

RACE VERSUS REALITY:
THE CREATION AND EXTENSION OF THE RACIAL
CASTE SYSTEM IN COLONIAL SPANISH AMERICA

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ABSTRACT

Latin American social stratification during the colonial period represented a unique system of racial socioeconomic castes. Domination by the Spanish Crown in colonial political affairs and peninsular prejudice against American-born Spaniards caused tension between Spanish elite and their American counterparts. As colonial dissatisfaction with the subordinate status to peninsular Spaniards grew, key beliefs inherited from Reconquest Spain directed colonists towards the implementation of a racial hierarchy. This caste system placed Spanish colonists as the dominating class, while relegating Indigenous and African populations to the most inferior social standing. As racial miscegenation increased, mixed races overpowered colonial society. By the eighteenth century, the high number of citizens of mixed heritage pushed colonial elite to institute strict legislation against racially mixed castes and to promote propaganda against socio-racial equality.

Despite regulation, movement between lower castes occurred, suggesting several loopholes for social mobility. Lower classes often ignored public laws, such as sumptuary legislation that limited certain clothing to the elite classes, and rural society blurred racial distinctions. However, the most legal route to social mobility occurred through documentation known as *gracias al sacar*, petitions to the Spanish Crown for a legal change of race. If approved, a *gracias al sacar* elevated one's racial status and, thus, socioeconomic standing. Ultimately, the exclusivity of the *gracias al sacar* documents suggests that, while formal social mobility existed, it did not provide a solution to the majority of residents in colonial society.

Luis de Meña's painting, *Escenas de Mestizaje* (Figure 1), portrays a classic scene of eighteenth century Mexican society: the patron saint the Virgin of Guadalupe, elaborately dressed Spanish elite, and overt racial propaganda. By the mid-eighteenth century, when Meña created this painting, racial stratification had evolved from a broadly defined socioeconomic separation between Africans, Indigenous, and Spanish to minutely differentiated and intricate racial castes that pervaded almost every aspect of life.¹ These numerous racial categories spawned paintings, referred to as *casta* paintings, which served to further separate society by describing the stereotypical traits of each "race." In Luis de Meña's rendition, the artist portrayed the eight most prominent racial castes while simultaneously divulging key details regarding the typical behavior and economic success associated with each caste. The comportment and clothing of each character mirrors the characteristics designated to each particular racial group. Thus, the more "purer Spanish" figures in the uppermost left-hand castes behave in a more sophisticated manner while the heavily racially mixed castes in the lower right-hand corner demonstrate un favorable behavioral characteristics. Meña's *Escenas de Mestizaje* not only comments on the hierarchical levels of social prestige associated with each non-European race, but also acts as evidence for the evolved stratification of colonial society into a distinct racial caste system. *Escenas de Mestizaje*, along with its fellow *casta* paintings, reflects the struggle that matured by the eighteenth century among American-born Spanish colonists to assert their superiority over competing colonial groups. In order to adequately respond to continuous European prejudice and to obtain a position of equality in the eyes of peninsular Spanish elite, the colonists defined "race" in colonial society through inherited Iberian ideology and justified

¹ Christa Olson, "Casta Painting and the Rhetorical Body," *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 39:4 (2009): 310.

these definitions in terms that would serve their power interests.

How did colonial society evolve into the complex racial hierarchy portrayed in *casta* paintings, like that of Luis de Meña, from the original separation between Spanish, African, and Indigenous populations? *Casta* paintings, like Luis de Meña's, personified colonial society by the eighteenth century. However, the elaborately rigid social structure in place in the viceroyalties by the eighteenth century developed over time, contributing to continued creole dissatisfaction of peninsular authority. While Spanish law did not directly dictate such stratification, the racial caste system of Spanish colonial society reflected the influence of European power over the Americas. The use of popular science, especially astrology and Hippocratic-Galenic physiology, contributed to assertion of the inferiority of American inhabitants while cartographic imagery of savage indigenous populations only enhanced negative opinions of the Americas. This attitude towards the Americas along with inherited Iberian ideology ultimately acted as an impetus for the creation of the complex racial hierarchy found in the colonies. In response to this European influence, creole elites constructed a complex racial hierarchy to categorize Indigenous and African populations, and mixed groups. In this multidimensional social structure, creoles attempted to organize an increasingly complex social situation by relying on the public sphere and idealized colonial depictions to present an image of society that did not completely align with reality.

European Influence and Inheritance

Prior to the installation of the caste system, precursors of the ideology of castes derived from the social and political trends of late medieval Europe and, more particularly, late medieval Spain. Before Columbus encountered the Americas, Europeans based their authority and sophistication on their adherence to Christianity; its presence or absence became a way to judge

whether a society was “advanced.” However, upon encountering the Americas, several explorers praised the pagan continent as appearing similar to a paradise. Columbus associated the natural terrain he encountered with the Garden of Eden, and Amerigo Vespucci claimed that the beauty of the pagan inhabitants was beyond equal.² These idealized descriptions, combined with Renaissance classical ideals popular in fifteenth and sixteenth century Europe, portrayed the Americas as a tangible example of the Greco-Roman perfection that Europe strived to create in their own society and forced a debate among humanists as to whether Europe still maintained its superior status to the reportedly idyllic Americas.³ Furthermore, the presence of a wet rainforest environment encountered in some areas of the Indigenous lands clashed directly with European calculations of its placement in the Torrid Zone, a supposedly inhospitable area due to the equator’s relation to the sun.⁴ This scientific inconsistency added to the growing idealization of the Americas. If large numbers of indigenous inhabitants could flourish in a supposedly “inhospitable” region, how did that affect the biological characteristics of the indigenous populations? Perhaps Europe was not in fact God’s chosen land; perhaps, descriptions from explorers like Columbus were accurate and the Americas, in fact, were the terrestrial equivalent of the Garden of Eden. These suspicions threw European security into question and presented a slew of questions concerning Europe’s global status. The desire to reject the idealization of the Americas and reassert European superiority, both terrestrially and religiously, appeared as a means to resolve these nascent European insecurities.

