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Migdalia Arcila-Valenzuela

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VISUALIZING TAXONOMIC REASONING

Casta Paintings and the Hierarchization of Bodily Differences

MIGDALIA ARCILA-VALENZUELA
Cornell University

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Abstract

This article delves into the intricacies of casta paintings, particularly focusing on the anonymous eighteenth-century work, *Las Castas*, produced in Mexico. *Las Castas* serves as a testimony to the complexities of colonial racialized subjectivity. More precisely, *Las Castas* presents us with a depiction of mestizaje as a rigid system of social stratification, with black individuals occupying a predetermined and inescapable role. The article introduces the *irreversibility thesis*, challenging prevailing notions of the race mixing process (*mestizaje*) in colonial Latin America, and asserting that being of black descent, contrary to being of indigenous and Spaniard descent (*mestizo*), was considered an irreversible stain determining one's social position within the mestizaje process. This article explores the genre of casta paintings as a colonial artifact and highlights the complexities inherent in colonial subjectivity through a taxonomic visual epistemology lens.

Keywords: *Mestizaje*, visual epistemology, casta paintings, colonial Latin America

Casta paintings were produced as a visual reconstruction of the mixing race (*mestizaje*) process that took place after the discovery of the New World. Most of the paintings consist of a set of sixteen scenes where there is a depiction of a woman, a man, and their children. Each scene is labeled with a description of the casta[1] of the mother, the father, and the resulting casta of the children.[2] Most of the paintings portray the three human figures wearing clothes that are supposed to be characteristic of each casta and also include different objects such as musical instruments, kitchenware, food, and other implements associated with specific occupations. Some of the paintings present the sixteen scenes next to each other on a single surface, as in the case of *Las Castas* (figure 1) painting, but there are other series that are composed by individual canvases. Even though there has been extensive research on this kind of artistic production,[3] one of the main difficulties in the study of casta paintings is precisely to put back together the sets that are disassembled. Additionally, some of the sets that are painted on a single surface are not signed and therefore their attribution and conditions of production remain unknown (Katzew 2004, 3).

In this article, I focus on *Las Castas* (figure 1), an anonymous eighteenth-century painting produced in Mexico. In particular, I will delve into the tension between the visual representation of the sixteen castas and the nomenclature used to identify each one in the painting *Las Castas*. On the one hand, if we focus on the visual representation of the bodies that compose each scene, we will not notice explicit physical features that would allow for a sharp classification of human differences. Besides their clothes and the objects they are interacting with, they do not seem to differ from each other in any other significant way. However, on the other hand, the labels that identify each of the castas present us with a very clear classification of people's differences and a rigid system of casta stratification, a system in which black people occupy a low and inescapable role. More precisely, in this article I argue that *Las Castas* represents how the introduction of "black blood" in the process of *mestizaje* is marked by a rigid concept of bodily differences and of the social status granted on the basis of such differences. Furthermore, in this article I present the *irreversibility thesis*, i.e., that contrary to what some scholars have argued, being of black descent was considered an irreversible stain that determined one's social position.

The article is structured as follows. In the first section, I will provide the historical context for the production of casta paintings. Next, in section 2, I will present Rebecca Earle's account of casta paintings to show how in her account she misses the tension I identify between visual representation

FIGURE 1
Las castas. Casta painting showing sixteen racial groupings. Anonymous, eighteenth century, oil on canvas, Museo Nacional del Virreinato, Tepotzotlán, Mexico. *Source:* https://www.artres.com/CS.aspx?VP3=DamView&VBID=2UN94S6DY3O93&SMLS=1&RW=1440&RH=680.

and nomenclature. In section 3, I present and explain how the tension is evident in the particular case of how black people are treated within the mestizaje process and therefore within the casta system. Finally, in section 4,

I present in detail how *Las Castas*, understood within the framework of taxonomic visual epistemology, serves as evidence of the complexities characteristic of colonial subjectivity.

1. Casta Paintings

In her book *Casta Paintings* (2004), Ilona Katzew asserts that casta paintings were produced for export to Europe as souvenirs and, as such, were mainly commissioned by Spanish functionaries on their way back to Europe.[4] In this sense, we can see how casta paintings are a portrait of Mexican society that is meant to be seen by Europeans and especially by the Spanish Crown (Katzew 2004, 1). Another important factor in understanding the context of the production of casta paintings is that by the seventeenth century, Mexico City was already a large and culturally complex society comparable to Madrid, London, and Paris (Katzew 2004, 1). Furthermore, Mexico enjoyed a remarkable reputation because of its geographical importance within the global economy; the city was in a privileged position between the East-West commerce route.

