Pinturas de Casta: Mexican Caste Paintings, a Foucauldian Reading

Nasheli Jiménez del Val
(Cardiff University)

Abstract

This article looks at the genre of *casta* painting developed in colonial Mexico during the eighteenth century. The genre consists of a series of paintings representing the different racial mixes that characterised New Spain throughout the colonial period and that continue to play an important role in contemporary Mexican society. By referring to several Foucauldian concepts such as *disciplinary power*, *biopower*, *normalisation*, *deviance* and *heterotopia*, this essay aims to locate the links between this genre and prevailing discourses on race, with a particular focus on the ensuing institutional and political practices implemented in the colony during this period. Centrally, by focusing on this genre as a representational technology of colonial surveillance, the paper argues that discourses on race in New Spain oscillated between an ideal representation of colonial society, ordered and stabilised through rigid classificatory systems, and a real miscegenated population that demanded a more fluid understanding of the colonial subject's societal value beyond the limitations of racial determinism.

It is known that neither the Indian nor Negro contends in dignity and esteem with the Spaniard; nor do any of the others envy the lot of the Negro, who is the "most dispirited and despised". [. . .] It is held as systematic that a Spaniard and an Indian produce a mestizo; a mestizo and a Spaniard, a castizo; and a castizo and a Spaniard, a Spaniard. It is agreed that from a Spaniard and a Negro a mulatto is born; from a mulatto and a Spaniard, a morisco; from a morisco and a Spaniard, a torna atrás; and from a torna atrás and a Spaniard, a tente en el aire. The same thing happens from the union of a Negro and Indian, the descent begins as follows: Negro and Indian produce a lobo; lobo and Indian, a chino; and chino and Indian, an albarazado, all of which incline towards the mulatto.

Pedro Alonso O'Crowley, 1774.

Casta painting is a pictorial genre produced by colonial artists between the early 18th century and the early 19th century that consists of a series of paintings representing the different racial mixings that characterised the colony of New Spain. As a pictorial genre, it is constituted by a succession of images that show a male and female subject from different ethnic origins and the offspring that result from

this combination. The three racial strands of Spaniard, Indian and Black initiate the series, with the possible combinations that derive from these crossing being depicted in detail, to the degree that even fifth or sixth degrees of derivations are often assigned specific names and traits.

Around the 1650s, the population of New Spain was composed of 1.3 million Indians, 185,000 whites, 155,000 blacks and mulattos, 110,000 *mestizos* and a few thousand Asians according to census records; by 1793, the number of Indians had increased by a million, the population of whites had risen to 690,000, the *mestizo* population had grown to around 420,000, and the black/mulatto sector was counted at 375,000 (MacLachlan and Rodríguez 1980: 197). The population of New Spain was highly diverse and in constant fluctuation. From the foundation of New Spain as a Spanish colony, institutions were put in place that officially recognised the dual nature of colonial society along the lines of its Spanish and Indian populations. Through the establishment of specific laws and legislations, the Spanish Crown attempted to temper the “conflict between settler interests and the well-being of the Indians” (MacLachlan and Rodríguez 1980: 197) by establishing a model of dual republics. On the one hand, the indigenous peoples were organised into a *república de los indios* (‘Indian republic’), while the colonists belonged to a *república de los españoles* (‘Spanish republic’). In this manner, the Indian natives and the incoming settlers were organised into a hierarchical society governed by laws that established the different sectors’ rights and responsibilities to the colony (MacLachlan and Rodríguez 1980: 197).

However, colonial society was hard to classify exclusively according to the two lines of either Spanish or Indian ethnic heritage. The early miscegenation between Indians and Spaniards, as well as the incorporation of black slaves from Africa, further complicated the classification of the population. In this context, high value was placed on the ‘purity’ of blood, with particular consideration for the Spaniards who were characterised as *gente de casta limpia* (‘people of a pure caste’). This distinction of ‘purity’ was a concept that originated in Spain to indicate the absence of Jewish or Moorish ancestry, but in the context of New Spain it meant the absence of Negro blood (MacLachlan and Rodríguez 1980: 199). Black subjects, considered physically and morally base, were termed *infames por derecho* (‘legally debased’) given their slave status or origins. As a consequence of this view, they were strictly limited in terms of their legal options, being excluded from civil posts, prohibited from marrying Indians or whites and forbidden to carry arms. Indians, while higher on the hierarchy because they were also considered to be of a good ‘pure’ caste, were believed to be *gente sin razón* (‘people without reason’), with the ensuing institutional consequence that they were treated as legal minors and made wards of the state (MacLachlan and Rodríguez 1980: 197). The caste system, based on the institutionalisation of legal rights along the lines of racial characteristics, served the purpose of organising the three sectors of the population in order to assign them specific political, economic and social roles.