Motivated by the growing desires to explain the key climactic mysteries in the Americas, Europeans turned to popular science to explain the contradictory nature of the Americas and

² David A. Brading, *The First America* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 14-15.

³ Brading, *The First America*, 18.

⁴ Jorge Cañizares-Esguerra, “New World, New Stars: Patriotic Astrology and the Invention of Indian and Creole Bodies in Colonial Spanish America, 1600-1650,” *The American Historical Review* 104:1 (1999): 38.

perhaps inadvertently sealed its inferiority to Europe. Astrology, by the beginning of the seventeenth century, represented one of the most popular fields of science and focused on the Aristotelian belief in the macrocosm versus the microcosm that informed the behavior of individuals based on the positions of the stars.⁵ The macrocosm, the constellations, possessed powers to affect the microcosm, the Earth, to mirror the qualities of each constellation above various terrestrial geographic points. This study of the relationship between the stars and Earth worked in conjunction with popular medical thought, Hippocratic-Galenic physiology, to scientifically prove that the inferiority of the Americas and its inhabitants did not just constitute peninsular snobbery. Hippocratic-Galenic physiology, or humoralism, studied the four bodily humors (blood, yellow bile, black bile and phlegm) and dominated Renaissance medical science. The qualities of each constellation affected or corrupted each of these four humors.⁶ While it was believed that an individual maintained certain characteristics regardless of external influences, the majority of emotional and physical ailments could be explained by an imbalance of humors caused by climatic, dietary, or astrological problems.⁷ In order to explain the physical and social differences found in the New World, learned Europeans utilized this “scientific astrology,” claiming that the newly discovered constellations of the Southern Hemisphere caused negative affects in the climate of the Americas that lead to behavioral degeneration in the area’s inhabitants.⁸ That is, the stars influenced not only weather patterns but also the physical and mental performances of human beings who resided beneath them. Upon the discovery of new constellations above the Americas, peninsular scholars believed that, despite certain idealization

⁵ Rebecca Earle, *The Body of the Conquistador: Food, Race, and the Colonial Experience in Spanish America, 1492-1700* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 26.

⁶ Cañizares-Esguerra, “New World, New Stars,” 36-37.

⁷ Earle, *The Body of the Conquistador*, 26.

⁸ Earle, *The Body of the Conquistador*, 26.

of the Americas, its constellations ultimately invoked degenerative and emasculating consequences in its inhabitants.⁹ The seemingly “lascivious and idle” behavior of indigenous populations supported this belief, while the lack of body hair on indigenous men acted as de facto proof of European men’s masculine superiority in the eyes of the well-bearded Spaniards who encountered them.¹⁰ Previous to the discovery of the New World, learned and popular audiences believed that cold and wet atmospheres reflected a feminine nature, while hot and dry atmospheres inherently promoted masculinity. The supposedly wet atmosphere encountered by Spaniards, then, threatened “sexual transformations for the colonists.”¹¹ The newly encountered wet atmosphere of the Caribbean, the first point of contact, furthered the suggestion that the constellations above emphasized an excess of feminine qualities that could ultimately corrupt Spaniards’ virility. Accordingly, due to the effeminate consequences of the constellations above the Americas, native blood constituted a weaker substance, making native populations inherently more fragile and less physically capable than Europeans.¹² Peninsular Spaniards thus maintained their dominance of the New World by creating an ultimate cause of colonial deviance: the stars. With inferiority based solidly on the qualitative proof of the physiognomy of native populations, scientific prejudice against the newly encountered indigenous lands acquired substantial strength and influence throughout the seventeenth century.

Discussion of the astrological consequences affecting the Americas quickly expanded into the academic sectors of the colonies and incited critique from Spaniards within colonial society. Friar Bernardino de Sahagún, a Franciscan living in Mexico, continued the discussion of

⁹ Cañizares-Esguerra, “New World, New Stars,” 37.

¹⁰ Cañizares-Esguerra, “New World, New Stars,” 45, 46-47.

¹¹ Cañizares-Esguerra, “New World, New Stars,” 39.

¹² María Elena Martínez, *Genealogical Fictions: Limpieza de Sangre, Religion, and Gender in Colonial Mexico* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008), 137.

