, trans. Naomi J. Andrews (Ann Arbor, Mich., 2010), <http://hdl.handle.net/2027/spo.did2222.0000.242>.

²⁷ Material in Bibliothèque municipale de Bordeaux, quoted in Andrew S. Curran, *The Anatomy of Blackness: Science and Slavery in an Age of Enlightenment* (Baltimore, 2011), 84–85.

²⁸ [Georges-Louis Leclerc], comte de Buffon, *The Natural History of Animals, Vegetables, and Minerals; with The Theory of the Earth in general*, trans. W. Kenrick and J. Murdoch (London, 1775), 1: 227–28 (quotation, 1: 228), 185, 253–55, 283–86, 290–91, 401–2. Or see [Cornelius de Pauw], *Recherches philosophiques sur les américains*. . . . (Paris, [1794]), 1: 240.

²⁹ Roxann Wheeler, *The Complexion of Race: Categories of Difference in Eighteenth-Century British Culture* (Philadelphia, 2000); Curran, *Anatomy of Blackness*;

Colonial writers, like their European interlocutors, turned to these concepts to explain the origins of Amerindians and to account for the transformations that many believed occurred in European bodies after extended residence in the Americas. New World authors agreed, for example, that although the ancestors of Amerindians originated in the Old World, centuries of living in the Indies slowly altered their physical appearance so that they no longer resembled their progenitors. As one seventeenth-century colonist put it, this change in their “color, size, gestures and faces” was caused by the very different food and climate of the Indies, which over time produced beings who looked and behaved very differently from their Old World ancestors.³⁰ Belief in and conversations about the transformative effect of climate, diet, and lifestyle on the body persisted to the end of the colonial era. This hemispheric discourse provided a unified and long-lasting framework that was employed to explain human diversity and transformation throughout the Americas. For example, Spanish military officials Jorge Juan and Antonio de Ulloa, who undertook a tour of South America in the 1740s, noted that the New World’s climate corrupted the humors of Spaniards who lived there so that they came to resemble locals in color, particularly if the newcomers also consumed local foods.³¹ At roughly the same time, three thousand miles to the north, Virginia planter William Byrd argued that the local diet explained why “so many People in this Province are markt with a Custard Complexion [and] . . . full of gross Humours.”³² In his 1806 *Observations on Lima’s Climate*, Peruvian savant Hipólito Unanue similarly discussed

Cristina Malcolmson, *Studies of Skin Color in the Early Royal Society: Boyle, Cavendish, Swift* (Farnham, U.K., 2013).

³⁰ Diego Andrés Rocha, *El origen de los indios* (1681), ed. José Alcina Franch (Madrid, 1988), 212 (quotation). Or see Cárdenas, *Problemas y secretos maravillosos de las Indias*, fols. 179, 184, 210, 219; Bernardo de Lizana, *Devocionario de nuestra señora de Izamal y conquista espiritual de Yucatán* (1633), ed. René Acuña (Mexico City, 1995), 61; Gregorio García, *Origen de los indios del Nuevo Mundo*, 2d ed. (1729), ed. Franklin Pease (Mexico City, 1981), 148–76, 243–54; José Antonio de Alzate [y Ramírez], “Un indio de la Nueva España. . . ,” 1791, in Roberto Moreno, ed., *Memorias y ensayos* (Mexico City, 1985), 154–65, esp. 162; Francisco Antonio de Ulloa, “Ensayo sobre el influjo del clima en la educación física y moral del hombre,” [Santafe de Bogotá] *Semanario del Nuevo Reyno de Granada*, Aug. 7, 1808, 283–84.

³¹ Jorge Juan and Antonio de Ulloa, *Relación histórica del viaje a la América Meridional*. . . (Madrid, 1748), 1: 58–59. Or see Gumilla, *El Orinoco ilustrado*, 1: 85–96; José Antonio [de] Alzate [y] Ramírez, “Historia natural,” 1787, in *Gacetas de Literatura de México*. . . (Puebla, 1831), 4: 223–27.

³² William K. Boyd, ed., *William Byrd’s Histories of the Dividing Line betwixt Virginia and North Carolina*, ca. 1738 (Raleigh, N.C., 1929), 54 (quotation); Joyce E. Chaplin, *Subject Matter: Technology, the Body, and Science on the Anglo-American Frontier, 1500–1676* (Cambridge, 2001), 239–45; Janet Moore Lindman and Michele Lise Tarter, eds., *A Centre of Wonders: The Body in Early America* (Ithaca, N.Y., 2001); Susan Scott Parrish, *American Curiosity: Cultures of Natural History in the Colonial British Atlantic World* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 2006).

in some detail the ways in which the local climate and individuals' lifestyles shaped their physical appearance, particularly skin color. Employing an entirely humoral frame, Unanue, who studied medicine at Lima's Universidad de San Marcos, explained how differences in environment, diet, and customs resulted in the varied appearance of people both around the globe and in Peru itself. It is clear that Unanue saw no contradiction between his emphasis on the mutability of the humoral body and the use of genealogical caste terminology, since he also classified Peru's population according to caste and explained categories such as "mulatto" and "zambo" entirely in terms of lineage.³³

The mutable, humoral nature of colonial caste categories is likewise revealed in the persistent anxiety provoked by the figure of the black or indigenous wet nurse. In Europe wet nursing had long been a source of concern because breast milk was regarded as a super-concentrated form of the lactating woman's own humors. The nursing child was therefore likely to take on the qualities of its nurse. As Spanish Jesuit Lorenzo Hervás y Panduro explained in an eighteenth-century text, individual character was rooted in the humors, "and these are transplanted through the breast milk into the nursing child."³⁴ In the case of creoles nursed by indigenous or black women, the effect was to endow these children with indigenous or African characteristics. As one Spanish priest put it, creole boys raised on Indian milk "differ little from Indians."³⁵ French naturalist Antoine Simon Le Page du Pratz similarly warned that colonists in Louisiana should under no circumstances permit their children to be breast-fed by black women; since milk was a purified form of blood, it inevitably transmitted the worst qualities of "this species."³⁶ Such concerns endured throughout the colonial era, not only because of the broader anxieties evoked by the intimacy that often arose between elite child and subaltern nurse but also because body

³³ Hipólito Unanue, *Observaciones sobre el clima de Lima, y sus influencias en los seres organizados, en especial el hombre* (Lima, 1806), esp. 66–76.

³⁴ Lorenzo Hervás y Panduro, *Historia de la vida del hombre* (Madrid, 1789), 1: 215–16 (quotation, 1: 216). See also Martín Sarmiento, "Discurso sobre el método que debía guardarse en la primera educación de la juventud. . . .," *Semanario erudito*. . . . 19 (1789): 167–256, esp. 171–73; M.-F. Morel, "Théories et pratiques de l'allaitement en France au XVIIIe siècle," *Annales de démographie historique* 1 (1976): 393–427; Emilie Bergmann, "Milking the Poor: Wet-Nursing and the Sexual Economy of Early Modern Spain," in *Marriage and Sexuality in Medieval and Early Modern Iberia*, ed. Eukene Lacarra Lanz (London, 2002), 90–114; Mónica Bolufer, "Medicine and the *Querelle des Femmes* in Early Modern Spain," in *Health and Medicine in Hapsburg Spain: Agents, Practices, Representations*, ed. Teresa Huguet-Termes, Jon Arrizabalaga, and Harold Cook (London, 2009), 86–106.

³⁵ Miguel de Sigüenza to the king, May 24, 1605, Audiencia de Filipinas 84, N. 132, fol. 3 (quotation), AGI; Earle, *Body of the Conquistador*, 51–53, 111–13.

³⁶ [Antoine Simon] Le Page du Pratz, *Histoire de la Louisiane*. . . . (Paris, 1758), 1: 343 (quotation); [Jean Bernard] Bossu, *Nouveaux voyages aux Indes Occidentales*. . . . (Paris, 1768), 1: 201–2.

concepts premised on the transformative impact of diet continued to hold sway. Colonial writers across Spanish America warned against ill-chosen nurses and their “pernicious breast milk” up until the eve of independence from Spain.³⁷ It is therefore no coincidence that elite mothers contentedly nursing their offspring appear regularly in *casta* series (Figure IV).³⁸ These scenes of appropriate maternity deflect the fear, endlessly repeated on both sides of the Atlantic, that mothers who failed to breast-feed risked the health of their infant and allowed their lineage to be contaminated with the lowly humors of the nurse.