Despite its global relevance and the fact that by the 1640s Mexico was economically independent from Spain, the local creoles could not obtain the respect and recognition from the peninsular Spaniards that they were longing for. The concept of "casta" plays an important role within this dispute between creoles and peninsular Spaniards. In this respect, Katzew (2004) quotes the declaration of the prelate and archbishop of Mexico (1766–72) Francisco Antonio Lorenzana, according to whom:

> Two worlds God has placed in the hands of our Catholic Monarch, and the New does not resemble the Old, not in its climate, its costumes, or its inhabitants . . . In the Old Spain only a single caste of men is recognized, in the New many and different.[5]

The term "casta" designated differences in race and social status. Technically the term was meant to apply to all members of the New World, but it ended up being used by Spaniards and Creoles to differentiate themselves from racially mixed people (Katzew 2004).

Within the first stages of the race mixing process, the Spanish Crown reluctantly recognized Spanish-Indian unions but only if the union was legalized by marriage. However, since the majority of the unions occurred

outside the institution of marriage, the term "mestizo" started to be used to refer to those who did not belong to purely indigenous or Spanish communities. In other words, the term "mestizo" was used as a mark of illegitimate birth, and as such, mestizos were excluded from positions of political or economic power (Cope 1994, 14–15; Mörner 1967, 55). In fact, by the second half of the sixteenth century, the mestizos had very restricted rights. For instance, they were forbidden from "employing Indian labor, bearing arms without proper permission, claiming Indian nobility status, working as public notaries and being ordained priests" (Rosenblat 1954, 151).

The political situation of the New Spain was delicate since the discontent of the people of mixed race was increasing exponentially, and they could have easily outnumbered Spaniards in case of a rebellion. A context of political agitation coincided with the increased complexity of racial intermarriage. Within these circumstances, the *sistema de castas* (casta system) served as an ideological instrument for the preservation of power and prestige of (white) Spaniards and the Creole elite. However, the sistema de castas was far from being a mere subterfuge or capricious invention; on the contrary, it was developed "from the medieval, European concept of the natural hierarchy of man and, as such, held definite biological overtones" (Katzew 2004, 40–41). In other words, at the core of the sistema de castas we find the the Spaniards and creoles' concern for avoiding "tainted" blood.

The terms used to designate the different castas can be found in official documents such as: "codifications of colonial law, parish records, Inquisition trials, criminal cases, censuses, and the Relaciones Geográficas[6] (geographical accounts) commissioned regularly by the crown from colonial authorities since the sixteenth century" (Katzew 2004, 43).

The specific words used to designate each casta were much more than a mere description of racial differences in terms of skin color, eye color, and complexion. For instance, while the literal meaning of the word *mestizo*, referring to the children of a Spaniard and an Indian, was "of mixed race,"[7] the word *mulato* (mulatto) used mainly for the children of Spaniards and Africans, was meant as a derogatory term. *Mulato* was a direct reference to the word *mula* (mule) since the offspring of Spaniards and Africans "was deemed uglier and stranger" (de Solorzano Pereira 1648). However, later in the eighteenth century, when the presence of Africans was urgently required for military activities, the term *mulato* was replaced by *moreno* (dark-colored) and *pardo* (Brown) to minimize the pejorative connotations of the term *mulato*.

The racial classification that was supposed to be portrayed in the sistema de castas was incredibly complex in part because of the difficulties involved in drawing clear-cut distinctions among the people of the New World. In this respect, the chronicler Alonso Ovalle asserts about mestizos and Spaniards that: "there is no difference, not in the feature of the face, nor in the form of the body or in the way of speaking and of pronunciation" (cited in Mörner 1967, 68). As mentioned earlier in this section, this difficulty in classifying and distinguishing people was a great concern for the Spanish Crown since it made it very difficult to exercise control over the colony and justify the social stratification that was necessary for the Crown to exert its power. It is precisely in this context where the visual representation of the casta system through the casta paintings becomes an important instrument for establishing and maintaining social hierarchies based on physical and genealogical differences.

2. Taxonomic Anxieties and the Fluidity of the Body

According to Isidro Moreno Navarro (1973), the Spanish Enlightenment was characterized by the scientific impulse of classification, which was a direct influence of the Swedish naturalist Carl Linnaeus (1707–78). Francisco de las Barra de Aragón, the Spanish anthropologist, was also of the same opinion. According to de las Barras de Aragón, "the creation of [casta paintings] was motivated by a spirit of scientific inquiry at the time when Spain was conducting an in-depth study of its possessions and was commissioning scientists to travel its domains" (Haverkamp-Begemann 1987, 511). Furthermore, Katzew points out how casta paintings were even used as scientific documents in the early twentieth century. For example, she mentions Raphaël Blanchard's commentary about casta paintings in 1908, according to which these paintings were "documents of the utmost ethnographic significance in terms of the settings, trades, costumes, instruments, and accoutrements depicted. They are also important socially because they provide us with the names of the different types of mixed races" (2004, 6).

However, the scientific inquiries based on these paintings did not achieve great success given that the strict classification and stratification of the sixteen castas did not map onto the complex and diverse reality of the colonial life. Additionally, Katzew (2004) asserts that there are reasons to deny the hypothesis that casta paintings are the direct product

of the Spanish Enlightenment. One of the main reasons is that the first casta paintings precede Linnaeus's *Systema Naturae* (1735) by at least two decades, suggesting that the interest and production of these types of paintings might have started in medieval times.