American degeneracy beyond Indigenous populations and condemned even Spanish-born citizens living in the colonies to the inevitable degeneration of their humors and dispositions.¹³ Sahagún further caused a schism between peninsular and colonial Spaniards when he claimed that “those that are native-born Spaniards... a few years after their arrival in this land become different; and I think that this is caused by the climate or the constellations of this land.”¹⁴ Thus, the “harmful” constellations above the Americas inevitably destroyed European masculine dispositions and ruined Christian morals, until colonial Spaniards began to act with the same vices of the Indigenous. Moreover, moral and physical degeneration not only applied to peninsular Spaniards with long-term habitation in the Americas, but also extended to their children born in the colonies. Intellectuals speculated that the physiological makeup of pure Spaniards would change in the Americas, affecting physical characteristics as well as mental functions such as wit and rhetorical prowess, essential skills of a gentleman.¹⁵

The idea that the Spanish elite now rejected their peers in the colonies as degenerates equal to the savage indigenous populations became popular at the same time that political tensions between creoles and peninsular Spaniards intensified, creating a more personal undertone to the accusations of inferiority.¹⁶ The bars against political leadership, along with claims of inherent inferiority, created a psychological inferiority complex in creole populations, generating a movement to reject European condemnation and reassert their own dominance as a Spanish race. It is the context of these direct attacks on creole populations that reveals the underlying social fears that led to the creation of the detailed racial hierarchy of eighteenth

¹³ Bernardino de Sahagún, ed. Angel Maria Garibay K., *Historia General de Las Cosas de Nueva España* (Mexico City: Editorial Porrúa, 1969), 3:160.

¹⁴ Sahagún, *Historia General*, 160. The original text reads: “los que son naturales españoles, si no tienen mucho aviso, a pocos años andados de su llegada a esta tierra se hacen otros; y esto pienso que lo hace el clima, o constelaciones de esta tierra...”

¹⁵ Martínez, *Genealogical Fictions*, 138.

¹⁶ Martínez, *Genealogical Fictions*, 137.

century colonial Latin America. In order to assert their equality with peninsular Spaniards, creoles determined that Indians, American-born Spaniards and Africans possessed distinctly different physiognomies that reacted differently to astral influences.¹⁷ Therefore, creoles became exempt from the negative effects induced by constellations and maintained the masculine characteristics of Europeans, while the Indigenous alone suffered claims of inherent effeminacy. Asserting biological differences between races represented the first step in the creation of the detailed racial hierarchy that was well established by the eighteenth century.

While Europeans utilized astrology to popularize the inequality between the Americas and Europe, hearsay regarding the reality of the newly forming colonies permeated into contemporary art and literature. Miguel de Cervantes, for example, wrote of the Indies as “the refuge and shelter of all desperate folk in Spain, the sanctuary of bankrupts, the safe-conduct of murderers, the protection and cover of those gamblers known by the experts in the craft as sharpers, the general decoy for loose women, where many go to be deceived and few find a way out of their difficulties.”¹⁸ Not only does Cervantes allude to an atmosphere of crime, but also a reality of economic disappointment, an outcome completely contradictory to that which all conquistadors hoped for. Apart from literary critiques, cartographic images painted of the colonies and its inhabitants augmented the sense of inequality between the two continents by promoting a haphazard scene of savage barbarity, increasing European disdain towards the colonies and causing confusion surrounding the reality of life in the new Viceroyalties. Cartographic sources of the New World often included distinct iconography regarding the flora, fauna, and inhabitants of the regions depicted; however, such iconography of the same geographic areas during the same time period often suggested very different realities, causing

¹⁷ Cañizares-Esguerra, “New World, New Stars,” 59-60.

¹⁸ Miguel de Cervantes, *Exemplary Stories*, trans. C.A. Jones (New York: Penguin, 1972), 147.

confusion regarding the level of barbarity of indigenous populations. For example, Georg Braun's comparison of the city plans of Tenochtitlan and Cusco, produced around 1575, portrays the indigenous as outliers in Spanish society yet still allows the indigenous figures to maintain a sense of sophistication (Figure 2). Cusco is represented as a European walled city, the only figures present inside being guards on duty and a group of guards in the city's center carrying out punishment. However, the Inca portrayed outside the city appear as organized, functioning members of an established ethnic group. Each man wears a short tunic, while Incan guards carry spears and wear headdresses specific to their social status. Commoners in simple blue and yellow tunics carry what appears to be a man of substantial social standing within the Incan hierarchy. The Roman-like tunics worn by the indigenous men perhaps refer to the Greco-Roman idealization of the Americas that initially threatened Europe. Braun recognized an indigenous hierarchy and occupational specialization that contradicts the general European idea of inherently lazy indigenous populations.¹⁹ Regardless of Braun's imagery of the Inca, he excludes them from Cusco. Aside from the indigenous proceedings outside the city, the only sense of a complex, sophisticated society occurs inside the city walls. Braun's map, therefore, maintained the European view that American populations existed outside all sense of order.

Despite being produced only twenty-one years later, Theodorum de Bry's map of Cusco strongly defines the line between indigenous inferiority and European superiority (Figure 3). Published in 1596, de Bry also portrayed Cusco as a walled and fortified European city containing city blocks and brick buildings. When looking at both maps, it is obvious that de Bry had access to Braun's drawing and relied heavily on Braun's description of Cusco. However, whereas Braun's iconography (Figure 2) portrayed the Inca as clothed and somewhat organized,

¹⁹ Cañizares-Esguerra, "New World, New Stars," 45.

de Bry's map shows its original inhabitants as aliens who remain outside the city walls, engaging in idleness, debauchery, and what seems to be witchcraft. Most notably, the Incans in the left-hand corner play a ball game while two other men engage in super-human acrobatic acts, standing on their heads and throwing logs with their feet. To the right, three naked indigenous men play with mythical creatures, including a miniature man with horns on his head. From a European perspective, this behavior not only highlighted the barbarity of indigenous groups, but also reinforced the idea that the indigenous did not belong in European society. The two figures on their heads and the inclusion of mythical creatures, one of which strongly resembles the Christian image of the devil, warns any readers of this map of the demonic behavior of New World inhabitants. The chaotic mayhem described by de Bry clashes with Braun's organization and presence of social order (Figure 2). Cusco's transformation and portrayal as a completely fortified European city with no remnants of indigenous urban planning tells the readers of these two maps that Cusco was a Spanish city and thus its inhabitants must be Spanish. Indigenous populations belonged outside the walls of the city and in turn, outside of civilization.