Caste was thus a complex, embodied process in which eating and bodily comportment materially altered people’s constitutions and, potentially, those of their children. It was simultaneously a genealogical condition and the result of cultural practice. Too much indigenous breast milk would Indianize the body of a Spanish baby, just as too much local food changed the color and character of the creole children born to Spaniards in the Indies. Amerindians themselves were living evidence of the transformative power of the New World’s climate and foodstuffs, since how else had they acquired their distinctive character and appearance? This set of beliefs explains why diet and overall lifestyle were so important in determining an individual’s caste status. Of course clothing and eating habits proclaimed the wearer’s wealth and social position, themselves closely associated with caste. More profoundly, the foods the individual body ingested, the clothing it wore, and the way it moved through space were likely to affect its overall complexion, transforming it into a different sort of body.

THE DYNAMIC IMPACT OF LIFESTYLE AND UPBRINGING is particularly evident in the creation of the *mestizo* body. Although *casta* paintings and many other colonial documents might appear to suggest that any child of a European and an Amerindian was a *mestizo*, the category in fact reflects a modulated, humoral understanding of caste. The term *mestizo* first appeared around the 1530s. Prior to that point, the children of Europeans and Amerindians were usually classified as either European or Amerindian; they were not accorded a separate status.³⁹ Even when *mestizo* came into

³⁷ See for example the repeated discussion throughout 1806 in the *Diario de México*; Ulloa, “Ensayo sobre el influjo del clima,” *Semanario del Nuevo Reyno de Granada*, Aug. 7, 1808, 314–15 (quotation); [José Joaquín Fernández de Lizardi], *El Periquillo Sarniento*. . . (1812), 4th ed. (Mexico City, 1842), 1: 7; Premo, *Children of the Father King*, 168–70; Mariselle Meléndez, *Deviant and Useful Citizens: The Cultural Production of the Female Body in Eighteenth-Century Peru* (Nashville, Tenn., 2011), 160–69. On intimacy, see Ann Laura Stoler, “Tense and Tender Ties: The Politics of Comparison in North American History and (Post) Colonial Studies,” in *Haunted by Empire: Geographies of Intimacy in North American History*, ed. Stoler (Durham, N.C., 2006), 23–67.

³⁸ Katzew, *Casta Painting*, 113–14, 219.

³⁹ Mörner, *Race Mixture in the History of Latin America*, 28–29, 54–55; Bernard Lavallé, *Las promesas ambiguas: Ensayos sobre el criollismo colonial en los Andes* (Lima,



FIGURE IV

Anon., *De Mestiza y Español Castizo* [*From a Mestiza and a Spanish Man, a Castizo*], eighteenth century. Museo de América, Madrid. This nursing mother is providing her infant with the best possible start in life both because her breast milk is ideally suited to its constitution and because by feeding the baby herself she will prevent its humors from being contaminated with “pernicious” milk from a black or indigenous wet nurse. In casta paintings such breast-feeding scenes are almost always situated in wealthy households in which one of the parents is Spanish, for it was only in such cases that the risks posed to the baby’s health and bodily integrity by “inferior” milk were considered socially meaningful by enlightened writers. (Francisco Antonio de Ulloa, “Ensayo sobre el influjo del clima en la educación física y moral del hombre,” [Santafé de Bogotá] *Semanario del Nuevo Reyno de Granada*, Sept. 4, 1808, 315 [“pernicious”].)

1993); María Elena Martínez, “The Language, Genealogy and Classification of ‘Race’ in Colonial Mexico,” in Katzew and Deans-Smith, *Race and Classification*, 25–42, esp. 32. For example, a 1514 document from Hispaniola refers simply to “children of Christians” whose mothers are “natives of the said islands.” These “mixed” children were not labeled with a distinctive nomenclature: “Repartimiento de la Isla Española,” 1514, in Joaquín F. Pacheco, Francisco de Cárdenas, and Luis Torres de Mendoza, eds., *Colección de documentos inéditos relativos al descubrimiento, conquista y colonización de las posesiones españolas en América y Oceanía*. . . . (Madrid, 1864), 1: 80–235, esp. 1: 80–81, 98, 106, 143, 152, 160, 172–73, 182, 190, 195, 207, 218, 225, 235; Stuart B. Schwartz, “Spaniards, *Pardos*,

widespread use in the early seventeenth century, not all children of mixed Spanish and indigenous ancestry were labeled mestizos. As historian Stuart B. Schwartz has argued, colonial society generally recognized children of mixed ancestry who were “born legitimately and who lived according to accepted colonial norms” as Spanish.⁴⁰ Thus the children of Amerindians and Spaniards were often classified on the basis of the culture into which they were absorbed. This integration of “mestizas” into the Spanish community probably explains why in the sixteenth century the number of recorded marriages involving “Spanish women” exceeds the number known to have emigrated to the Indies.⁴¹

These children were not passing themselves off as Spanish. In a treatise from 1607, Dominican priest Gregorio García insisted that the legitimate offspring of Spaniards and Indians *were* Spanish “and as such are permitted to occupy distinguished positions, including in the administration, and other honorable and holy posts and are not excluded from them for having partial indigenous ancestry.”⁴² In his view, the honor that such individuals gained from their Spanish heritage greatly outweighed the insignificance of their indigenous heritage. As García indicated, legitimate “mestizos” were not really mestizos at all. One hundred and forty years later, another cleric, José Gumilla, maintained that it took several generations to “overcome” indigenous ancestry, but he agreed that once this was accomplished the individual could be regarded not simply as Spanish but as “perfectly white, just like a Frenchwoman born and raised in Paris.”⁴³ This view is reflected in *casta* paintings, where the great-grandchildren of Spaniards and Amerindians are labeled as Spanish (Figure V).

As García intimated, legitimate children of mixed Spanish and indigenous ancestry (which in most cases meant children of Spanish fathers) did not qualify as mestizos because the very term *mestizo* presupposed

and the Missing Mestizos: Identities and Racial Categories in the Early Hispanic Caribbean,” *New West Indian Guide/Nieuwe West-Indische Gids* 71, nos. 1–2 (1997): 5–19, esp. 11. Or see Richard Konezke, ed., *Colección de documentos para la historia de la formación social de Hispanoamérica, 1493–1810* (Madrid, 1953), 1: 147, 168.

⁴⁰ Schwartz, *New West Indian Guide/Nieuwe West-Indische Gids* 71: 10. (Schwartz here refers specifically to the Spanish Caribbean.)

⁴¹ Mörner, *Race Mixture in the History of Latin America*, 28–29, 54–55; John K. Chance, *Race and Class in Colonial Oaxaca* (Stanford, Calif., 1978), 65–66, 97–98; Cope, *Limits of Racial Domination*, 18; Minchom, *People of Quito*, 178; Kuznesof, *CLAR* 4: 153–76; Stuart B. Schwartz, “Colonial Identities and the *Sociedad de Castas*,” *CLAR* 4, no. 1 (1995): 185–201; Elizabeth Anne Kuznesof, “More Conversation on Race, Class and Gender,” *CLAR* 5, no. 1 (1996): 129–33; Berta Ares Queija, “Mestizos, mulatos y zambaios (Virreinato del Perú, siglo XVI),” in *Negros, mulatos, zambaios: Derroteros africanos en los mundos ibéricos*, ed. Queija and Alessandro Stella (Seville, 2000), 75–88.

⁴² García, *Origen de los indios del Nuevo Mundo*, 102.

⁴³ Gumilla, *El Orinoco ilustrado*, 1: 85 (“overcome”), 82 (“perfectly white”); Katzew, *Casta Painting*, 48–49. Martínez, *Genealogical Fictions*, 268, discusses the convergence of “whiteness” and “Spanishness.”