However segregated the different sectors were in institutional documents and practices, the reality in New Spain was more complex. The actual separation into

Indian and Spanish republics was precluded by a complex multiracial society that broke down the artificial barriers between the two groups through miscegenation and acculturation. As MacLachlan and Rodríguez (1980: 198) have explained, in many instances Indian subjects would seek out the advantages of forming alliances with the Europeans through the production of miscegenated offspring. That, in conjunction with the initial numeric disadvantage in the ratio of Spaniards to Indians, resulted in a spectrum of racial varieties that was hard to either quantify or limit. *Casta* paintings are, in fact, an echo of the miscegenation that had already taken place in New Spain over two centuries of colonial rule by Spain. As García Sáiz (1989) states, Spanish rulers had, by this point, simply accepted "what, in fact, was actually happening and officially authorise[d] it" (30). These paintings are, in the first instance, a reflection of this active sanctioning.

The precise function of caste paintings is yet unclear. It can be assumed that the images were produced for an elite literate audience, given that most of them incorporate written inscriptions specifying the racial terms assigned to the progenitors and offspring (Carrera 2003: 50). Some authors (Fernández 1989, Carrera 2003) argue that these paintings were originally commissioned as informative tableaux or visual aids for churches and parishes in order to properly register individuals in the baptismal record books. Parents would present their offspring in the local church and, according to the parents' racial lineage and to the child's physical traits, the infant would be registered either in the *libro de españoles* ('Spanish register') or in the *libro de castas* ('caste register'), which would include all colonial subjects that were not of 'pure' blood. The placement of the individual in one or the other register would fatefully determine his or her future conditions as a member of society. Spaniards had access to high ranking posts in government and university education, while *casta* members were subject to pay colonial tribute and faced the prospects of a limited institutional existence. Another hypothesis (García Sáiz 1989) is that these paintings were produced for export, given that a large number of them have been found in European collections. Under this scenario, they would have functioned as a kind of 'souvenir' from the colonies, "catering to a clientele that wanted to take back a 'real' vision of American society that did not appear in any other kind of colonial paintings" (García Sáiz 1989: 44). Potentially a kind of postcard from New Spain, these paintings did not only present the possible racial combinations, but also included the dress, customs, produce and other elements of life in the colony. Hence, as Katzew (1993) argues, these paintings may have served to heighten European access to the 'exoticness' of the colonies. A third hypothesis suggests that these paintings played a propagandistic role in New Spain. Katzew (2004) believes that this genre responded to an internal "concern with the construction of a particular self-image" on the part of an increasingly powerful Creole population that wanted to reflect a "collective image of colonial self-pride" (1). In this propagandistic vein, the paintings would also serve the external function of rebutting the Spanish perception of New Spain as a colony of mongrels and degenerate mixes. The images may have been a "reminder to the Spanish Crown that, despite contrary reports, Mexico was still a rigidly structured society" (Car-

rera 2003: 52), where Spaniards were at the top of the hierarchy. In other words, these paintings may have been used to affirm the idea of a rigidly structured racial hierarchy in New Spain at the service of imperial order.

The concept of order was paramount in the historical period during which this genre developed. In the context of the Spanish Enlightenment, a spirit of scientific inquiry was gaining strength with Spain "conducting an in-depth study of its possessions and [. . .] commissioning scientists to travel to its domains" (Barras de Aragón cited in Katzew 2004: 7), and concurrently developing taxonomic categories in order to fully describe its colonies under the emerging epistemic regime. Central to this spirit was the development of new systems of classification of potentially all the objects in nature. This ambitious project was the result of a new understanding of the world in which reason could help to explain the world beyond the religious discourses that had characterised early modern Europe.

Figure 1: Miguel Cabrera, *From Spaniard and Mulata, Morisca*, 1763

Given this framework, *casta* paintings can be viewed as the expression of the privileging of reason through the pictorial materialisation of taxonomic categories. An exercise of the representational privileges of the colonial elite, *casta* paintings permitted miscegenation in New Spain to be fixed and produced as an object for scientific inspection. As in all taxonomic enterprises, hierarchies were deployed in order to organise the 'scientifically' legitimated differences between races. In the space and sequence of the pictorial format, these hierarchies took on an explicitly visual form. In most of the *casta* series, the first painting demonstrates the mixing of the male Spaniard and the female Indian, giving the white Spaniard pride of place as the initiator of the series, hence confirming the racial patriarchal hierarchies established in the colony (Figure 1).[1] In other variants, the space of the canvas is literally divided into hierarchically organised compartments whereby the

[1]All illustrations in this article are in the public domain.