Regardless of the philosophical mindset that could have motivated the production of casta paintings, what is obvious is the clear intention to classify, in very specific terms, the population of the New World. This classificatory intention is characteristic of different approaches to not only the population but also to the territory of the New World. For instance, Rebecca Earle (2016) introduces the example of the Ecuadorian Pedro Franco Dávila and his attempt to classify an array of natural objects into a coherent taxonomy.[8] Speaking about his classificatory task, Franco Dávila says:

> 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. (Cited in Earle 2016, 427)

According to Earle (2016), this quote from Franco Dávila resembles the challenges that the Spaniards faced in their attempts to establish a casta system. There is an extensive literature[9] about the difficulties in setting an ordered and well-structured use of each of the casta terms, i.e., there is a lack of consistency in how the terms to designate each social racial group were used in official documents (Earle 2016, 428–29). Evidence of this is provided, for instance, by a study about late eighteenth-century male heads of households in Valparaiso, Chile. According to this study, in a period of twelve years, approximately half of the males were named with different casta terms in several official documents (Earle 2016, 432).

Although it is widely accepted that the casta system was quite flexible in its implementation, there is a remaining question that, according to Earle (2016), has not received appropriate attention. According to Earle (2016), there is an unresolved tension "between the well-documented flexibility of colonial casta categories and the manifestly genealogical nature of caste itself" (431–32). In other words, there is a tension between a category that alludes to an embodied feature—qua genealogical feature—but at the same time is widely used in a flexible and unstructured way. The genealogical

nature of the castas is clear from the labels that accompanied each of the family scenes in the casta paintings. Each of the casta labels has the following form: from a Y man and a X woman a Z *is born*.[10] Therefore, we cannot reduce the notion of casta to a mere subterfuge to designate socioeconomic differences since, as Earle (2016) rightly asserts, "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" (432).

According to Earle (2016), the emphasis on genealogy and physical appearance is to be contrasted with two other central features of the notion of casta: (1) reputation, and (2) performativity. In the first place, establishing genealogies as a fixed system of kinship relationships was extremely difficult in the New World during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. This was partly because of a lack of genealogical information, and because of "racial drift" (Rappaport 2014, 38–39), understood as the movement of individuals from one casta to another during their lifetimes. Given the difficulties in establishing a blood-based lineage, on many occasions, genealogical relationships were formulated in terms of reputation. For this reason, witnesses played a major role in disputes about casta attributions. Because of this reliance on testimony and social corroboration, Earle (2016) says that "in a sense an individual's ancestry was often provisional because it was based on what others believed" (433). Interestingly, according to Earle (2016), not even blood-purity certificates issued by the inquisition were immune to the influence of reputation. She indicates that those certificates "did not remain valid indefinitely, a tacit acknowledgment that an individual's ancestry, being reliant on reputation, was always provisional" (433–34).

Besides the difficulties in drawing genealogical relationships in terms of biological lineage, Earle (2016) points out another wrinkle to the problem of categorizing people within the casta system, namely that there was no certain and structured way to categorize someone's appearance. This can be evidenced in the variety of details used in official travel documents during the colonial period. Travel documents contain very detailed descriptions of scars, moles, and other kinds of skin marks. Moreover, Earle (2016) says that "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" (334). Contrary to contemporary conceptions of race, skin color

was among the least useful physical characteristics to identify people. The references to people's skin color are ambiguous, e.g., "she is of Moorish color" or "she is brownish" (Rappaport 2014, 198).

Given the difficulties in pinning down someone's lineage and in obtaining precise descriptions of physical appearance to distinguish one group from another, Joanne Rappaport (2014) asserts that describing people's clothes was a far more useful strategy to classify them than describing their physical features. This performatic aspect of the castas is one of the most salient features of the genre of casta paintings. Each of the scenes that represents the different castas contain detailed depictions of people's clothes and of the types of food that were characteristic of their particular social positions. Some of the paintings portray characters wearing garments, such as the indigenous huipil, as a mark of indigeneity (see figures 2 and 3) so that any woman wearing a huipil was an *india* (Indigenous woman). Additionally, it is important to notice that in some of the scenes both parents and the child are performing very specific tasks such as serving *pulque*

FIGURE 2
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. *Source:* https://www.brooklynmuseum.org/opencollection/objects/207338.

FIGURE 3
Cabrera, Miguel. *De lobo y india nace Albarazado*, 1763, oil on canvas, *Source:* https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Castas_11albarazado_max.jpg.

(agave beer) (see figure 2). Thus, according to Earle (2016), even though casta paintings do not capture the actual complexity of the casta system as it was implemented in the eighteenth century, they do successfully represent the contextual and performatic import of the castas.