FIGURE V

José de Ibarra (attrib.), *De Castizo, y Española, Español* [From a Castizo Man and a Spanish Woman, a Spaniard], ca. 1725. Museo de América, Madrid. This happy trinity of Spanish mother, castizo father, and Spanish son depicts the outcome of a multigenerational process that has eliminated any trace of indigenusness from this boy, who is described unequivocally as Spanish. The Spanish mother caresses her son, whose rosy cheeks and European clothing further reflect his status as a Spaniard.

illegitimacy. This is why jurist Juan de Solórzano Pereira felt obliged to clarify in his seventeenth-century compendium of colonial law that restrictive anti-mestizo legislation should be understood as applying only to illegitimate mestizos; legitimate mestizos were to be treated as Spaniards.⁴⁴ Solórzano Pereira assumed that illegitimate individuals were unlikely to be brought up in the households of their Spanish fathers; their physical environments were therefore those of their indigenous mothers. Since the environment left a profound imprint on the individual complexion, individuals raised as indigenous were likely to take on the physical characteristics of Amerindians, whatever their personal ancestry, and especially if they had the misfortune to be breast-fed by their indigenous mothers. The essential difference between a mestizo taken from his indigenous mother to be raised by his Spanish father and one brought up among Amerindians can be seen clearly in the contrasting assessment of them in colonial documentation. A child of the first sort “always follows their Spanish side,” in the view of Mexican viceroy Martín Enríquez, while the second type of child, raised by his indigenous mother, was to be treated as indigenous.⁴⁵ For instance, the latter child was exempted from the regulations prohibiting non-Amerindians from residing in indigenous villages.⁴⁶

The physical body and its very ancestry were thus in part the product of the body’s cultural milieu. That is why the cultural world with which an individual associated helped determine caste status. This connection between culture and caste, in turn, is why many colonial writers insisted that possessing some indigenous ancestry did not necessarily prevent a person from being Spanish, and why, whatever the dictionary definition, the children of Spaniards and Amerindians were not consistently classified as mestizos in censuses and other official records. By way of example, we may recall the eighteenth-century case mentioned earlier of the daughter of an Amerindian woman who was nonetheless “accepted and held to be Spanish.” The genealogical language of caste captures well this fluid early modern understanding of heredity, which was less an inflexible legacy than a set of predispositions that might or might not be activated during one’s lifetime.⁴⁷

⁴⁴ In a further indication of the link between color and the parents’ marital status, Solórzano Pereira argued that only illegitimate mestizos were “stained” with a confusing, mixed skin color. Solórzano Pereira, *Política indiana*, 217–22. Or see Antonio de Ulloa, *Noticias americanas: Entretenimientos físicos-históricos, sobre la América Meridional, y la Septentrional Oriental*. . . (Madrid, 1772), 346. Twinam, *Purchasing Whiteness*, 201, provides a clear statement of the links between illegitimacy and the category of “mestizo.”

⁴⁵ Martín Enríquez to Felipe II, Jan. 9, 1574, in [Justo Zaragoza et al., eds.], *Cartas de Indias* (Madrid, 1877), 298–99 (quotation, 299).

⁴⁶ Bk. 6, title 3, law 21, in *Recopilación de leyes de los reinos de las Indias, mandada imprimir y publicar por la magestad católica del rey Don Carlos II*. . . (Madrid, 1841), 2: 231.

⁴⁷ Material from Fondo Real Audiencia, ANC, quoted in Schüler, “Españoles oscuros y mulatos blancos,” 359. See Müller-Wille and Rheinberger, *Heredity Produced*.

AS REGARDS THE CATEGORY OF “MULATTO,” one of the most striking features of casta series is the different treatment that they give to lineages that combine Spanish and indigenous people, on the one hand, and those that combine Spanish and black people, on the other. As we have seen, casta paintings present people with an indigenous great-grandparent as Spanish. This is not the case in paintings showing people with one black great-grandparent. Such individuals are usually labeled *chinos* or *albinos*, and their children with Spaniards are often termed a *saltatrás* or *tornatrás*: a “throwback” (Figure VI). Subsequent generations are depicted as departing even more definitively from the Spanish prototype. Black ancestry, such paintings imply, utterly prohibits any return to whiteness or Spanishness. This view is consistent with the outspoken denunciations of “black blood” emanating from both Spain and its colonies in the eighteenth century. In 1773, for example, the Mexican Inquisition affirmed that “blackened blood [*sangre denegrida*] never disappears, because experience shows that by the third, fourth, or fifth generation it pullulates, so that two whites produce a black, called *tornatrás* or *saltatrás*.”⁴⁸ The distinctive treatment of African ancestry in casta paintings similarly resonates with the increasing concern of eighteenth-century science to isolate the black body as fundamentally different from other bodies, whether that concern was expressed through the language of humors, anatomy, or scripture. Physicians began to probe the inner recesses of cadavers in search of the physical origin of black skin, and philosophers devoted ever-greater attention to whether, in Voltaire’s words, “bearded whites, woolly-headed blacks, yellow people with hair like horses, and beardless [Amerindian] men” could truly have descended from the same original ancestors.⁴⁹ Casta paintings might therefore be seen as reflecting this broader urge both to segregate black bodies as inherently different from white bodies and to insist on the intransigent, immutable nature of blackness.

At the same time, merely by representing the children and grandchildren of mulattoes, casta artists implicitly contested a potent polemic against the fundamental unity of humankind circulating during the Enlightenment: the claim that mulattoes and their descendants were

⁴⁸ Martínez, *Genealogical Fictions*, 246 (“black blood”), 247 (“blackened blood,” quoting material from Inquisición, Archivo Histórico Nacional, Madrid); Carrera, *Imagining Identity in New Spain*, 12–13; Katzew, *Casta Painting*, 39–61; Evelina Guzauskyte, “Fragmented Borders, Fallen Men, Bestial Women: Violence in the *Casta* Paintings of Eighteenth-Century New Spain,” *Bulletin of Spanish Studies* 86, no. 2 (2009): 175–204. Or see Pedro Alonso O’Crouley, *A Description of the Kingdom of New Spain* (1774), ed. and trans. Seán Galvin (Dublin, 1972), 20–21.

⁴⁹ [Voltaire], “Traité de Métaphysique,” 1734, in *Oeuvres complètes de Voltaire* (Paris, 1847), 6: 3–22 (quotation, 6: 4); Wheeler, *Complexion of Race*; Colin Kidd, *The Forging of Races: Race and Scripture in the Protestant Atlantic World, 1600–2000* (Cambridge, 2006); Curran, *Anatomy of Blackness*; Malcolmson, *Studies of Skin Color in the Early Royal Society*.



FIGURE VI

Andrés de Islas, *De Español, y Alvina, nace, Torna-atras* [*From a Spaniard and an Albina is Born a Throwback*], 1774. Museo de América, Madrid. The unexpectedly dark skin of their son has not deterred these wealthy parents from dressing him in a smart European-style suit. The mother's pale skin contrasts strongly with that of her little son in ways that would surely have provoked discussion between her and her husband, who glances quizzically in her direction. Her eyes, however, remain modestly lowered.

sterile. Eighteenth-century scholars agreed that different species could not produce fertile offspring. As the comte de Buffon, the doyen of enlightened science, explained, the axiom that members of a single species can reproduce, whereas those of different species cannot, "is the most fixed point that we have in natural history." Therefore, if the children born to a

couple consisting of one black and one white parent were unable to reproduce, it would suggest that black and white people were fundamentally different. Many eighteenth-century writers considered this issue. Buffon, for his part, insisted that “since all men can communicate and produce together, all men come from the same stock, and are of the same family”; he therefore did not believe that black and white people constituted separate species. Other scholars claimed variously that such couples could not reproduce at all or that their children would be sterile, or at least very feeble.⁵⁰ For these reasons the reproductive capacity of the mulatto was freighted with scientific significance.