Cartographic imagery was often one of the few visual sources Europeans had access to in order to form an opinion of the newly encountered lands and the people who resided there, including creoles. As disdainful confusion surrounding the Spanish colonies and its myriad of residents became pervasive in peninsular Spanish society, Spaniards adapted popular terminology to apply to social groups in the Americas, but neglected to clarify distinctions between creoles and indigenous populations. Initially, peninsular Spaniards often referred to both natives and creoles as *indianos* prior to the institution of the term *criollo*, creole, to differentiate between Spaniards and American-born Spaniards.²⁰ This initial verbal confusion in terminology

²⁰ Bernard Lavallé, *Las Promesas Ambiguas: Ensayos sobre el Criollismo Colonial en los Andes* (Lima: Instituto Riva-Agüera de la Pontificia Universidad Católica del Perú, 1993), 15.

between what constituted indigenous and American-born Spanish fostered more inconsistencies in European attitudes towards the creoles and indigenous populations. The confusion and discontent created by using *indiano* for two socially unequal cultural groups led to use of *criollo*. Primarily used as a moniker for slaves born in the colonies as opposed to slaves directly imported from Africa, the term held blatant connotations of inferiority at the time that *criollo* became associated with American-born Spaniards.²¹ In an effort to clarify the standards of social inequality, peninsular Spaniards adopted the term *criollo* to distinctly separate colonial Spaniards from Spaniards temporarily living in the colonies.²² This, in turn, generated creole animosity towards peninsular Spaniards, as the terminology appropriated to describe the creole class still held negative connotations. By popularizing terms to distinctly separate peninsular Spaniards and their American counterparts, while American-born Spaniards and indigenous still shared the ambiguous use of *indiano*, creoles sought to separate themselves from indigenous populations and assert their superiority. Astrology, humoralism, and fragmented classification both visually and verbally of American inhabitants worked together to establish a differing status between peninsular Spaniards and creole Spaniards in the very land where creoles claimed their right as the dominating force.²³ While the Spanish crown did not directly institute the racial caste system of the Americas, attitudes fostered by Spanish society assisted in creating the need for such racial separation by popularizing the idea that, while creoles possessed the same Spanish purity, their very existence as permanent fixtures in the colonies ultimately caused their demotion to a second-rate elite.

As Europe continued to form its opinions and prejudices about the Americas and its

²¹ Martínez, *Genealogical Fictions*, 136.

²² Lavallé, *Las Promesas Ambiguas*, 16.

²³ Lavallé, *Las Promesas Ambiguas*, 15-17.

burgeoning Spanish colonies, the inadequacy of the early colonial social structure added to the growing colonial distress. Upon colonization, Spanish conquistadors and administrators imposed the medieval Castilian social model of estates upon the significantly more diverse American society. Medieval Spanish society constituted a hierarchic, rigid society that allowed for only two estates: the nobility and the common order.²⁴ This bifurcated social model then applied to the colonies in the form of the two Republics: the more prestigious Spanish Republic and the lower Indigenous Republic. The European model permitted the wealthiest members of the lower, common order to hold an almost equal status to the poorest of the nobility (perhaps higher in the case of degenerate *hidalgos*, titled knights that acquired land through Reconquest battles); similarly, in colonial society, the most elite members of the indigenous republic held an equal status to the least prominent members of the Spanish republic.²⁵

Several issues merit further consideration. First, the two-republic system never accounted for the importation of slaves or the miscegenation between those of Spanish, indigenous, and African heritage that increased throughout the seventeenth century.²⁶ The growth of mestizos and other racial castes in the eighteenth century could not be accounted for properly in either republic. The perceived necessity to further organize these ambiguously defined groupings forced the social structure towards forming clear ethnic divisions.²⁷ The idea that indigenous members of the elite could occupy the same status as “old Christian” Spaniards caused tension by threatening the Iberian sense of honor. Even if he held a poor economic status, a native-born Spaniard in colonial society could at least console himself by the color of his skin.²⁸ By legally

²⁴ Magnus Mörner, *Race Mixture in the History of Latin America* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1967), 54.

²⁵ Mörner, *Race Mixture*, 42-43.

²⁶ Mcalister, “Social Structure and Social Change,” 354.

²⁷ Mörner, *Race Mixture*, 54.

²⁸ Mörner, *Race Mixture*, 55-56.

stating the equality between noble indigenous members and poor Spaniards, the Spanish Crown essentially removed the one advantage that creoles maintained over other native inhabitants. This loss of power was further exacerbated by the lack of noble titles issued by the Crown to creoles in Mexico. As the acquisition of land and personal deeds through conquest became more important than esteemed lineage, *encomenderos*' (powerful land owners) desires for formal recognition of nobility were rarely fulfilled.²⁹ Creole complaints against the lack of formal recognition further damaged the plausibility of maintaining the two-republic system. Colonial society, for the sake of creole ambitions and the Crown's hold on the colonies, required a system that allowed for racially mixed populations.