Additionally, Earle (2016) affirms that "corporeal identity in the early modern era was inherently mutable" (437). The medical framework that explains this notion of mutability is humoral theory, the idea that the body is composed of four kinds of humors, which, depending on their balance and distribution across the body, determine both physical complexion and temperament. Humoral theory is fundamentally a theory of correspondence: the four canonical humors (blood, phlegm, yellow bile, and black bile) correspond to the four fundamental qualities (hot, cold, wet, dry), which also correspond to the four elements (earth, air, fire, water). Furthermore, the proportion in which those humors are distributed in the body correspond to a character type: sanguine, phlegmatic, bilious, melancholic.[11]

This system of correspondence relies on a conception of a body that is vulnerable in many ways to environmental changes. For instance, Earle (2014) brings up Christopher Columbus's 1493 letters in which he revealed

his concern regarding how the food, water, and climate of the New World were inimical to the Spaniard's constitution. According to Earle (2014), colonizers were fearful and anxious that "living in an unfamiliar environment, and among unfamiliar peoples, might alter not only the customs but also the very bodies of the settlers" (3–4). Furthermore, within the humoral framework,[12] altering the bodies also implied the possibility of altering characterological features. This is why, according to Earle (2014), "in the view of colonists, bodies were porous and mutable, in constant dialogue with their surrounding environment. They were very far from stable" (41).

Both the pervasive worry about transformation and the idea of an open, fluid, and vulnerable embodiment can be evidenced in casta paintings. The richness of the paintings in terms of clothing, foods, and the settings where the castas are depicted bear witness to the fluidity and contextual dependency of the casta system. However, as I will explain in the following two sections, Earle is overstating the extent to which the casta system is fluid and flexible. That the representation of castas necessitates the use of performatic elements such as clothes or foods means that the category is socially constructed, but this does not mean that the category is less rigid than if it were purely determined by biological markers. Although the castas were not well-defined biological categories, the system that established and reinforced them was less fluid than Earle suggests.

3. Blackness and the Worry of Contamination

As we can see in *Las Castas* (figure 1), the casta system is the result of the different possible combinations among Spanish (*Español*), indigenous (*Indio*), and black (*Moro*) peoples. These three castas appear in the first horizontal subdivision of *Las Castas* (figure 1) and give rise to the subsequent castas. However, those three groups play very different roles in the process of mestizaje since, as Katzew (2004) asserts, "being identify [*sic*] as black or as a descendant from blacks in the sistema de castas was tantamount to being a social pariah" (46). There were two main reasons why blackness was an inherent social disadvantage. First, being black or being associated with a black ancestor was interpreted as a sign of a Muslim or Jewish background. Second, being black was associated with being a descendant from slaves. Thus, blackness was a mark of an atavistic taint from which Spaniards desperately wanted to distance themselves.

As I mentioned in section I, even though, by the eighteenth century, Mexico was economically independent from Spain and it was in many aspects a city comparable with London or Paris, the Spaniards born in the Americas yearned for respect and recognition from the peninsular Spaniards. This is the context where the casta system served as a demarcation, as a way to draw dividing lines among different people. This process was relevant because as Katzew (2004) indicates, "elite creoles came up (in part unconsciously) with the *sistema de castas* as a way of avoiding being associated with 'tainted' blood, and because they needed a method of social categorization that would reinforce their sense of exclusivity" (24).

Although Spaniards tried to differentiate themselves both from indigenous people and blacks, the ways in which those groups were categorized and understood within the mestizaje process were quite different. Blackness was associated with an atavistic taint because unlike indigenous people, who were considered neophytes, Africans were regarded as corrupt since ancient times. One of the main questions that guided many philosophical and scientific inquiries in the eighteenth century was the origin of black skin. Contrary to what Earle (2014, 2016) argues, humoral theory was just one among many other theories, and not the most popular one for explaining the origin of black skin. In fact, climatic explanations faced serious criticisms because, by the eighteenth century, Spaniards had been in America and Asia for almost three centuries and their progeny were still white. Among the contested theories circulating in the New World were the damnation theory and the mother's imagination theory. According to the former, black Africans were descendants of Ham, the youngest son of Noah. Ham's descendants were condemned to eternal servitude because Ham exposed Noah's nudity to his own brothers while their father was sleeping. As Katzew (2004) affirms, "the punishment dealt by the Patriarch Noah was in fact a shift in the complexion of Canaan and his descendants from white to black" (24–25). This theory was embraced in Mexico by Fray Juan de Torquemada, who was an important critic of the climatic explanation.[13]

On the other hand, the mother's imagination theory stresses the special powers that a mother's imagination has over her child's complexion, especially skin color. According to this theory, the first black person was the product of a mother who fixated her attention on a black object while she was pregnant (Appelbaum, Macpherson, and Rosemblatt 2003). One of the main advocates of this theory in the New World was the Jesuit missionary José Gumilla. In his natural history of Orinoco, *El Orinoco ilustrado y defendido, historia natural, civil, y geográfica de este gran río y de sus caudalosas*

vertientes (1741), Gumilla rejects the biblical story about eternal damnation of black people, arguing that it was a categorical mistake to exclusively associate blackness with slavery since there have been white slaves throughout history as well.