Eighteenth-century scholars were equally captivated by the question of whether white children might be born to black parents. A number of such “nègres blancs” or “albino” children toured Europe to the amazement of the public and scientists alike. These people fascinated through their unusual appearance and also because they prompted questions about the reasons for their unexpected coloring (Figure VII). Although many writers endorsed the view that maternal imagination alone was sufficient to produce such dramatic alterations in skin color and overall physical form, for some philosophers these unsettling figures provided reassuring evidence that humanity had originally been white. After considering such children, Buffon, for instance, deduced that “white, then, appears to be the primitive colour of Nature, which climate, food, and manners, alter, and even change into yellow, into brown, or into black; and which, in certain circumstances, reappears, though by no means equal to what it was, on account of its corruption from the causes here mentioned.” He concluded that “Nature, in her full perfection, has made men white, and Nature, reduced to the last stage of adulteration, renders them white again.”⁵¹ This return to whiteness demonstrated the residual power of humanity’s original color, all the more so given that, as a number of eighteenth-century scholars insisted, it was vastly more common for black parents to give birth to white children than the inverse.⁵² In sum, the fertility of couples

⁵⁰ Buffon, *Natural History of Animals, Vegetables, and Minerals*, 1: 431 (“fixed point”), 434 (“since all men”); [Pierre Barrère], *Dissertation sur la cause physique de la couleur des nègres*. . . . (Paris, 1741), 11; Feijoó, “Sobre el influjo de la imaginación materna”; Gumilla, *El Orinoco ilustrado*, 1: 109–15; Paul L. Farber, “Buffon and the Concept of Species,” *Journal of the History of Biology* 5, no. 2 (Autumn 1972): 259–84; Claude Blanckaert, “Of Monstrous Métis? Hybridity, Fear of Miscegenation, and Patriotism from Buffon to Paul Broca,” in Peabody and Stovall, *Color of Liberty*, 42–70; Doris Garraway, “Race, Reproduction and Family Romance in Moreau de Saint-Méry’s *Description . . . de la Partie Française de l’Isle Saint-Domingue*,” *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 38, no. 2 (Winter 2005): 227–46; Curran, *Anatomy of Blackness*, 83–107.

⁵¹ Buffon, *Natural History of Animals, Vegetables, and Minerals*, 1: 268–70 (quotations, 1: 270).

⁵² Jean-Baptiste Labat, *Nouvelle relation de l’Afrique Occidentale*. . . . (Paris, 1728), 2: 268; Gumilla, *El Orinoco ilustrado*, 1: 109–15; [Pierre-Louis Moreau de] Maupertuis, *Vénus physique* (1745), in “*Vénus physique*,” suivi de la “*Lettre sur le progrès des sciences*,”



FIGURE VII

[Georges-Louis Leclerc], comte de Buffon, *Histoire naturelle, générale et particulière: Servant de suite à l'Histoire Naturelle de l'Homme* (Paris, 1777), supplement to vol. 4, plate 1. This young woman from Dominica had West African parents who were themselves “perfectly black,” but she was “white all over” (*ibid.*, 559–65 [quotations, 559]). Eighteenth-century scientists were fascinated by such “white negroes,” whose unusual coloring appeared to shed light on mankind’s original color. Buffon reported that her name was Geneviève and that he had scrutinized her in person.

comprising black and white people and the ability of parents of one color to engender children of a different color interested eighteenth-century scientists on both sides of the Atlantic because these topics were believed to illuminate fundamental questions about the origins of humanity's physical diversity. Those who maintained that black people differed fundamentally from whites were particularly insistent that mulattoes were sterile and that white people seldom or never engendered dark-skinned children.

Casta paintings disrupt assertions that black and white people were unable to reproduce together. On the contrary, the children of Spaniards and black people always appear in these series; mulattoes are moreover routinely shown in subsequent paintings surrounded by their own children (Figure VIII; see also Figures I, III). Casta paintings, furthermore, never depict "white" children born to black parents—the *nègres blancs* who so fascinated eighteenth-century Europe—but the "throwback," a dark child born to light-skinned parents, is a familiar figure in casta series. These children are represented in multiple ways; most often they are shown as the privileged offspring of bemused but loving parents, who dandle their dark-skinned sons on their knees or dress them in expensive clothing (see Figure VI). Like the absence of *nègres blancs*, such families implicitly contested the claim that because humanity was originally white-skinned, white parents could not give birth to black children but black parents could give birth to white children. (The "albinos" shown in casta paintings such as Figure VI are the children of Spaniards and other lighter-skinned people, not the mysteriously pale offspring of very dark parents discussed by Buffon and his interlocutors.) In other words, although some casta paintings mirror the hostility toward the black body expressed in other venues, these images do not merely reproduce the attitudes expressed by racial philosophers in the eighteenth-century Atlantic world. Rather, we might view them as visual interventions in their own right into debates about science and natural history, comparable to the botanical illustrations produced by New World illustrators.⁵³ Certainly contemporary viewers appear to have regarded them in this way. English traveler Richard Twiss, who viewed a set of casta paintings in Málaga in the 1770s, was struck by the "remarkable circumstance of the children of almost white parents . . . being quite black." He was so surprised that he specifically noted his inability to verify whether such a thing ever occurred in reality.⁵⁴

Casta paintings thus participated in a lively scholarly debate about the nature of blackness on which there was little consensus. The casta

ed. Patrick Tort (Paris, 1980), 140–43; Diderot, "Humanity (Type)"; Curran, *Anatomy of Blackness*, 87–105.

⁵³ Bleichmar, *Visible Empire*, offers an extremely suggestive model for how we might read such eighteenth-century colonial images in the context of enlightened debates about science, truth, and the natural world.

⁵⁴ Richard Twiss, *Travels through Portugal and Spain, in 1772 and 1773* (London, 1775), 333 (quotation); Deans-Smith, *CLAR* 14: 190.



FIGURE VIII

Anon., *De Mestiza y Mulato produce Campamulata* [*A Mestiza and a Mulatto Produce a Calpamulata*], eighteenth century. Museum für Volkerkunde, Vienna. Courtesy, KHM-Museumsverband, Weltmuseum Vienna. Contrary to the claims of some eighteenth-century savants, this mulatto is clearly not sterile, as he is shown together with his daughter. The image conveys a powerful narrative of calamity, precisely the quality that intrigued eighteenth-century viewers. The empty glass suggests the cause of the mulatto's bloodshot eyes and slumped position, but what has driven him to this sorry pass? His little daughter gestures dramatically at this portrait of despair, while the mestiza looks sadly at her stricken partner.

series' confident insistence that black bodies could never engender Spanish descendants was not shared by all eighteenth-century scholars. For instance Gumilla, who affirmed that indigenous ancestry could be "overcome" in four generations, maintained that exactly the same process applied to people of black ancestry. As he described it:

- I. From a European man and a black woman comes a mulatta (*two quarters from each side*).
- II. From a European man and a mulatta comes a quadroon (*one-quarter mulatta*).

III. From a European man and a quadroon comes an octroon (*one-eighth mulatta*).

IV. From a European man and an octroon comes a puchuela (*completely white*).⁵⁵

Other writers from across the Indies believed this process took five generations but concurred that afterward descendants should be considered Spanish.⁵⁶ Overall, as with the category of “mestizo,” the classification of mulattoes and their descendants did not conform to a singular genealogical model even in the abstract theories of eighteenth-century scholars.

Far from adhering to a single taxonomic model, children of mixed African and European ancestry were not all considered mulattoes, nor was the term used solely to refer to such people. Indeed, the very idea that there was a difference between mestizos and mulattoes emerged only slowly. John Minsheu’s late sixteenth-century Spanish-English lexicon defined a mestizo as the offspring of “a blacke-Moore and a Christian.”⁵⁷ Historian Jack D. Forbes has, moreover, demonstrated that during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries *mulatto* generally meant someone with a mixture of African and indigenous (rather than European) ancestry. In some regions this terminology persisted until the end of the colonial era, whereas elsewhere the term came to include anyone with any African ancestry whatsoever.⁵⁸ Such flexibility is reflected in the 1811 Mexico City

⁵⁵ Gumilla, *El Orinoco ilustrado*, 1: 85–87 (“overcome,” 1: 85, “European man,” 1: 86–87); Unanue, *Observaciones*, 98; Katzew, *Casta Painting*, 48–49.

⁵⁶ Juan and Ulloa, *Relación histórica*, 1: 41; Gregorio de Cangas, *Descripción en diálogo de la ciudad de Lima entre un peruano práctico y un bisoño chapetón* (1780), ed. Camilo G. Vicente and José L. Lenci ([Lima, 1997]), 59; Joaquín de Finestrada, *El vasallo instruido en el estado del Nuevo Reino de Granada y en sus respectivas obligaciones* (1789), ed. Margarita González (Bogotá, 2000), 135. Five generations is the timescale depicted in the 1770 casta series reproduced in Majluf, *Los cuadros de mestizaje del Virrey Amat*. Five was also the number of generations breeders believed necessary to transform one variety of sheep into another: Roger J. Wood, “The Sheep Breeders’ View of Heredity before and after 1800,” in Müller-Wille and Rheinberger, *Heredity Produced*, 229–50, esp. 231. Mexican savant José Antonio de Alzate y Ramírez affirmed that the process of transformation from one thing to another would lead definitively to the “extinction” of blackness, although he did not specify the number of generations required: Alzate [y] Ramírez, “Historia natural,” 4: 223–24 (quotation, 4: 224).