Spaniard and the whiter castes rule—compositionally and symbolically—*over* the rest (Figure 2). This representational strategy reflects colonial administrative practices by which "the stability of the Spanish social order rested on [maintaining] the difference between Spaniards and Indians [. . .] and the effective restriction of the rights and obligations of the Africans and the racially mixed" (Katzew 2004: 40). In visually embodying elite forms of control through visual representational techniques, this genre underscores the success of the colonial enterprise "by showing a healthy and wealthy body politic" (Katzew 2004: 202) that was—if only in theory—efficiently delimited, organised and administered.

Figure 2: Anon., single-panel *casta* series, 18th century

Biopower

The genre of caste painting reflects the two forms of power that Foucault (1980, 1981) has amply theorised. On the one hand, these pictures are a reflection of the disciplinary power enacted over colonial bodies. Legal institutions and precepts, such as the *patria potestad* ('power of a father'), were the cornerstone of a patriarchal society in New Spain (MacLachlan and Rodríguez 1980: 232). This legal precept was derived from Roman law (*patria potestas*), which had granted the father of any family "the right to 'dispose' of the life of his children and his slaves; just as he had given them life, so he could take it away" (Foucault 1981: 135). The Spaniard patriarch in New Spain was legally responsible for the physical, economic, and social wellbeing of his wife and offspring. An enactment of the power of the sovereign through the figure of the 'superior' Spaniard, the *patria potestad* was a modality of disciplinary power that was based on what Foucault (1981: 136)

has termed *a right of seizure*. Hence, the figure of the father—legally invested with the power of the sovereign—had the right to exercise the seizure of things, time, bodies and life itself.

Overlapping with this conception of power, *casta* paintings are also an expression of the colonial exercise of what Foucault (1980) has termed *biopower*. Foucault argues that it is insufficient to analyse power in its repressive disciplinary mode and that power has other ways of organising the forces that constitute it. The capacity of power to generate forces, to make them grow and to order them, rather than to destroy them, is crucial to understanding the ways in which power works. It is precisely this modality of power that secures the ability of the social body to maintain and develop life. Importantly, this type of power functions as a *productive* force that "exerts a positive influence on life, that endeavours to administer, optimize, and multiply it, subjecting it to precise controls and comprehensive regulations" (Foucault 1981: 137). This kind of power situates itself at the very heart of society's source of cohesion and strength: the biological existence of the population. In other words, biopower is the power to administer human life.

Crucially, as McWhorter (2004: 42) has highlighted, the anchor point for the exercise of biopower is always the body. Foucault (1981: 139–140) has located two levels at which this power is exercised. Firstly, following a Cartesian model, biopower in the form of an anatomo-politics centres on the body as a machine and focuses on its disciplining in terms of the optimisation of its capabilities, the increase of its usefulness and docility, and its integration into systems of economic controls. On a second level, biopower exercises its dominance over the body as a species. In this mode, termed the *biopolitics of population*, the body is "imbued with the mechanics of life and serv[es] as the basis of the biological processes: propagation, births and mortality, the level of health, life expectancy and longevity, with all the conditions that can cause these to vary" (Foucault 1981: 139). Thus, these two poles surrounding the administration of bodies and the management of the species are central in the exercise of power over life.

Further to this understanding of power, *casta* paintings can be understood as one of several technologies put into place in order to achieve an ordering of the body as the main focus of an anatomo-politics and of a biopolitics of population. Hence, through a productive subjugation of bodies and an active control of populations, colonial power involved the mastery over living beings. By rendering the colonial subject's body as a central locus for the conjunction of productive forces, these pictures echo the "explicit calculations [that] made knowledge-power an agent of transformation of human life" (Foucault 1981: 143). This genre was a way of affirming at a representational level the "infinitesimal surveillances, permanent controls, [and] extremely meticulous orderings of space [that resulted in] an entire micro-power concerned with the body" (Foucault 1981: 144–145). Specifically, these paintings reflect the ways in which biopower functioned in order to inscribe race in the caste system and other mechanisms of the state through the enforcement of various kinds of controls and surveillances.

Racial Essentialisation?