Regardless of the precise origin story of blackness, "being remotely associated with black ancestry in Mexico, as elsewhere in Spanish America, was everyone's worst nightmare with respect to socio-racial standing" (Katzew 2004, 60). Therefore, contrary to what Earle (2014, 2016) suggests, in coming into contact with black people, the Spaniards' worry was not only about potential transformations but also about contamination and degradation. In other words, they worried about some transformations more than others because some transformations were regarded as irreversible. More precisely, there was an intense fear of being regarded as black, and then being placed at the bottom of the casta system, a place from which it was nearly impossible to escape.[14] Although Earle (2014, 2016) rightly points out that what it meant to be black was largely constituted by social performativity, she wrongly equates social construction with fluidity and flexibility. That there was not a clear sense of the biological underpinning of black skin does not mean that the social category of "black" or "mulato" had loose boundaries or that it was easy to move from one casta to another. This rigidity of the social structures can be evidenced in the furious opposition triggered by some attempts at social mobility in the New World.

For instance, Ann Twinam (2015) recounts some cases of black people who appealed to legal strategies for obtaining the status of whiteness. These kinds of petitions were received with contempt as in the case of Bernando Ramírez, a black man from Guatemala, who in 1783 submitted a "whiteness" petition that was deemed "repugnant or at least excessive" since, according to Guatemala's council, Ramírez "can neither disguise nor dismiss his *infected* quality [cualidad] even if he tries" (Twinam 2015, 141; emphasis added). Likewise, the Caracas city council raised a complaint about the legal procedure to obtain the status of "whiteness" because "*pardos* were ambitious for honors and to equal themselves with the whites in spite of that inferior class in which *the Author of their naturaleza has placed them*" (Twinam 2015, 152; emphasis added). Furthermore, even after the conferral of white status, people were still subjected to segregation:

> Even after the Crown whitened Diego Mexias Bejarano's son, university officials justified their refusal to permit him to matriculate and study for the priesthood. They noted that "even though Mexias

> and his son have arrived at the condition of being free, they descend precisely from black *bozales* (recently arrived slaves) from Africa" and so they carried with them the "despicable note" of those linked to slavery. (Twinam 2015, 152–53)

Thus, regardless of the theoretical framework used to justify the inferior nature of black people, there was a constant reinforcement of exclusion and segregation that kept black people and their descendants at the bottom of the casta system.

The idea of blackness as an unredeemable stain has been previously explored in the literature (e.g., Martínez 2004; Gallegos-Ordorica 2018) in particular in discussions about *pureza de sangre* (blood purity). For the Spanish Crown, "impurity" was synonymous with being a "new" or recently converted Christian (Martínez 2004). Although this was the case for both indigenous people and Africans, the Spaniards regarded natives as redeemable through mestizaje, i.e., natives were "savable" through a whitening process. Also, in her discussion of the trial and execution of thirty-five blacks and mulatos in 1612 in Mexico City, Martínez (2004) points out that the disparity of treatment between the natives and the Africans responded not only to concerns of religious "purity," but also:

> Another factor that made the status of blacks in the Spanish colonial world problematic was their foreignness, or rather, their African ancestral origins, which within Spanish political theory meant that, unlike the "natives" (*naturales*), they had no natural love for the territories that now belonged to the crown of Castile and were therefore more likely to side with Spain's enemies. (Martínez 2004, 489)

It is important to note that using this kind of justificatory discourses to exclude black people in Mexico and other parts of the Americas is a prevalent issue even today. Gallegos-Ordorica (2018) mentions how Afro Mexicans are often denied their own national identity as Mexicans:

> Mexicans who exhibit visible phenotypical markers associated with Afro-descendant populations often fail to be recognized as Mexicans by their own countrymen despite providing testimony about their national identity . . . In particular, when Afro-Mexicans (who traditionally live in isolated and impoverished rural communities in

> coastal states such as Guerrero, Oaxaca, and Veracruz) venture outside their communities, Mexican civil authorities often mistake them with undocumented Caribbean or Central American immigrants. (Gallegos-Ordorica 2018, 36)

The attempt to erase Afro Mexican identity is not just another instance of contemporary racism, but it comes as a result of the mestizaje ideology portrayed in the casta paintings. As Gallegos-Ordorica affirms, the common assumption that "all Mexicans are mestizos" plays into the colonial project of whitening the natives and excluding the Africans.

4. Las Castas: Unidirectionality, Degradation, and the Irreversibility Thesis

Besides the social practices that served as evidence to the rigidity of the casta system, casta paintings are also a testament to the unyielding imposition of an inferiority status on African people. In this section, my aim is to show that a close look at some of the casta paintings will show further evidence of this rigidity. In particular, I will focus on the anonymous eighteenth-century painting called *Las Castas* (figure 1).