⁵⁷ John Minsheu, *A Dictionarie in Spanish and English*. . . (London, 1599), 169.

⁵⁸ Jack D. Forbes, *Black Africans and Native Americans: Color, Race and Caste in the Evolution of Red-Black Peoples* (Oxford, 1988). See also Juan López de Velasco, *Geografía y descripción universal de las Indias* (1574), ed. Justo Zaragoza (Madrid, 1894), 43; O’Crouley, *Description of the Kingdom of New Spain*, 20; Félix de Azara, *Descripción é historia del Paraguay y del Río de la Plata*, 1806 (Madrid, 1847), 1: 294; Konetzke, *Colección de documentos*, 1: 435, 2: 1, 480; Ares Queija, “Mestizos, mulatos y zambaigos”; Martínez, “Language, Genealogy and Classification of ‘Race,’” 32; Kathryn Burns, “Unfixing Race,” in *Histories of Race and Racism: The Andes and Mesoamerica from Colonial Times to the Present*, ed. Laura Gotkowitz (Durham, N.C., 2011), 57–71, esp. 62; Robert C. Schwaller, “‘Mulata, hija de negro y india’: Afro-Indigenous *Mulatos* in Early

census, where, as historian Ben Vinson III has shown, census takers varied widely in their classification of the children of “Spaniards” and “moriscas” (ostensibly the offspring of Spaniards and mulattas). In this census the children of Spaniards and moriscas were sometimes listed as mestizos, sometimes as mulattoes, and sometimes as Spaniards.⁵⁹ According to the categories employed in casta paintings, these children should have been labeled as *chinos* or *albinos*, and certainly never as Spanish. Moreover, as was the case with mestizos, mulatto status was transmitted unevenly depending on whether it was the mother or the father who was black.⁶⁰ In sum, far from descending uniquely from an African and a European, mulattoes could have different ancestries, and the children of Africans and Europeans were not necessarily mulattoes.

Scholars have long argued that caste categories were fluid in practice; they were also fluid in theory. It was not simply that in the messy reality of colonial life the firm categories of the caste system dissolved; rather, these categories themselves reflected the transformative impact of culture. This is why colonial writers employed varying terminology to describe ostensibly identical genealogical combinations and generally insisted that lifestyle played a crucial role in shaping the body. Casta paintings reveal this flexibility, when we look.

The terminology used to describe the child of a particular “mixing” is not consistent across the corpus of paintings or, at times, even within a single series. For example, in the Breamore House series by Juan Rodríguez Juárez, the child of a *lobo* man and an Indian woman is labeled a “lobo que es torna atras” (“lobo or throwback”), whereas a *loba* woman and an Indian man produce a “grifo que es tente en el aire” (“griffin or hover-in-the-air”) (Figures IX–X). In other words, the children of Indians and *lobos* are categorized differently depending on whether the mother or the father is the Indian. The very different settings surrounding the two families make plain the gulf separating these children, which amply justifies their divergent labels. The world of the little *grifo* in Figure X is materially and culturally distant from Hispanic influence. Nothing in the painting suggests that this child will ever be able to leave the cultural milieu into which he has been born. The environment welcoming the daughter of the *lobo* man and the indigenous woman, in contrast, teems with the accoutrements of upward mobility. Her father, dressed in a blue cloak and lace cravat, holds a pair

Colonial Mexico,” *Journal of Social History* 44, no. 3 (Spring 2011): 889–914; Twinam, *Purchasing Whiteness*.

⁵⁹ Ben Vinson III, “Studying Race from the Margins: The ‘Forgotten Castes’—*Lobos*, *Moriscos*, *Coyotes*, *Moros*, and *Chinos* in Colonial Mexico” (working paper delivered at “The Structure of Colonial Societies, 1500–1825,” International Seminar on the History of the Atlantic World, 1500–1825, Cambridge, Mass., Aug. 5–15, 2002), 32–33.

⁶⁰ On the intersectionality of sex and race, see Kuznesof, *CLAR* 4: 153–76; Lewis, *Hall of Mirrors*; Peter Wade, *Race and Sex in Latin America* (London, 2009).



FIGURE IX

Juan Rodríguez Juárez, *De lobo y de india produce lobo que es torna atras* [A Lobo Man and an Indian Woman Produce a Lobo-Throwback], 1725. Breamore House, Hampshire, U.K./Bridgeman Images. The young daughter of this smiling couple takes after her well-dressed father both in caste label and in future prospects; indeed, her indigenous *huipil* is adorned with an image of a dark-skinned man much like her father. She is fortunate that it is her father, and not her mother, who is the *lobo*.

of high-heeled shoes and a cobbler's last. Silver buttons gleam on his coat, and a broad-brimmed hat honorably covers his head. His child will possess the tools necessary to leave the indigenous world of her mother, unlike the little *grifo*, who is confined to material and corporeal marginality. In casta paintings, as in colonial culture more generally, caste terms attached themselves differently to different bodies depending on their life circumstances because those life circumstances themselves shaped the individual body. Part of the power of casta paintings lies in their exceptional ability to visualize this dynamic relationship between bodies and their broader environment.

Moreover, individual caste terms are ascribed quite divergent ancestries in different series. For instance, depending on the casta set, an *albarazado* can be variously described as the child of a *cambujo* and a mulatta,



FIGURE X

Juan Rodríguez Juárez, *De indio y loba produce grifo que es tente en el aire* [An Indian Man and a Loba Woman Produce a Griffin or Hover-In-The-Air], 1725. Breamore House, Hampshire, U.K./Bridgeman Images. This little baby's modest circumstances will provide scant opportunity for social advancement; as his peculiar caste title suggests, he is likely to remain in his current environment and therefore to retain his current body. His prospects for developing a different caste identity are slight, lacking as he does any of the accoutrements of Hispanic culture.

a *morisco* and a *coyote*, or nine other possible pairings. Such variability in the meaning of individual caste terms undermines any argument that the paintings simply record widely accepted taxonomies or served as aides-mémoires for officials, as some scholars once claimed.⁶¹ The interchangeability, or permeability, of different caste categories is further suggested by the recurrence of particular settings, such as a cobbler's workshop, a poultry stall, or a *pulque* stand, which are peopled by different

⁶¹ Efraín Castro Morales, "Los cuadros de castas de la Nueva España," *Jahrbuch für Geschichte von Staat, Wirtschaft, und Gesellschaft Lateinamerikas* 20, no. 1 (December 1983): 671–90, esp. 676–77; Teresa Castelló Yturbe, "Los cuadros de mestizaje y sus pintores," in *De la historia: Homenaje a Jorge Gurría Lacroix* (Mexico City, 1985), 191–200, esp. 192, 199–200.

castes in different series.⁶² Perhaps it does not matter very much whether the inhabitants of a particular workshop or stall are *barcinos* or *albarazados* or *chinos*. The important things for the viewer to understand are that these people possess highly mixed ancestries, are involved in sexual relationships, and are undertaking visually engaging activities. Casta paintings emphasize certain combinations as significant and silence others to produce representations of human diversity that highlight its underlying unity while at the same time stressing the differences between blackness and whiteness. Casta paintings may thus be seen both as reflections of the embodied yet mutable nature of colonial caste categories and as interventions in an enlightened debate about the origins and meaning of skin color. Why, however, did people wish to own such images? Answering that question requires first addressing the powerful narratives about colonialism, sexuality, and pleasure inherent in the genre and then revisiting the opening discussion of classification, which allows us to connect casta painting's complex appeal to both its taxonomic and its narrative power.

PAINTINGS SUCH AS José Joaquín Magón's eighteenth-century *From the Spanish Man and the Indian Woman is Born the Mestizo*, which depicts an elegantly dressed indigenous woman together with her Spanish husband in a comfortable setting, create a scenario that in the eighteenth century was almost an ontological impossibility.⁶³ There is abundant evidence to suggest that the act of marrying a wealthy Spaniard was often sufficient to establish a woman in or near the category of "Spaniard," whatever her previously ascribed caste. That is, these images do not show us how a couple comprising an elite Spaniard and a wealthy Indian woman might appear because in reality late colonial society would not have read such a woman as Indian in the first place. Rather, the images represent flights of imagination. They show us both probable and improbable liaisons for which they attempt to construct plausible social contexts. "This," such images suggest, "is how it would be if a Spanish man fathered a child with a black woman." "This might happen when a black man gets together with an Indian woman."