McWhorter (2004: 47) affirms that the concept of race has varied over time, and that the original connotations of the term were not initially biologicist. Early uses of the word simply implied a reference to familial or cultural lineage and were not imbued with the value judgements that would later characterise discourses of race. It was during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries that a major shift in discourse occurred. Following Bemasconi's reading of Kant's race theory, McWhorter (2004: 48) argues that in the eighteenth century the concept of race started to be associated to the debates surrounding polygenist and monogenist theories of human lineage. According to a polygenist theory of races, not all human beings would be descended from the biblical Adam and Eve and, therefore, the different races would be the product of numerous distinct acts of creation. Kant, in opposition to this view and defending the biblical account from Genesis, argued through a monogenist theory of races that human morphological variation was due to the effects of climate and lifestyle that over time contributed to the development of different racial traits.

The meanings associated to the concept shifted further with the classification of people into racial groups resulting in value categories being assigned to different groups. This change was the result of an attempt to inscribe race into a larger project that would describe the development of human beings as a species. Race became used in Enlightenment discourses in order to trace a line of 'development' of human civilisation (McWhorter 2004: 49). In this view, it was believed that racial types were markers of the different stages in human development, with the highest level of progress represented through the industrialised north-western white European. At the lowest level of development were the 'savage' native North American semi-nomads and the African bushmen who remained tool-less hunter-gatherers. Importantly, all the variants beneath the white European in this classificatory hierarchy were considered to be examples of arrested stages of human development:

> What remained was to study the "lower races", rank them in order of their level of development over against one another, and figure out what flaw in each of them had slowed or stopped their group's progress toward civilized perfection. Superior and inferior human types—races—became biological facts. (McWhorter 2004: 47–48)

It was this shift that gave racism its impetus. Racial classification, with the added adscription of value to different races, eventually resulted in racism in "its modern, 'biologising', statist form"; hence, a whole politics of settlement, social hierarchisation, family and marriage became "permanent interventions at the level of the body, conduct, health, and everyday life" (Foucault 1981: 149).

In this sense, the racial boundaries established through the caste system in New Spain were reaffirmed in *casta* paintings through the meticulous depiction of the physical characteristics of the subjects (Figure 3). Racial phenotypes were expressed pictorically through a focused attention on different colours of complexion

Figure 3: Miguel Cabrera, details from *casta* series, 1763

and eyes, and emphasised the different kinds of hair texture and particular facial features, among other things. In this manner, the varieties of skin tone, eye colour, hair texture, became the focus of intense scrutiny and observation. There was, in particular, a search for colour in order to express the varieties in skin tone according to the different racial mixings with specific colours of the palette assigned to the different races. The reddish undertones in Indian skins are contrasted against greenish backgrounds, pale Spaniard skins are depicted in light, delicate clothing, amber-brown undertones characterise the *mestizo* skin, and dark black profiles are set against a bright blue sky. This degree of observation and exercise of representational power was, in effect, a way of "construct[ing] racial identity through visual representation" (Katzew 2004: 5).

Racialist discourses also served very practical administrative and political functions in New Spain. The highlighting of differences between the castes responded, in many cases, to a tactic of divide and conquer. By controlling the systems of classification of the diverse peoples and playing up their differences against each other, the Spanish elites could guarantee their positions of power over the colony:

> But the notable discord and lack of affection that exists between the two groups [*castas* and Indians] is God's providence, because poorly inclined as they are, the day this disunion were to cease, they would annihilate the Spaniards who are least in number. (Contemporary observer, 1735, cited in Katzew 2004: 42)

By inventing and maintaining differences and hierarchies between the different castes, Spaniards managed to keep the upper hand in the governance of the colony, despite the fact that they were at a numerical disadvantage. In this sense, the real practical impact of the caste system and its representational technologies was made patent.

Importantly, the discourses of race in the American colonies were necessarily different from those in Europe. Given the intensive miscegenation that had taken place in New Spain from the early days of the conquest, the easy compartmentalisation of different racial groups became a convoluted matter. While the *casta* system was a way of dealing with these differences by attempting to impose a racial order on colonial society, the concept of *casta* was in itself a hybrid thing. As Carrera (2003: 83) has argued, while the word *casta* was used by 'pure-blooded' Spaniards to distinguish themselves from the racially mixed majority in New Spain, it was

also a concept that was associated to other means of political, economic, and social valorisation of the colonial subject. By the time these paintings were produced in New Spain, colonial society was still based on ethnic distinctions, but according to MacLachlan and Rodríguez (1980: 200, 217) it relied more and more on socioeconomic criteria in order to determine an individual's status. In this sense, ideal types or classificatory schemes were hard to apply to individuals according to racial criteria "because cultural, social and economic distinctions were as important as ethnicity in determining a person's identity" (MacLachlan and Rodríguez 1980: 200). Other forms of hierarchisation, such as the opposition between nobility (*hidalguía*) and commoners, were as determinant in establishing relations among colonial subjects.