There are three main aspects in which this painting is different from Miguel Cabrera's series (figure 3), one of the most famous of the casta paintings series and the one that Rebecca Earle uses almost exclusively in her analysis of the genre. First, *Las Castas* is a vertical panel where there are sixteen scenes numbered in consecutive order. Second, unlike Cabrera's, the scenes represented in this painting lack any background that could give us information about where the scene takes place. Furthermore, the three characters in each scene in *Las Castas* are not performing any particular activity, unlike, for example, in figure 2, where the family is serving pulque. Third, the numbers and labels are particularly salient in this painting precisely because the characters are contrasted with a monotone background, and they are not performing any activity. Moreover, the labels, organized in six horizontal panels, play an important role in the visual organization and legibility of the painting.

As has been noted by other scholars (e.g., Bleichmar 2012), the visual structure of the painting resembles those of the botanical illustrations commissioned by the Spanish empire between the late eighteenth and the early nineteenth centuries. According to Bleichmar (2012):

> Visual appetite came to characterize a Hispanic way of knowing the empire. The eighteenth century natural history expeditions were but a portion of a much larger project of making the empire visible in order to know and exploit it, which involved a varied cast of characters from the peninsula and the viceroyalties. For over three centuries, in a wide variety of contexts and for huge range of purposes, the task of making the New World knowable and governable involved making it visible. (Bleichmar 2012, 9–10).

This "visual appetite" is part of what Bleichmar calls "visual epistemology," i.e., the way in which observation and representation function as knowledge production tools. Visual epistemology is characteristic of the Spanish empire since it was a way to reduce the geographical distance between the empire outside and inside Europe, a way to see and experience the New World through illustrations and text.

The use of taxonomic visual and written language is evident in *Las Castas*, and it has a clear resemblance to the botanical illustrations made in the New World and to some of Linnaeus's taxonomical models (see figure 4). As we can see in figure 4, the labels and the visual organization of the painting serve a classificatory purpose that we can also see in *Las Castas*. Then, if we understand *Las Castas* as a taxonomical instrument, it is important to take a closer look at how the labels portray a specific system of classification.

One of the striking features of the labels used in *Las Castas* is that the casta terms are not neutral in the sense that they indicate hierarchical relationships. In this respect, it is important to consider the assertion of the viceroy Marqués de Mancera in 1763, according to whom the Mexican population was "composed of a range of mixed-blooded whose names define their degrees and nature."[15] Based on a reading of *Las Castas*' labels, the painting presents us with a hierarchization of people that is unidirectional, telling us a story of degradation and not just of fluidity and transformation. The process of mestizaje illustrated in *Las Castas* does not treat indigenous and black people in the same way, i.e., simply as non-Spaniards. But it considers the different "qualities" (*cualidades*) of the respective lineage of black and indigenous people. The idea of cualidad can be understood in relation to the underlying concept of "race," which permeated European intellectual culture in the eighteenth century. According to Claude-Olivier Doron (2016) in *L'homme altéré. Races et dégénerescence (xvii–xix siècles)*:

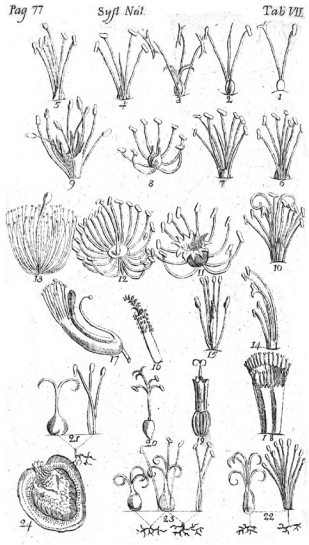

FIGURE 4
Carl Linnaeus, *Systema Naturae* (Leiden, 1735). *Source:* https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Systema_Naturae_Plate_VII.jpg.

> Race involves qualities linked to an origin and a territory, which are transmitted through generations, can be preserved despite transplantation . . . or, on the contrary, can degenerate. These qualities are essential to determine the quality of the product one wants to obtain from it, and one must know how to choose races based on what one wants to do with them.[16]

The association of "black blood" with an atavistic stain, as discussed in the previous section, gives shape to the idea that black people "contaminate" their descendants in an unredeemable way. This marks an important difference from the way in which "indigenous blood" was regarded within the mestizaje process.

Each of the sixteen labels presents the casta term of the mother, the father, and the resulting casta of the child. The casta term of the child only appears again in the subsequent castas but not in the antecedent ones. In other words, the term that designates the combination between two castas is found again only if we read the labels in the downward but never in the upward direction. The only exception to this rule is found in the first three scenes where we can see what I call the "whitening loop." The whitening

loop starts with a Spaniard mixing with an indigenous woman, and then, after just one more combination we obtain again a Spaniard. Contrary to this case, after the introduction of the first black-associated casta term, the series can only follow a downstream direction. We can see in *Las Castas* how the black and indigenous characters introduce different complexities in the *mestizaje* process. From the language that is used to designate the castas to the position that each casta occupies in the visual representation of the system, black people in the New World are treated as the source of a taint that degrades their descendants.