Casta paintings, in essence, are works of imaginative fiction. By this I mean not simply that these images display artifice and imagination but also that they contain elements of narrative. The paintings tell stories about the intimate lives of imagined colonial subjects whose sexual and reproductive practices are displayed for our viewing. Paintings such as Andrés de Islas's 1774 *From a Spaniard and an Albina is Born a Throwback* (see

⁶² García Sáiz, *Las castas mexicanas*, 24, 44; Carrera, *Imagining Identity in New Spain*, 37.

⁶³ I am grateful to Alejandra Irigoin for this elegant turn of phrase. José Joaquín Magón's *From the Spanish Man and the Indian Woman is Born the Mestizo*, held in a private collection in Mexico, appears in García Sáiz, *Las castas mexicanas*, 103.

Figure VI) invite us to imagine the emotions surrounding the birth of this dark-skinned child to his pale parents, just as the title of Magón's *Quadroon and Mestiza, Always Fighting, Engender the Strong, Bold Coyote* prompts questions about what has recently passed between a dismayed mestiza and her knife-wielding partner, to whom she clings anxiously as he strides determinedly away from her and their distressed daughter. (See Figure VIII for another image of marital unraveling.) Eighteenth-century Spanish art critics encouraged viewers to develop precisely this sort of imaginative response, since the ability to convey a narrative lay at the core of a painting's appeal.⁶⁴

The sense of narrative is powerfully reinforced by the idea—articulated in a letter by the viceroy of Peru, Manuel de Amat—that the child represented in one painting may be understood as a parent in the subsequent painting. “The key,” the viceroy explained, “is that the son or daughter depicted in the first couple is, depending on their sex, the father or mother in the second couple, and the child of these is the father or mother in the third couple, and so on.”⁶⁵ In other words, in some series we witness not only a moment in the life of an imagined domestic unit but also an individual's progression through life. The little mestiza baby depicted in the fourth painting of the Peruvian series to which the viceroy referred thus grows into the mestiza woman shown with her own child in the fifth painting. She has evidently inherited her mother's hair ornament (shown in the fourth painting), since a similar decoration adorns her baby's head in the fifth painting. She wears finer clothing and jewelry than her mother did, so we may assume that her marriage—we see the ring—to a Spaniard has improved her fortunes.⁶⁶ This is a narrative as much as it is a taxonomy.

We should recall that the stories told by *casta* paintings are stories of interracial sexuality. They represent, as the viceroy put it, “the successive generations of the mixing of Indians and blacks.” Viewers evidently found this to be the genre's most striking feature, which they highlighted by describing the paintings as depictions of “the intermarriages of the Spaniards and Indians, with their offspring” or “the union of whites with people of color.”⁶⁷ The diversity of castes, colors, and conditions in

⁶⁴ See for example Estevan de Arteaga, *Investigaciones filosóficas sobre la belleza ideal, considerada como objeto de todas las artes de imitación* (Madrid, 1789), 37–58. Magón's eighteenth-century *Quadroon and Mestiza*, held in a private collection in Mexico, appears in García Saíz, *Las castas mexicanas*, 110.

⁶⁵ Manuel de Amat to Julián de Arriaga, May 13, 1770, Audiencia de Lima 652, no. 57, AGI (quotation); Pilar Romero de Tejeda, “Los cuadros de mestizaje del Virrey Amat,” in Majluf, *Los cuadros de mestizaje del Virrey Amat*, 17–25, esp. 22.

⁶⁶ I am grateful to Don Cruickshank for his guidance on the history of wedding rings. The Peruvian series of *casta* paintings is held by the Museo Nacional de Antropología, Madrid.

⁶⁷ Amat to Arriaga, May 13, 1770, Audiencia de Lima 652, no. 57 (“successive generations”); *A Tour through the Principal Provinces of Spain and Portugal, Performed in the Year 1803*. . . . (London, 1806), 48 (“intermarriages”); Ramón de Mesonero

colonial Spanish America is—these paintings remind us—the result of sexual activity between men and women, whose genealogical connection to their children forms the defining characteristic of the genre.

We know that in colonial contexts issues of race and sexuality are intertwined with the construction of colonial power itself. Ideas about race were embedded in the regulation of sexual behavior and marriage typical of European colonialisms, which in turn helped buttress their central hierarchies.⁶⁸ Moreover, regulation, race, and sexuality are intimately connected to issues of both colonial power and colonial knowledge. Michel Foucault's observations on the disciplining power of official description surely resonate with the endless cataloging of *casta* paintings, visualized so powerfully in their authoritative captions. "There is," Foucault insisted, "no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power relations."⁶⁹ Power, Foucault reminds us, cannot exist separately from a system of knowledge that is able simultaneously to create truth and to shape the articulation of authority. Given *casta* paintings' intense and explicit concern with microclassification, proclaimed with particular clarity in their characteristic captions, it is easy to see how the genre could function as a form of both knowledge and power. Yet if it is about regulation and colonial power, then it is also about desire.

As anthropologist Ann Laura Stoler has demonstrated, the very mechanisms of colonial regulation and control themselves help eroticize colonial space and the people who inhabit it. Drawing on Foucault's assertion that "desire follows from, and is generated out of, the law, out of the power-laden discourses of sexuality," she (and others) have shown how particular regimes of desire have been created by the regulatory discourses of colonialism themselves.⁷⁰ Regulation creates desire. In particular, as Stoler's

Romanos, *Manual de Madrid. Descripción de la corte y de la villa*. . . . (Madrid, 1833), 228 ("union"); Twiss, *Travels through Portugal and Spain*, 333; *Paseo por Madrid, ó Guia del forastero en la Corte*. . . . (Madrid, 1815), 49; [Fernando Cagigal], *La educación: Comedia en tres actos y en prosa* (Barcelona, 1818), 80.

⁶⁸ For the interconnections among race, gender, and colonial power, see for example Ramón A. Gutiérrez, *When Jesus Came, the Corn Mothers Went Away: Marriage, Sexuality, and Power in New Mexico, 1500–1846* (Stanford, Calif., 1991); Kathleen M. Brown, *Good Wives, Nasty Wenches, and Anxious Patriarchs: Gender, Race, and Power in Colonial Virginia* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1996); Jennifer M. Spear, *Race, Sex, and Social Order in Early New Orleans* (Baltimore, 2009).

⁶⁹ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (London, 1991), 27 (quotation); Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, trans. Sheridan (London, 1972).

⁷⁰ Ann Laura Stoler, *Race and the Education of Desire: Foucault's History of Sexuality and the Colonial Order of Things* (Durham, N.C., 1995), 165 (quotation), 169; Stoler, *Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power: Race and the Intimate in Colonial Rule* (Berkeley, Calif., 2010). See also Regina Harrison, "The Theology of Concupiscence: Spanish-Quechua Confessional Manuals in the Andes," in *Coded Encounters: Writing, Gender, and Ethnicity in*

writings on the colonial education of desire reveal, the pleasure of imagining interracial sex—and the sentimental ties that grew out of it—was one of the luxuries of colonial power. Colonialism and its efforts to control and manage sexuality helped convert the intimate lives of colonial subjects into a topic of persistent, and pleasurable, imaginative speculation.