This added dimension of valorisation in the caste system is perhaps best expressed through the concept of *calidad* ('quality'). While race was related to a series of inherited physical traits, as Katzew (2004) explains "the perception of economic position and social standing carried as much weight in the overall identification of a person as did appearance" (45). In fact, caste painting was as much about 'reputational' race as it was about phenotypical race. A person's *calidad* was, then, the combination of economic, social, cultural and racial factors that defined the worth of the individual in society. The extended degree to which miscegenation took place meant that the acculturation of both Indian and European populations had taken place from very early on in the formation of the colony. Further to the strategic interrelationships that were established between Indians and Spaniards, the society in which the offspring of such unions was raised was central to determining the caste that the child would occupy (MacLachlan and Rodríguez 1980: 198). So, while being biological mestizos, there were many children who were raised in a European milieu and were, therefore, considered white because of their social position.

Figure 4: José Joaquín Mangón, *Spaniard and Mestiza produces a Castiza*, Spaniard, c. 1770

Caste paintings were a way of visually controlling the racial and social limits between different sectors of colonial society. While racial traits are the central

determining factor for the categorisation of subjects in these pictures, they also portray the values, trades, activities and space ascribed to each group (Figure 4). For example, the occupations and trades made available to the different castes are related to the *calidad* of the subject. Spaniards tend to be portrayed in high social positions, in occupations related to the military, scholarly life or leisure, while more mixed castes are painted as street vendors or market sellers. This policing of the boundaries of race and *calidad* was further confirmed pictorically through the setting where the figures are typically located. In some cases, the 'whiter', more 'respectable' castes are represented in domestic interiors, while the lower *castas* are portrayed in public spaces such as the market or the street. This divide along the lines of private versus public spaces was a way of positioning the castes and fixing them spatially in their particular environments. As Carrera (2003: 101) argues, private spaces were a Spanish prerogative, while public settings indicated a condition of lower *calidad*. Another way of fixing the boundaries between the higher and lower castes was through the clothing they are painted in. Further to the recognition of the different castes through skin tone, eye colour and hair texture, clothes confirm the "social strata of the individuals depicted" (García Sáiz 1989: 38), with finer garments underscoring the more respectable *calidad* of the individual. In contrast, tattered clothes or nudity were considered a common problem among the popular classes and "were viewed not as the result of abject poverty but as yet another indication of plebeian depravity" (Carrera 2003: 119). Hence, race and *calidad* were interdependent categories that threaded through all aspects of colonial life.

Perhaps one of the most interesting aspects in which race and *calidad* become enmeshed is through the disciplinary control over the colonial subject's body. The paintings reflect a baroque representational codification of body language whereby the delicate, affected gestures of the subjects "make explicit the idea of display" (Katzew 2004: 91). Furthermore, the subtle gestures of the whiter castes reflect what Feder (2007) calls a "successful fashioning of the docile body [that] relies ultimately on the internalization of standards, rules and norms" (2). A hallmark of the desirable, docile, and cultivated colonial body, these pictures are an example of the disciplinary power deployed by individual subjects "who direct this power inward, applying it to their own bodies, their own selves" (Feder 2007: 2). Following existing discourses on the body and physiognomics at the period, the *hombre de bien* ('gentleman') enacted certain "external bodily characteristics as a system of signs representing the invisible inner character of masculine persons"; an ideal body was one "moderate and restrained in its gestures, the control of which is for those men who would be virtuous gentlemen" (Haidt cited in Carrera 2003: 131). Hence, the self-discipline and bodily restraint expressed by many of the figures in these paintings are signs of their unquestionable respectability and social standing.

In contrast, the bodies of the lower castes are undisciplined and out of control. Katzew (1993: 734) has located two variants in *casta* paintings for depicting a mixed-caste couple fighting. In the first variant, the couple pull at each other's hair while a child stands between them and attempts to stop the fight. In the second

variant set in a disorganised kitchen, a low caste woman lifts a kitchen object and threatens to hit the man. These typifications were frequently used in the *casta* genre in order to heighten the presumed violence of certain races in opposition to others. In the second variant, particularly, the black woman is represented as an aggressor while the Spaniard reacts like a victim (Katzew 1993: 734). Importantly, these images function in order to establish the difference between the 'pure-blooded' body of the white Spaniard and the fragmented, disorderly and chaotic body of the lower castes. Rather than enjoying the "placidity and harmony" (Katzew 1993: 734) of the high-class Spaniards, the black body lacks restraint, responds to temperamental impulses, and constitutes an imminent threat of violence. A metaphor for the body politic, the control and policing of these bodies within the space of the *casta* painting reflects the impulse to regulate real behaviours in colonial society.