Creole elite also inherited an obsession with *limpieza de sangre*, or purity of blood, to define the members of society in the Americas. The concept further agitated the ill-fitting social structure and influenced the installation of a hierarchical caste system. The concept of *limpieza de sangre* originated during the Reconquest of Spain as Catholic kingdoms fought to expel the Moors from the peninsula. Originally referring to the purity of blood in a religious sense, that is, individuals free of Jewish or Muslim blood, *limpieza de sangre* (literally in English "cleanness of blood") described the purity of one's Christian heritage. Not just a concept for the upper classes, *limpieza de sangre* was understood and embraced by the majority of Iberian society. Very similar to its later use in the colonies, *limpieza de sangre* was used by Iberian aristocracy to impede commoners' desires for upward mobility, while the lower classes appealed to the concept for just that reason: to increase their prestige and honor.³⁰ This concept of religious purity evolved in the colonies to acquire a racial connotation and held the same power over colonial social mobility that religious identity held in Spain. The parallelism between *limpieza de sangre*

²⁹ Mcalister, "Social Structure and Social Change," 357.

³⁰ Martínez, *Genealogical Fictions*, 61.

from the Reconquest era and its colonial variety demonstrate that the concept existed long before the creation of the caste system; its establishment in the colonies reflects yet another example of how the ideologies of Iberia served as an impetus in the evolution of colonial social structure.

While the status seeking Spaniard in the Iberian Peninsula was preoccupied with maintaining his bloodline free from by Muslims, Jews, and converted populations, the status seeking creole was equally concerned with maintaining the separation between his bloodline and the taint of African and Indigenous mixing. Just as Spanish society asserted *limpieza de sangre* as a requirement for certain professional positions, so too did colonial society demand pure blood for administrative positions.³¹ By the time that racially mixed populations occupied their own space in society, the concept of “pure” or “impure” blood and the socioeconomic allegations that followed had been steadily implanted in the colonial psyche since the Spaniards’ arrival. While this conceptual inheritance may not have outwardly antagonized members of colonial society, it provided a basis by which creoles could effectively assert their superiority over upwardly mobile mixed populations. *Limpieza de sangre* legitimized claims of racial strata by appealing to a concept respected in the Iberian Peninsula. Peninsular claims to the inevitable degeneration and obvious inferiority of creoles, the imposition of an ill-suited structural foundation, and the inheritance of *limpieza de sangre* all acted as precursors that would inadvertently push creoles towards the institution of racial castes.

Implementing the Caste System

In both the social and political spheres, peninsular Spaniards so consistently overruled creoles that this behavior cultivated an attitude of inferiority within creole communities regarding their place in society. By the seventeenth century, creoles painted themselves as

³¹ L.N. Mcalister, “Social Structure and Social Change in New Spain,” *The Hispanic American Historical Review* 43:3 (1963): 361.

“dispossessed nobles outcompeted by ravenous, transient, Peninsular upstarts,” and this feeling of grievance acted in part as an impetus for creole elite to institute the racial hierarchy. In positioning themselves as the ruling social class and rejecting peninsular domination, creoles believed they could recover control of their community.³² While a strong peninsular political presence could not be avoided, it was the increasing sentiment of creole social inferiority that helped instigate action among the powerful creole elite. Capitalizing on the previously claimed physiognomic difference between creoles, indigenous, and Africans, creoles altered European astrological evidence to prove their destiny as overseers of indigenous institutionalized labor forces and used this labor force to constitute the base of the hierarchy that became so firmly installed by the eighteenth century.³³ The institution of the socio-racial hierarchy provided creoles with the opportunity to both reject Spanish control as well as to assert their independence as a unique entity that possessed customs and norms distinct from those of Spain.

Just as peninsular Spaniards manipulated terminology in an attempt to organize colonial society, creoles first instituted hierarchical classifications to organize the growing number of racially mixed colonial citizens. The transformation of colonial vocabulary during the construction of the racial caste system marks one of the primary attempts to assert creole dominance, as they mutated peninsular terms to fit their specific racial needs. To reinforce their status as the ruling colonial elite, creoles chose to recognize their sense of separation from peninsular Spaniards. By embracing this separation, the creole elite was able to assert its right to social power in the colonies, even if political power could not be fully attained. Terms such as “*hijos del reino*” (sons of the kingdom) and “*hijos de la tierra*” (sons of the land) demonstrated their identification with an American heritage while “*hijos y nietos de los conquistadores*” (sons

³² Cañizares-Esguerra, “New World, New Stars,” 50.

³³ Cañizares-Esguerra, “New World, New Stars,” 56.

and grandsons of the conquistadors) showed a genealogy of claims to the Spanish colonies as their legitimate rulers.³⁴ Creoles utilized the complex concept of native-ness to invert indigenous claims to the land and assert themselves as the true natives of the Americas. Creoles claimed that, in terms of the Americas, indigenous civilizations had “occupied it incorrectly or insufficiently.”³⁵ Because Spanish conquistadors explicitly claimed the land through European concepts of lawful ownership, creoles essentially appropriated the idea of being a “native” from indigenous populations and applied it to themselves. Late medieval Spanish society did not establish native-ness solely by birthright and the installment of indigenous tribute to Spaniards further minimized indigenous claims to being “natives” of the land.³⁶ Establishing this dichotomy, creoles were then able to state that peninsular Spaniards temporarily in the Americas were “outsiders...who, even in the best of circumstances, could only be viewed as adopted...”³⁷ By doing so, creoles simultaneously removed indigenous populations from any claims to power and devalued peninsular power in the colonies by referring to peninsular Spaniards as visitors. Appropriating the idea of native-ness allowed creoles to assert themselves as the true owners of the land, relegating both indigenous and Spanish parties to the periphery.