The treatment of "black blood" as a source of an unredeemable stain is what I call the *irreversibility thesis*. Eighteenth-century Spaniards' firm belief in this thesis can be evidenced, for example, in the following account from Don Pedro Alonso O'Corvley's manuscript (1774):

> Descendants of mixed Spanish and Negro parentage remain tainted for innumerable generations and *are unable to escape* their heritage or lose *their primitive Mulatto quality*. Spaniard and Negro produce a Mulatto; Mulatto and Spaniard produce a Morisco; Morisco and Spaniard produce a Torna-Atrás; Torna-Atrás and Spaniard produce a Tente en el Ayre, which is the same thing as a Mulatto. This is why they say, and with good reason, that the Mulatto *cannot escape* from the mixture. He can only lose his Spanish portion, which leaves his character reduced to that of the Negro. (Cited in Chance 1978, 209–10; emphasis added)

The irreversibility thesis states not only that black blood carries with it an eternal stain, but that black blood is categorically different from indigenous blood due to its "impurity," and this is one of the reasons why the social relations and in particular the sexual relations among people of different castas were highly policed by the Inquisition (see Bennett 2011).[17]

Moreover, *Las Castas* offers an indication of this differential treatment toward black people through the representation of socioeconomic marks of degradation. This is particularly clear if we compare the first casta scene with the last one in the painting *Las Castas*. The three figures in the first casta scene are wearing bright colored clothes and black shoes, they have pleasant facial expressions, and the child is in close proximity to the mother. Additionally, the child's face has a healthy blush, and we can distinguish with clarity their facial features. This scene stands in sharp contrast with

the last casta in which none of the three characters are wearing shoes, their clothes look torn apart, the child is particularly small, and we cannot even distinguish their facial features. Putting these two scenes next to each other allows us to see how even if the casta system does not have a rigid biological underpinning, its socio-economic determinations create an immense gap between the higher castas and the lower ones, a gap that in the case of black and black-descended people is irreversible.

Conclusion

In this article I have argued that within the mestizaje process, indigenous and black people were regarded differently, influencing the social status and casta of their descendants. *Las Castas* serves as a testimony to the complexities of colonial racialized subjectivity. More precisely, *Las Castas* presents us with a hierarchization that is unidirectional, telling us a story of degradation and not just of fluidity and transformation. In particular, it shows how black people were trapped at the bottom of the social hierarchy because blackness was deemed an irreversible stain. Contrary to the common assumption that a fluid and open notion of the body underlies the mestizaje process, I argued that the casta system is rigid in its applications and reinforcement of social differences. The fact that a category such as "casta" is socially constructed does not mean that it is entirely fluid and mutable. These considerations can help us understand the constitution of racial identities in Latin America and the use of casta paintings as a colonial artifact.

MIGDALIA ARCILA-VALENZUELA is a PhD candidate in philosophy at Cornell University. Her research interests are Latin American philosophy, moral psychology, and philosophy of race. Her work has appeared in *Review of Philosophy and Psychology*, *Acta Psychologica*, *Pensamiento Humanista,* and *Oxford Studies in Agency and Responsibility*.

NOTES

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1. The Spanish term *casta* is sometimes used as a synonym for "race." However, its original meaning, as it was introduced in Spain and Portugal in the Middle Ages, is closer to "lineage." For a discussion on this issue, see, e.g., Laura Giraudo, "Casta(s), 'sociedad de castas' e indigenismo: la interpretación del pasado colonial en el siglo XX," *Nuevo Mundo Mundos Nuevos* (June 14, 2018).
2. From: a Spanish man and an Indian woman is born a Mestiza; Spanish man and Mestiza woman, a Castiza; Spanish man and Castiza woman, a Spaniard; Spanish man and Black woman, a Mulatta; Spanish man and Mulatta woman, a Morisca; Spanish man and Morisca woman, an Albina; Spanish man and Albina woman, a Throwback; Spanish man and Throwback woman, a Tente en el aire; Black man and Indian woman, a China Cambuja; Chino Cambujo man and Indian woman, a Loba; Lobo man and Indian woman, an Albarazado; Albarazado man and Mestiza woman, a Barcino; Indian man and Barcina woman, a Zambaiga; Castizo man and Mestiza woman, a Chamizo; Mestizo man and Indian woman, a Coyote; Heathen Indians.
3. See María Concepción García Sáiz, *Las castas mexicanas: Un género pictórico americano* (Milan: Olivetti, 1989); Ilona Katzew, ed., *New World Orders: Casta Painting and Colonial Latin America* (New York: Americas Society Art Gallery, 1996); Natalia Majluf, ed., *Los cuadros de mestizaje del Virrey Amat: La representación etnográfica en el Perú colonial* (Lima: Museo de Arte de Lima, 2000); Magali M. Carrera, *Imagining Identity in New Spain: Race, Lineage, and the Colonial Body in Portraiture and Casta Paintings* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2003); Ilona Katzew, *Casta Painting: Images of Race in Eighteenth-Century Mexico* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 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 (2) (2005): 169–204; María Elena Martínez, *Genealogical Fictions: Limpieza de Sangre, Religion, and Gender in Colonial Mexico* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2008); Ilona Katzew and Susan Deans-Smith, eds., *Race and Classification: The Case of Mexican America* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009); Daniela Bleichmar, *Visible Empire: Botanical Expeditions and Visual Culture in the Hispanic Enlightenment* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012).
4. It is important to bear in mind that this is just one of the theories about the origin and purpose of casta paintings. As Katzew (2004) asserts, "[given that] the production of casta paintings spans an entire century, what might have given impetus to the creation of certain sets at certain moments cannot satisfactorily account for the impetus behind the creation of the genre as a whole" (8).
5. Quoted from Hernán Cortés, *Historia de la Nueva España: Escrita por su esclarecido conquistador Hernán Cortés* (Mexico City: Hogal, 1770), introduction, n.p.
6. The "Relaciones Geográficas" were questioners implemented for the first time in the sixteenth century by the Council of Indies in order to gather detailed information about the colonies (Katzew 2004, 8).
7. It is interesting to note that in the early colonial period, the word "mestizo" was associated with illegitimacy. However, later on, when contrasted with "mulatos," the mestizo became the most "favored" form of race mixing by the eighteenth