Many eighteenth-century European writings about race were punctuated with romantic imaginings of the intimate pleasures available in distant colonial spaces. In a 1745 treatise on race and human reproduction, French savant Pierre-Louis Moreau de Maupertuis, for instance, found himself speculating on whether “bored sultans” ever tried to create new, particularly beautiful races of women by systematically fathering children with their many diverse concubines.⁷¹ Maupertuis mused that if, like these sultans, he were forced to spend his life in the pleasant contemplation of women’s beauty, he would surely have recourse to such experiments. (Of course, he insisted immediately after reporting his erotic daydream, these men would never know the deeper pleasure gained through true affection.) Satirical prints of Britons newly arrived in the West Indies enumerated the mixed-race children such men were certain to father with exotic “sable Venus[es].”⁷² Race, romance, sexuality, power, and pleasure were intimately linked in the European imagination, which helps explain the popularity of the colonial romance as a literary genre. As Anthony Ashley Cooper, 3d Earl of Shaftesbury, complained, such novels were devoured by “a thousand Desdemonas” who spent their days longing for “a hero of the black tribe.”⁷³ Tales of tragic interracial romances set in colonial spaces allowed readers to imagine themselves into this thrilling world without any actual loss of selfhood. Such narratives affirmed the differences that separated colonizers and colonized while offering an emotional framework for managing those differences. Literary critic Lynn Festa thus notes that “empire begets sentimentality” as a mode of negotiating and taming the unsettling forces unleashed by

Colonial Latin America, ed. Francisco Javier Cevallos-Candau et al. (Amherst, Mass., 1994), 135–50; Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest* (London, 1995); Homi K. Bhabha, “The Other Question: Stereotype, Discrimination and the Discourse of Colonialism,” in *The Location of Culture*, 2d ed. (London, 2012), 94–120. Robert J. C. Young observes: “The traces of miscegenation were tracked with a furtive but obsessive interest and attention and marked with a taxonomic fervour through which we can glimpse an extraordinary ethnography of colonial desire.” See Young, *Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Theory, Culture and Race* (London, 1995), 174.

⁷¹ [Moreau de] Maupertuis, *Vénus physique*, 134 (quotation). Or see [Julien-] J[oseph] Virey, *Histoire naturelle du genre humain*, new ed. (Paris, 1824), 2: 184.

⁷² See for example *Johnny Newcome in Love in the West Indies*, 1808, British Museum (quotation). I am grateful to Meleisa Ono-George for drawing this image to my attention.

⁷³ Ant[h]ony [Ashley Cooper], Earl of Shaftesbury, “Soliloquy; or, Advice to an Author,” in *Characteristics of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times, With A Collection of Letters* (Basel, Switzerland, 1790), 1: 300 (quotations).

colonialism.⁷⁴ Sentimental novels provided a language built around emotion through which to articulate the experience of empire.

Casta paintings are imagined narratives of interracial colonial sexuality and of the intimate domestic worlds it engendered. As such, they are about pleasure as much as they are about control, or perhaps it is more precise to say that they are about the interconnections between pleasure and control. That is surely why they were reportedly viewed with “amusement and pleasure” by colonial elites. It is striking that this observation, from an anonymous 1759 tract, one of the rare eighteenth-century sources to comment on the genre, should highlight precisely the pleasure derived from viewing casta paintings. The author disapprovingly described the fascination the New World’s “great diversity of people” held for Spaniards and complained that those Spaniards enjoyed reading descriptions of the many different castes inhabiting Mexico. For “yet greater amusement and pleasure,” some even commissioned paintings showing the castes resulting from the “union of a mestizo with an Indian” and other mixes. The anonymous author lamented this prurient interest while at the same time making clear that the paintings were seen, fundamentally, as a source of enjoyment.⁷⁵

We should recall that the eighteenth-century pleasures of the imagination included the contemplation not only of the beautiful and the tasteful but also of the novel and the unusual. As one Spanish writer explained in a translation of a Scottish treatise on taste:

The imagination is not delighted only by those objects that appear sublime or beautiful, since the ability to please also derives from other principles.

[Joseph] Addison and all those who have written on this topic describe novelty, for example, as one of the sources of pleasure. An object that lacks any other merit can induce a lively and pleasant commotion in the soul simply through being unique and new. This arouses curiosity, which is so deeply rooted in all men. Very familiar ideas and objects make too weak an impression to be able to exercise our faculties agreeably, but new and strange objects pleasantly stimulate our spirits.

⁷⁴ Lynn Festa, *Sentimental Figures of Empire in Eighteenth-Century Britain and France* (Baltimore, 2006), 7. See also Doris Sommer, *Foundational Fictions: The National Romances of Latin America* (Berkeley, Calif., 1991); Wheeler, *Complexion of Race*, 138–75.

⁷⁵ “Diversas castas que se hallan entre los havitadores de Nueva España,” 1759, *Recolección de varios curiosos papeles*, vol. 5, MS. Colecciones especiales, fol. 63 (quotations), Archivo del Museo Nacional de Antropología, Mexico City; Katzew, *Casta Painting*, 217. European enthusiasm for these images unsettled other colonial writers as well; Castro Morales, *Jahrbuch für Geschichte von Staat, Wirtschaft, und Gesellschaft Lateinamerikas* 20: 679–80, discusses a 1746 text whose creole author likewise deplored the indecent interest Europeans showed in the genre.

This, he added, was “the source of much of the enjoyment we find in novels and romances.”⁷⁶ Many Spanish writers concurred that variety and novelty were important elements of a successful work of art because they stimulated the imagination and prevented tedium. The overly familiar, as Spanish savant Antonio de Capmany noted in a treatise on eloquence, “never can please us.”⁷⁷ Paintings that did not please failed to fulfill a central aim of all works of art, which was, after all, to cause delight. “The object of painting,” insisted one of the many eighteenth-century Spanish writers to consider this matter, “is to please the soul and the senses, delighting, and never tiring them.”⁷⁸ An identical view was expressed by some of Mexico City’s most prominent artists, including a number noted for their *casta* series, in a 1753 letter defending the dignity of their profession. The signatories insisted that painting, like other liberal arts, must “delight” as well as instruct.⁷⁹ Critics discussed the ways in which the fine arts might accomplish this fundamental goal and debated the physiology of how these processes worked on the mind. All agreed, however, that the value of the fine arts lay precisely in their ability to stimulate the imagination and provoke pleasure. In the words of the orator at a prize-giving ceremony for pupils of the Madrid academy of fine art, art causes “real pleasure through imaginary invention.”⁸⁰ Paintings of whatever sort thus aimed, fundamentally, to please and delight the viewer, which they could accomplish not only through being beautiful but also through being unusual, imaginative, and surprising.

Casta paintings pleased and delighted their viewers by combining the “lively and pleasant commotion” provoked by the unusual and the new with the pleasurable contemplation of colonial sexuality, producing an

⁷⁶ Hugo Blair, *Lecciones sobre la retórica y las bellas letras*, trans. Joseph Luis Munariz (Madrid, 1798), 1: 121 (quotations). See also Munariz’s translation of Joseph Addison’s “Pleasures of Imagination”: Josef Munariz, trans., “Ensayo sobre los placeres de la imaginación, escrito por Addison,” *Variedades de Ciencias, Literatura y Artes* 2 (1805): no. 13, 29–46, no. 14, 82–99, no. 15, 159–76.

⁷⁷ Antonio de Capmany, *Filosofía de la elocuencia* (Madrid, 1777), 73–74 (quotation, 74); Benito Jerónimo Feijóo y Montenegro, “Razón del gusto,” in *Theatro crítico universal*, vol. 6 (1734; repr., Madrid, 1778), discourse 11; Diego Antonio Rejón de Silva, *La pintura: Poema didáctico en tres cantos* (Segovia, Spain, 1786), 34; Arteaga, *Investigaciones filosóficas sobre la belleza ideal*, 164–75; [Charles] Batteux, *Principios filosóficos de la literatura: Ó curso razonado de bellas letras y de bellas artes*, trans. Agustín García de Arrieta (Madrid, 1797), 1: 255.

⁷⁸ Arteaga, *Investigaciones filosóficas sobre la belleza ideal*, 113.

⁷⁹ Material from the Archivo Histórico de la Ciudad de México, quoted in Mina Ramírez Montes, “En defensa de la pintura: Ciudad de México, 1753,” *Anales del Instituto de Investigaciones Estéticas* 23, no. 78 (2001): 103–28 (quotation, 119).

⁸⁰ *Distribución de los premios concedidos por el rey nuestro señor á los discípulos de las tres nobles artes, hecha por la Real Academia de San Fernando en la junta pública de 13 de julio de 1796* (Madrid, [1796]), 68–73, esp. 75–76 (quotation, 76); Antonio Rafael Mengs, *Obras*. . . , ed. Joseph Nicolas de Azara (Madrid, 1780); Juan Francisco de Masdeu, *Historia crítica de España, y de la cultura española* (Madrid, 1783), 1: 223, 266; Arteaga, *Investigaciones filosóficas sobre la belleza ideal*.

aesthetic experience entirely comparable to that offered by “novels and romances” and other works of art. Little wonder that these paintings were produced on a commercial scale for the delectation and amusement of the colonial elite, who perhaps understood how to read their intimate narratives in ways that later viewers, concerned with classification and taxonomy, sometimes overlooked.