In Carrera's view (2003: 17), these paintings function primarily as a way of controlling the ambivalence of ethnic reality in New Spain. Through this symbolic deployment, the disruption that miscegenation represented to colonial authority became delimited, ordered, and controlled. In a sense, the drive to organise colonial society according to value-driven hierarchies of race responded to what Bhabha (1994: 67) has theorised as the colonial tactic of 'anxious repetition'. In his work, Bhabha argues that most colonial projects base themselves on an understanding of the colonised subject as standing outside of Western culture and civilisation. However, through the civilising mission the external other becomes domesticated in a bid to "abolish [his] radical 'otherness"' (McLeod 2000: 53); in order to achieve this, the colonised subject has to be placed *inside* Western culture and civilisation. Consequently the subject position of the colonial other is "split by the contradictory positioning of the colonised simultaneously inside and outside Western knowledge" (McLeod 2000: 53). In order to control this ambivalence, particular tactics are put in motion in order to permanently fix the other. Through the repetitive submission of the colonial other to categories, charts, classifications, and hierarchies, attempts are put forward in order to position the other as a fixed node in colonial discourse so that he can become an object of colonial knowledge. Caste paintings are one example of such tactics. By exercising the representational power to produce and reify racial categories, *casta* images are an attempt to stabilise and fix the racial mobility and ambiguity that characterised the colonial subjects of New Spain.

In a sense, these paintings are a sort of "diagnostic gaze that provides anonymous and accurate observation of *casta* appearances and circumstances" (Carrera 2003: 83) put into place in order to properly distinguish the Spaniard from *casta* mixes. By acting as a catalogue of racial and social values, the images function as a tool to aid in the surveillance of the dynamic and constantly changing colonial population. Carrera (2003) has developed this idea further, by focusing on the concept of *surveillance* as theorised by Foucault and applying it to the genre of caste paintings. She argues that the visual strategy of surveillance, patent in the pictures, is not just about looking but that instead "it constructs the very object of its observation: hybrid bodies, that is, people of mixed blood" (Carrera 2003: 13).

Hence, the colonial gaze functions as a visual totality that deploys surveillance as a strategy for the production of hierarchies and the differentiation between ethnic groups in order to overcome the ambiguity of miscegenation. By submitting the colonial other to constant surveillance, shifts in behaviours and appearances can be located and a 'diagnostic gaze' can be mobilised in order to better be able to distinguish the Spaniard from the *casta*. In other words, the form of surveillance present in the paintings responds to a strategy of control that seeks to overcome ambiguity and locate sites of hybridity in order to fix them as objects of colonial power/knowledge.

Figure 5: Anon., *2. From Black and Indian, a Lobo. Black 1. Indian 2. Lobo 3.*, c. 1780

In this context, it is important to remember that these pictures were, in all likelihood, produced by artists and artisans catering to the colonial elites. Further to this, the colonial-panoptic gaze present in the *casta* paintings functions as "an ever-penetrating gaze that takes the viewer into the workshops of cobblers and cigarette makers, into private domestic scenes and moments" (Carrera 2003: 101), thus giving the elites privileged access into places rarely visited by them in everyday life (Figure 5). In Katzew's words, the paintings were a commodity "that satisfied Europeans' urge to consume 'alterity' from the comfort of their armchairs" (2004: 168). By responding to a degree of representational power held by the elites, both in commissioning these series and as a likely minority that had access to their viewing, it can be surmised that—in most cases—this was a genre that catered to elite interests in the colony and potentially in Europe as well. The capacity for these paintings to penetrate into the furthest crevices of colonial society was the ultimate demonstration of its power.

Deviance

Not only did these paintings provide colonial elites with privileged access into the everyday lives of all the different sectors of the colonial population, they also served to establish parameters of 'normalcy' and 'degeneracy' with regards to the racial varieties in New Spain. At the centre of such images are issues of a standardisation of the population and the establishment of a colonial social 'norm'. As Feder (2007: 65) argues, the founding and legitimisation of a concept of *normalcy* necessarily derives from the contrast established between 'the norm' and a supposed degeneracy with regards to the norm. It is important to highlight that normalisation is, at its core, a powerful construction that *produces* difference in order to gain authority. In many cases, the establishment of the 'norm' was discursively determined by the statistical averages of biological factors. Particularly during the eighteenth century, biopower was no longer as strongly centred on the "control of crime or illness" as it hade been previously, but instead focused on the biologicist "control of the abnormal individual [who was] conceptualized in racist terms" (Foucault cited in Feder 2007: 5). Through the representational controls established in the caste paintings, the social acceptability of certain mixtures, but not of others, becomes visibly regimented. Caste images act as a type of surveillance technology that serves to produce a norm along which the 'degeneracy' of colonial miscegenation can be measured and prescribed.