Similar to the linguistic inversion of terms like “creole” and “native,” the evolution of the term *casta* helped strengthen the evolution of the racial caste system within the colonial psyche. Prior to the colonization of the Americas, *casta* referred not to differences in race, but to the presence of noble lineage and descent.³⁸ Only after Spanish colonization did the linguistic differentiation begin to refer to people of mixed race in the Americas as *castas*. Most noticeably,

³⁴ Lavallé, *Las Promesas Ambiguas*, 17.

³⁵ Tamar Herzog, “The Appropriation of Native Status: Forming and Reforming Insiders and Outsiders in the Spanish Colonial World,” *Rechtsgeschichte* 22 (2014): 144.

³⁶ Herzog, “The Appropriation of Native Status,” 141, 142.

³⁷ Herzog, “The Appropriation of Native Status,” 146.

³⁸ Carolina González Undurraga, “De La Casta a La Raza,” *Historia Mexicana* 60.3 (2011): 1497.

the use of *casta*, in the sense of racial caste, referred only to persons of mixed race in the Americas. Those of European background did not belong to any *casta*.³⁹ In order to counteract the negative stigma that peninsular Spaniards imposed upon creoles, creoles in turn imposed categorical terms on society. The linguistic evolution of racial terms in the Spanish colonies mirrored the evolution of the concept of race in colonial society. Primarily, the creole preference for terms with connotations of power, such as “sons of the conquistadors” demonstrated their identification as a powerful cultural body. Then, as the racial hierarchy developed into a more concrete structure, race-specific words, like the evolution of *casta*, increased in the colonial language. New terms, like *mestizo* and *mulatto*, needed to be created for new castes as creoles increased the number of “races” in colonial society. While the three main racial categories (Indian, creole, and African) maintained the strongest sense of identity, more eccentric terms such as *tente en el aire* (hold yourself in the air) and *lobo* (wolf) can be found in popular *casta* paintings at the time.⁴⁰ Modifying the Spanish language to apply to specific colonial phenomena, like the caste system, represented a key moment in the formation of a uniquely colonial identity from that of Spain. By giving racial connotations to otherwise irrelevant terms, such as *lobo* mentioned earlier, creoles isolated the concept of race in colonial society.⁴¹ This invented vocabulary allowed creoles to organize and stratify society according to their vision of an ideal society, regardless of whether actual social groups reflected their ideal concepts.

Creole endeavors to control colonial society did not stop with racial terminology but extended far past linguistics into multiple sectors of daily life. As the *casta* system evolved from physiognomic differences between Indians, creoles, and Africans into the complex racial scale

³⁹ González Undurraga, “De La Casta,” 1499.

⁴⁰ Olson, “Casta Painting and the Rhetorical Body,” 310.

⁴¹ Olson, “Casta Painting and the Rhetorical Body,” 318.

seen in Meña's painting (Figure 1), racial separation likewise occurred on a minute scale, pervading psychological, physical, and social performance. For example, administrative documents from the viceroyalties often reflected racial undertones. A *real cedula* from the Audiencia of Buenos Aires from 1709 relates the distress of certain *encomenderos* over the close vicinity of indigenous members to their children, citing that many Spanish children "didn't know the Castilian language, finding themselves more expert in that of the Indians, from whom they learned the language through continuous interaction...that resulted from living without society."⁴² By "society," the *encomenderos* meant the right kind of society—a Spanish society. These complaints demonstrated the fear that without strict separation, pure Spaniards might become tainted by the unwanted characteristics of the lower castes.

In order to maintain *limpieza de sangre* and Spanish superiority, contact with mixed castes needed to be limited, and the castes themselves isolated physically. In a court case from Quito in 1784, another public complaint involved a father's objection to his daughter's marriage to a man of supposedly lower social status. The plaintiff's argument demonstrates the multidimensional racial separation that occurred in the colonies. Six years earlier, in 1778, the Spanish Crown instituted the Royal Pragmatic on Marriages, allowing parents and government officials to legally prevent marriages that involved racial inequality.⁴³ The Quito case focused on the defendant's racial origin and the *calidad*, or social standing, of the two parties. In order to establish his *calidad*, inquiries extend into factors of ancestry and clothing patterns to determine

⁴² Richard Konetze, *Colección de Documentos para la Historia de la Formación Social de Hispanoamérica 1493-1810* (Madrid) 3:1, n. 82, 1709. The original text reads: "[N]o sabían el idioma castellano, hallándose más expertos en el de indios, de quines lo aprendían por la continua comunicación con ellos...que resultaban de vivir sin sociabilidad."