century—see Juan de Solórzano Pereira, *Política indiana* (Madrid: Diego Diaz de la Carrera, [1648] 1930), 1:219: "Los mestizos, es la mejor mezcla, que ay en Indias, y son hijos de Españoles é Indias" (The mestizos, the best mix in the Indies and they are the children of Spaniards and Indigenous women).

8. As the first director of the Royal Cabinet of Natural History in Madrid, Pedro Franco Dávila composed a catalog (1760) in which he systematically presented his collection of stones, minerals, plants, and other natural objects. See [Pedro Franco Dávila], *Catalogue systématique et raisonné des curiosités de la nature et de l'art, Qui composent le Cabinet de M. Davila* (Paris: Chez Briasson, 1767).
9. See, for example, Martínez, *Genealogical Fictions*; Katzew and Deans-Smith, *Race and Classification*; Bleichmar, *Visible Empire*.
10. As explained in note 2.
11. For a more comprehensive account of humoral theory, see R. J. Hankinson, "Humours and Humoral Theory," in *The Routledge History of Disease*, ed. Mark Jackson (London: Routledge, 2017), 21–37.
12. From the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries, humoralism was the key component of the medical syllabus at the University of Mexico. Therefore, although humoralism was not the only medical framework at play during the Spanish colony, it was certainly an important scientific framework at that time. See Francisco de Asís Flores, *Historia de la medicina en México desde la época de los indios hasta la presente* (México: Oficina tip de la Secretaría de fomento).
13. See Juan de Torquemada, *Monarquía Indiana* (Mexico City: Editorial Porrúa, [1615] 1969), bk. 13, ch. 13, 567–68.
14. This fear of the reputational effects of being of black descent persisted in Mexican society beyond the colonial period. An example of this is the government elections of the state of Michoacán in 2001, where the candidate for the Partido Revolucionario Institucional, Alfredo Anaya, questioned the Mexican identity (*mexicanidad*) of his opponent, Lázaro Cárdenas, calling attention to the ethnicity of Cardenas's wife, the Afro Cuban ballerina Mayra Coffigny (Ginger Thompson, "Race Strains a Mexican Campaign," *New York Times*, November 11, 2001). Also, according to Alberto Ribas ("Una herencia perdida: La identidad afromexicana de Artemio Cruz," *Afro-Hispanic Review* 28 [1][2009]: 99–116), the fear of blackness and the desire to distance oneself from signs of black heritage play an important role in the famous Carlos Fuentes's novel *La Muerte de Artemio Cruz* (1962), wherein the ethnic identity of the protagonist Artemio Cruz, resulting from the rape of the mulatta Isabel Cruz by a white landlord, is revealed only toward the end of the novel.
15. See "Instrucciones y memorias de los virreyes novohispanos," vol. 1 (585), quoted in Katzew (2004, 46).
16. The original French: "La race implique des qualités, liées à une origine et un terroir, qui se transmettent à travers les générations, peuvent être conservées en dépit de la transplantation . . . ou au contraire dégénérer. Ces qualités sont essentielles pour déterminer la qualité du produit qu'on en veut tirer et il faut savoir choisir les races en fonction de ce qu'on veut en faire." Claude-Olivier Doron, *L'homme altéré: Races et dégénérescence (xvii–xix siècles)* (Seyssel: Champ Vallon, 2016, 59).

(Race involves qualities linked to an origin and a territory, which are transmitted through generations, can be preserved despite transplantation . . . or, on the contrary, can degenerate. These qualities are essential to determine the quality of the product one wants to obtain from it, and one must know how to choose races based on what one wants to do with them.)

17. It is important to notice that within the irreversibility thesis and the casta system as a whole, the term "black blood" is used as a coarse generalization of what was an ethnically diverse population of Africans from different countries, linguistic backgrounds, and religious communities; see Gonzalo Aguirre-Beltrán, *La población negra de México: Estudio etnohistórico* (México: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1972).

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