The role that these paintings played in the effective normalisation of colonial society was central. For Katzew (2004), the emphasis on social and racial differences in *casta* paintings did not directly imply a harmonious coexistence of the various mixes, but served instead "to remind both colonial subjects and the Spanish Crown that Mexico was still an ordered hierarchical society in which each group occupied a specific socioeconomic niche defined largely by race" (40). Hence, these paintings typified the standard or norm by which different sectors in colonial society should conduct themselves. As McWhorter (2004) has highlighted, "racial identities would have to have emerged as a result of normalising power that takes people to be essentially temporal, developmental creatures and seeks to describe their development in statistical terms" (45). In other words, the 'norm' established in New Spain was prescriptive and quantifiable through representational techniques such as this genre of painting. Furthermore, the 'degeneracy' that was assumed to derive from the mixings of different races was equally quantifiable and it resulted from the implementation of such identity categories as "a way of classifying people as deviant—either as developing in some wrong way or as having ceased to develop at all at some early stage" (McWhorter 2004: 45).

This discursive link that joined social worth, deviance and race was correspondingly expressed in this pictorial genre (Figure 6). Mulattos, for example, were not merely recognisable through their physical traits, but were also related "to debased social and moral traits" (Carrera 2003: 6), resulting in a diagnostics of moral worth evidenced through the correspondence established between 'degeneracy' and particular racial traits. Hence, from the point of view of colonial elites

Figure 6: Miguel Cabrera, *From Mestizo and Indian, Coyote*, 1763

in New Spain, the immediate results of miscegenation were “the vast number of thefts, the supposed idleness of the masses, excessive drinking, abandonment of agriculture, concubinage, and so forth” (Katzew 2004: 60). Racial traits were, effectively, a visual marker that reified the assumed difference between *gente decente* (‘decent people’) and /emphgente vulgar (‘common people’) (Carrera 2003: 42). Importantly, the identification between ‘degeneracy’ and certain racial traits was considered endemic, permanent and inevitable. As Feder (2007) clarifies, such a viewpoint would imply that the violence of certain races “cannot be understood as a temporary danger but is a ‘permanent factor’ [that is] biologically determined” (5). Again, through these kinds of discourses the colonial other became the object of observation in an attempt to fix the colonial subject’s position within society.

Heterotopia

Even as recently as 1989, the genre of *casta* paintings has been romanticised as the “product of a coming together, an interrelation of heterogeneous groups, i.e. the self-portrait of a society” (Fernández 1989: 20). However, as this article has demonstrated, a more complex approach to the genre is required. Following Foucault’s concepts of *utopia* and *heterotopia*, caste paintings can be considered a visual discursive space for negotiating difference and consolidating representational power. In Foucault’s work, utopias are theorised as sites with no real place that hold a relation of “direct or inverted analogy with the real space of Society” (1967). In other words, utopias are unreal spaces that mirror back a potential, perfected form

of society. Heterotopias, on the other hand, are real places configured in the very founding of a given society. They are counter-sites where utopias are effectively enacted and "simultaneously represented, contested and inverted" (Foucault 1967). In this context, the function of heterotopias is twofold. On the one hand, they can function as a space of illusion that exposes the very real spaces that constitute it. Or their role can be to create a space that is 'other', another real space "as perfect, as meticulous, as well-arranged as ours is messy, ill constructed and jumbled" (Foucault 1967).

Caste paintings are, in this sense, a symbolic space for the effective enactment and management of colonial utopias and heterotopias. In this space, the 'ideal' society is represented. Yet this genre is also the space where the very real hybridity and perceived disorder of a miscegenated colonial society comes under representational control, even if only symbolically. While "demographic conditions in metropolitan New Spain were erupting and devolving into more and more disorder", colonial elites in all likelihood produced these images to "emphasise and promote ideals of order, orderliness and productivity, law and management" (Carrera 2003: xvii). They became the pictorial space where utopias were put into action and where society became meticulously ordered according to colonial interests. The genre was one among other representational technologies of colonial power mobilised in order to control a miscegenated society perceived to be unstable and threatening. *Casta* paintings, then, oscillate between the utopian vision they lay claim to and the realities of the heterogeneous amorphous colonial body.