And of course taxonomy too had its pleasures. Though eighteenth-century advocates of different classificatory systems quarreled over the nomenclature and principles that ought to guide particular schema, the practice of classification itself was a source of pleasure.⁸¹ Portuguese naturalist and sailor Antonio Parra, for instance, explained that during his posting in Cuba in the 1760s, “the multitude of admirable productions in the animal, vegetable, and mineral kingdoms, of which the island of Cuba and its surrounding seas abound, inspired in me from the moment I arrived a great desire to enumerate a collection.”⁸² To satisfy that desire, he began collecting fish and other wildlife in his spare time and subsequently produced an extensive catalog of engravings and descriptions, organized according to his own system, which focused equally on anatomy and edibility. For Parra, as for many others, the ordering of nature into a visual catalog was a source of satisfaction and enjoyment in its own right. Pedro Franco Dávila described the formation and ordering of his extensive collection as his “strongest passion,” the greatest pleasure of his life.⁸³ Truly, passion was the only possible response when contemplating the delightfully female Nature, “who awakens man’s pleasure and curiosity with sweet charms,” in the words of one enamored botanist.⁸⁴

And must scientific classification rely on different axioms or entail different practices from those associated with the sentimental appreciation of a novel or a painting? Eighteenth-century natural philosophers would not have recognized this notion. As historian Jessica Riskin has shown, eighteenth-century savants were certain that science itself originated in emotions and feelings. After all, the philosophical Paul-Henri Thiry, baron d’Holbach, observed, from “sensibility flow all the faculties that we call

⁸¹ On such disputes, see Phillip R. Sloan, “The Buffon-Linnaeus Controversy,” *Isis* 67, no. 3 (September 1976): 356–75; Roberto Moreno, ed., *Linneo en México: Las controversias sobre el sistema binario sexual, 1788–1798* (Mexico City, 1989); E. C. Spary, *Utopia’s Garden: French Natural History from Old Regime to Revolution* (Chicago, 2000); Jessica Riskin, *Science in the Age of Sensibility: The Sentimental Empiricists of the French Enlightenment* (Chicago, 2002), 227–81; Parrish, *American Curiosity*, 234–35; Helen Cowie, *Conquering Nature in Spain and Its Empire, 1750–1850* (Manchester, U.K., 2011), 122–46; and, for the underlying continuities, Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*, anonymous translation (London, 1970), 125–65.

⁸² Antonio Parra, dedication to *Descripción de diferentes piezas de historia natural las mas del ramo marítimo, representadas en sesenta y cinco láminas* (Havana, 1787), 1–2.

⁸³ [Franco Dávila], *Catalogue systématique et raisonné*, 1: iii–iv (quotation, 1: iv).

⁸⁴ Joseph Quer [y Martínez], *Flora española, ó historia de las plantas, que se crían en España* (Madrid, 1762), 1: 4–5 (quotation, 1: 5).

*intellectual.*⁸⁵ For these thinkers, knowledge resulted from a combination of sensations and sentiments. Feelings informed science and science nourished noble sentiments. Taxonomies and novels were not so different from each other, as both drew on the deep reservoirs of sensibility that animated the human spirit. Physiocrat Pierre Samuel Du Pont de Nemours did not rely solely on charts and treatises to popularize the new economic doctrines he supported; he also composed poems, plays, and other literary works on them. And, as historian Robert Darnton demonstrates, even a pornographic novel could offer incisive political critique at the same time as it captivated the senses.⁸⁶ Pleasure and knowledge reinforced each other.

Let us end where we began, with the intimate links connecting the families in casta paintings with the families and classes displayed in taxonomic tables by botanists and other savants. The same language and underlying structures of knowledge supported both systems of classification. These connections were acknowledged in the very metaphors that animated and drew together the two fields. “Just as plants are improved by grafting, so too are the American castes improved by mixing,” insisted one delegate to the Spanish Cortes in 1810.⁸⁷ Natural history and the understanding of humanity more generally derived from the same historical a priori, from the same fundamental arrangement of knowledge, that “provides man’s everyday perception with theoretical powers, and defines the conditions in which he can sustain a discourse about things that is recognized to be true.”⁸⁸ This is why Franco Dávila’s call to “bring a little order to the families . . . to bring more order and coherence to our system” could equally express a scientific dismay over the challenges of constructing a taxonomy of nature and the social anxieties aroused by the impossibility of fixing identity in the colonial world.⁸⁹

The similarity of the language used for classifying plants and classifying people is likewise clear in comments by Joseph Quer y Martínez, the first professor of botany at the Royal Botanical Garden of Madrid and author of an admired treatise on botanical classification. Indeed, Quer was trained not only in botany but also in medicine; prior to occupying his post at the royal gardens, he served as a surgeon in the Spanish military. His learning thus embraced both people and plants. In his 1762 *Flora española*, Quer explained that nature regularly produced “monstrous” or

⁸⁵ [Paul-Henri Thiry, baron d’Holbach], *La morale universelle; ou, les devoirs de l’homme*. . . . (Amsterdam, 1776), 1: 3; Riskin, *Science in the Age of Sensibility*, 2–3.

⁸⁶ Robert Darnton, *The Forbidden Best-Sellers of Pre-Revolutionary France* (New York, 1996); Liana Vardi, *The Physiocrats and the World of the Enlightenment* (Cambridge, 2012).

⁸⁷ Adolfo de Castro, ed., *Cortes de Cádiz: Complementos de las sesiones verificadas en la isla de Leon y en Cádiz: Extractos de las discusiones, datos, noticias, documentos y discursos publicados en periódicos y folletos de la época* (Madrid, 1913), 1: 177.

⁸⁸ Foucault, *Order of Things*, 157–58 (quotation, 158).

⁸⁹ [Franco Dávila], *Catalogue systématique et raisonné*, 1: xiii.

“hybrid” beings but that these “bastard varieties” could often be returned to their original forms. Bastardization resulted when a living thing was moved from its homeland and subjected to unfamiliar airs and nourishment; as he noted, “everything is engendered with most grace and elegance and thrives best in its natural location, removed from which, and placed in an alien land, it changes its nature and degenerates, because of the difference in substance and climate.”⁹⁰ Nonetheless, this process of degeneration could be reversed. Doing so required only that the plant be tended with appropriate care and provided with the right microenvironment. The same processes, as we have seen, applied to people, whose unsettling hybridity could likewise be reversed through suitable upbringing and cultivation. Nature itself allowed for movement and transformation, among both people and other living things.

Perhaps it was for this reason that Spanish scientists expressed grave doubts about whether it was possible to form a general taxonomy that could accommodate the earth’s great variety of flora and fauna. Carl Linnaeus had insisted that each natural body could be assigned “its own peculiar name . . . so that amidst the greatest apparent confusion, the greatest order is visible,” but not all shared his confidence.⁹¹ Indeed, Quer was certain that such a system could not exist. It was impossible, he stated, “to form a general system, and perfect Method, not only for Natural History in its entirety, but even for one part of it.” Nature was too complex to be captured in taxonomy. “Thus we see,” he observed, “that one species changes into another species, and often one genus into another, subtly, through a diverse range of almost imperceptible accidental occurrences.” In this way nature sustained its magisterial incomprehensibility and frustrated any project of forming a “general system.” Nature’s captivating variety, nowhere more evident than in the New World’s diverse populations, meant that the quest for a “general method” to classify living things would prove no more successful than the search for the philosopher’s stone.⁹² Ultimately, it seemed, desire and narrative were the only ways to make sense of America.

⁹⁰ Quer, *Flora española*, 1: 341–43 (quotations, 1: 342).

⁹¹ Charles Linné [Carl Linnaeus], *A General System of Nature*. . . ., trans. William Turton (Swansea, U.K., 1800), 1: 3.

⁹² Quer, *Flora española*, 275–76 (quotations, 275); or see José Antonio [de] Alzate [y] Ramírez, “Carta satisfactoria aun literato,” 1788, in *Gacetas de Literatura de México*, 4: 399–413.