⁴³ Ann Twinam, *Public Lives, Private Secrets: Gender, Honors, Sexuality, and Illegitimacy in Colonial Spanish America* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), 262.

race.⁴⁴ Plaintiff Don Manuel Valdivieso's testimony questioned not only the defendant Don Teodoro Jaramillo's racial origin, but also inquires into the *calidad*, the racial quality, of others such as his first wife, his uncle, and his uncle's wife.⁴⁵ This extension into removed familial relationships originated from the idea that race descended not only in a biological manner, but through social contacts. Society determined a person's race by the combined diluted Spanish blood (in the sense of identity) from both parents.⁴⁶ Thus, not only did Jaramillo's immediate family determine his race but also all extended family acted as a representation for Jaramillo's racial purity, or lack thereof. Eventually, the court condemned Jaramillo's prospective marriage, stating that Jaramillo's questionable familial "race" jeopardized the daughter's claim to elite social status.⁴⁷

Several of the testimonies submitted in Don Jaramillo's case refer to Jaramillo's mother's "plebeian" clothing as a means to assert her true racial identity. Not merely a comment on fashion, these remarks derived from another attempt to control colonial society: sumptuary legislation that barred certain clothing styles from certain races. In order to maintain the public performance of the rigid caste system, creoles prohibited lesser castes from more extravagant designs and cloth, such as velvet, to prevent material ambitions in lower castes and to assert their own superiority and economic success. By the time most viceroalties instituted sumptuary laws, most European countries regarded sumptuary laws as archaic.⁴⁸ However, their use in the Americas occurred out of a need to prevent lower castes from falsely representing their socio-racial status through clothing. Prior to the institution of such laws, women of lower classes often

⁴⁴ Christian Büschges, "Don Manuel Valdivieso y Carrión Protests the Marriage of His Daughter to Don Teodoro Jaramillo, a Person of Lower Social Standing," in *Colonial Lives: Documents on Latin American History, 1550-1850*, ed. Richard Boyer and Geoffrey Spurling (New York: Oxford University Press: 200), 228.

⁴⁵ Büschges, "Don Manuel Valdivieso y Carrión," 227-228.

⁴⁶ González Undurraga, "De La Casta," 1501.

⁴⁷ Büschges, "Don Manuel Valdivieso y Carrión," 229.

⁴⁸ Earle, "'Two Pairs of Pink Satin Shoes!!'," 187.

attempted to dress in styles above their caste to appear more socially elite in public.⁴⁹

Valdivieso's testimony addressed Jaramillo's mother's wardrobe, with Valdivieso's friend, Don Mateo Vásquez, undecidedly stating "he never saw her in the clothing of a plebeian."⁵⁰ Clothing acted as a marker of identity used to maintain and widen the stratification between castes.⁵¹

Prohibiting finer clothing from inferior castes bolstered creole sense of domination in a material sense. Colonial elite, then, dressed themselves in extremely elaborate, even gaudy, clothing while the sight of a black or indigenous woman in attempted finery provoked aggressive reactions from their "superiors."⁵² Sumptuary laws applied to all castes that were not purely Spanish and not adhering to the restrictions acted as a substantial action of defiance.

Complaints from the city of San Ildefonso to the Viceroy of Peru in 1725 speak of the lack of enforcement the new sumptuary laws had in limiting "the scandalous excess of the dress that blacks, mulattos, Indians, and mestizos of both sexes dresses themselves with."⁵³ In particular, only twenty-four hours after the law's publication, "two of Conde de las Torres' black slaves infringed upon the law...their excesses staying concealed and without punishment."⁵⁴ By creating dress codes, elite creoles sought the ability to easily identify every caste in society, a skill that was becoming exponentially more difficult as the mixed race population grew. Allowing free dress would have not only given lower castes the personal freedom to associate themselves with a higher caste but would have also created a nightmare for creoles attempting to maintain the strict racial stratification they desired. Sumptuary laws sought to minimize

⁴⁹ Earle, "'Two Pairs of Pink Satin Shoes!!'," 187.

⁵⁰ Büschges, "Don Manuel Valdivieso y Carrión," 227.

⁵¹ Rebecca Earle, "'Two Pairs of Pink Satin Shoes!!' Race, Clothing, and Identity in the Americas (17th-19th Centuries)," *History Workshop Journal* 52 (2001): 175.

⁵² Earle, "'Two Pairs of Pink Satin Shoes!!'," 179, 182.

⁵³ Konetzke 3:1 n. 114, 1725. The original text reads: "el escandaloso exceso de los trajes que vestían los negros, mulatos, indios y mestizos de ambos sexos."

⁵⁴ Konetzke 3:1 n. 114, 1725. The original text reads: "quebrantaron dos negras esclavas del Conde de las Torres...los excesos por quedar disimulados y sin castigo."

ambiguities between castes and to isolate expressions of material grandeur solely within the elite creole class. To creoles, if an indigenous woman was able to wear gold and silver jewelry, she was also capable of rejecting the caste hierarchy imposed upon public society. Clothing not only held connotations of economic status but also acquired socio-political connotations and, as such, required regulation to maintain social order.

As indicated by the public nature of sumptuary laws, the caste hierarchy existed most prominently in the public realm of society; it manipulated the use of public behavior to reinforce daily stratification of the caste society. Spanish and colonial societies emphasized life in the public eye. Members of all classes used public events, such as religious processions, and areas, especially plazas and churches, as opportunities to reinforce their status and honor. While the elite creole class placed emphasis on maintaining honor by maintaining a good reputation, lower classes also attempted to uphold their honor to claim a position in society above other classes. Public behavior between classes shifted towards attempts to assert authority through public disgrace. Elite creoles wielded the power to arbitrarily accuse someone of a lower class of indecent behavior by relying on behavioral stereotypes associated with their race. Public fights broke out as a means to humiliate those who did not “know their place.” Josefa Cadena, a young *castiza* woman of Spanish and indigenous blood, in a town on the outskirts of Mexico City, became the victim of a public beating in 1782. Three noblewomen beat and ridiculed her for no known reason other than the noble woman’s claim that the *castiza* brushed her back.⁵⁵ The noblewoman, doña Theresa Bravo, immediately labeled Josefa “black,” hurling racial epithets and insulting her virtue. In Josefa’s husband’s testimony, he particularly responds that his wife’s

⁵⁵ Sonya Lipsett-Rivera, “Scandal at the Church: José de Alfaro Accuses Doña Theresa Bravo and Others of Insulting and Beating His *Castiza* Wife, Josefa Cadena,” in *Colonial Lives: Documents on Latin America, 1550-1850*, ed. Richard Boyer and Geoffrey Spurling (New York: Oxford University Press: 2000), 218.