The decline of this genre of painting began in the early 19th century with the Mexican War of Independence from Spain. Among other things, the paintings became obsolete, as a hierarchically structured society of *castas* became rejected by the new ruling Creole elites, and people's institutional classification according to their ethnic traits became legally forbidden (Katzew 2004: 37). This followed the need to concretise a new sense of national identity based on cultural cohesion through the championing of the *mestizo* as a figure representing the new Mexican subject. The *mestizo*, classified in *casta* painting as the offspring of Spaniard and Indian, was the ultimate representative of miscegenation in the colony and in the emerging nation. Yet this figure was not only a hybrid in the biological sense; the mestizo was also the product of a cultural miscegenation and as such this figure became championed as a symbol of the incorporation of all the aspects of native society and Spanish traditions in order to provide the foundations for Mexican society (MacLachlan and Rodríguez 1980: 209). Moreover, the rapid forging of a mestizo culture was the result of a much needed replacement of the caste system by one based on class (MacLachlan and Rodríguez 1980: 223). The idea of a society hierarchised according to racial categories was slowly replaced by the implementation of a society divided along the lines of class in order to best serve national cohesion. In this manner, the idea that racial categories had once organised and determined people's circumstances in Mexico became whitewashed. In the independent nation of Mexico, all its citizens were *mestizos*. This myth continues in Mexico to this day.

Yet the discussion over race in Mexico is far from being exhausted. The myth that Mexico is a country solely structured according to class continues to prevail in vast sectors of the population. The stock response to the question of racism in contemporary Mexico tends to be: "No, we're not a racist society, we're a classist society". In spite of this perception, race does continue to play an important—if not central—role in Mexican society. As Ortiz Pinchetti (2009) points out, Mexico continues to be a society divided along the lines of race, with the upper 'whiter' 10% of the population occupying the main posts on the political and entrepreneurial stage. The marginalisation of indigenous peoples continues to occur along the lines of race, and in the 'mestizo' sector, which makes up the bulk of the population, the link between ethnic traits and the subject's *calidad* continues to be established on an everyday basis.

In recent times, the matter of race has been revived by the ruling elite and used in order to discredit dissenting political and social movements, particularly in the wake of the Zapatista movement and the 2006 presidential elections. In the case of the Zapatista movement, age-old paternalistic discourses resurfaced and the Indian was represented under many of the same terms as they were in the caste system: as legal minors, people without reason, and wards of the state. During the 2006 presidential elections, the leftist candidate's ethnic and class-based traits were highlighted by his opponents in order to diminish his appeal among an aspirational mestizo middle-class intent on upwardly-bound social mobility. The tactic of 'divide and conquer' along racial lines continues to be put into practice, and it has very real political implications.

However, it would be simplistic to import Anglo-Western conceptualisations of race and racism to explain the racial divide in contemporary Mexico. Racism in Mexico eschews the biologicist nineteenth century aspects of racial discourses and is, instead, still very much a product of the colonial eighteenth century concept of *calidad*. In a Mexican context, race and social standing form part of a dyad that problematises the simple discrimination of peoples along deterministic ethnic lines. Race is not completely understood as something endemic, permanent or inevitable. The quality of the individual, his level of education, his social standing, his cultural upbringing; all these factors contribute to the ranking of the Mexican subject in a hierarchy of values. Moreover, the social mobility and miscegenation that characterises Mexican society allows for a more fluid understanding of race compared to the many discourses on race that characterise Anglo-Western societies. In this sense, 'race' functions as a sliding signifier whose "meaning shifts whenever it is called upon to perform a different one of its many functions in the systems of power and knowledge of which it is a part" (McWhorter 2004: 51). In a Mexican context, race is part of a couplet twinned with the individual's perceived social standing.

Because race and racism in Mexico do not follow the same dynamics of race and racism in Anglo-Western contexts, most Mexicans will deny being racist and instead highlight inequalities along economic lines. In Mexico, the economic polarisation between the rich and poor is so extreme that it is immediately more visi-

ble to the common citizen. However, race and class hold a dialectic relationship in Mexican society. Perhaps it would be more useful, then, to understand race as "the dominant metaphor to express social inequality" (Katzew 2004: 53). In the end, as long as race is constructed as a non-issue in Mexico, "the Creole myth of equality and racial fraternity [will only benefit] the domination" (Ortiz Pinchetti 2009) of one group over another.

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