“honor is publicly known, and she is not a black but rather a *castiza*.” Josefa’s husband, José, takes more offense on the public nature of the insults, testifying, “[w]hat makes all this much worse is that the insults occurred in public and in the presence of a numerous crowd who were leaving mass.” By publicly calling Josefa black and insulting her virtue, doña Theresa addressed two key elements of the racial caste system. First, skin color overruled other class descriptions. Should a *castiza* woman happen to have darker skin, elite classes viewed her as one of the two main ethnic groups: indigenous or African.⁵⁶ Thus, the caste system, so theoretically rigid in behavior and social rules, often acted as a much more fluid structure in public when attempting to determine race. In reality, physical traits determined one’s race more heavily than lineage. Second, doña Theresa’s insult to her virtue derived from the reasoning that race is linked to behavioral qualities. This logic arose from the original claim of American scientific inferiority and the behavioral degeneration that became popular during the early years of colonization. To doña Theresa and her friends, Josefa’s status as a person of mixed race correlated to inherently promiscuous behavior. This particular, highly public event reinforced the caste system by reminding the public of the strong racial biases that existed.

Perhaps the best-known tool to promote the caste system, *casta* paintings acted as a very distinct form of racial propaganda. *Casta* paintings, like Meña’s (Figure 1), served to educate the public on the various and extensive castes in colonial society by portraying two parents of different races and presenting the child as the racial product of that union.⁵⁷ The majority of *casta* paintings produced in New Spain were created in the 1770’s and the 1780’s, although there is an escalation in the production of these paintings from the beginning of the eighteenth century. In their nascent phase, the paintings were commissioned by the Spanish Crown in order to gain

⁵⁶ Olson, “Casta Painting and the Rhetorical Body,” 310.

⁵⁷ Olson, “Casta Painting and the Rhetoric Body,” 310.

more insight into the racial makeup of the colonies. Early *casta* paintings focused less on presenting negative characteristics of inferior races and instead aimed to demonstrate the widespread wealth of the colonies.⁵⁸ Manuel de Arellano's *Rendering of a Mulatta* (Figure 4) exemplifies these more ambitious viewpoints through his portrait of a young *mulatta*. The young woman portrayed in the painting wears finery characteristic of the creole elite class, the silken fabrics and the jewels around her neck creating a sense of grandeur. Despite her aristocratic clothing, Arellano intends the subject to be understood as mixed race, noticeable by her dark skin and hairstyle. Instead of condemning mixed castes, as seen in later paintings, original *casta* paintings sought to demonstrate the great wealth of the colonies by catering to European curiosity about the Americas and boasting of the grandeur of all its inhabitants, even those of mixed heritage.⁵⁹ However, while the paintings began by describing the origin of various castes for viewers in Europe, in the colonies, they also warned viewers of each caste's economic standing as well as stereotypical behaviors.⁶⁰ Thus, the anonymously painted *De Español e India produce mestizo* (Spanish and Indian produces Mestizo) (Figure 5) shows the child as a clean, well-dressed boy held in his mother's arms and Miguel Cabrera's *De Mestizo e India produce Coyote* (Mestizo and Indian produces Coyote) clearly represents a scene of poverty and violence as the older child aims to strike the father (Figure 6). Although primarily commissioned to promote the success of the Americas, *casta* paintings began to reinforce creole control by visually depicting the inferiorities and deficiencies of each racial caste in public.⁶¹ As racial miscegenation increased, creoles turned to *casta* paintings to ease anxiety and maintain the caste

⁵⁸ Ilona Katzew, *Casta Painting: Images of Race in Eighteenth-Century Mexico* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 9, 69.

⁵⁹ Katzew, *Casta Painting*, 65, 68.

⁶⁰ Olson, "Casta Painting and the Rhetoric Body," 310.

⁶¹ Olson, "Casta Painting and the Rhetoric Body," 309.

system.

As creole anxiety intensified throughout the eighteenth century, *casta* paintings became increasingly more intricate as painters dramatized stereotypical characteristics of each caste. Despite the legal and cultural boundaries designed to separate racial castes, the actual increase in racial blending made strict categorization nearly impossible. The growing number of mestizos and mulattos threatened the existing power structure.⁶² Circulating exaggerated paintings among creole elites illustrated the need to maintain strict regulation over the intricate hierarchy. The increased portrayal of violent behavior among African races, in particular, reflected the fears of the elite concerning the control of these populations.⁶³ By the 1770's full *casta* sets appeared to mark each category of race. In particular, Francisco de Clapera's set from 1775 includes sixteen distinctions that demonstrate not only socioeconomic markers but also behavioral markers as de facto characterizations of each class (Figure 7, Figure 8, Figure 9, Figure 10). Artists of *casta* paintings based their portrayal of stereotypical caste behavior on the European claims of American inferiority that remained imbedded in the colonial psyche.⁶⁴ While more indigenous castes are presented in moderate to low economic standing, often working in rural settings, castes with substantial African blood have a clearly more violent connotation attached to each painting. *De español y negra, mulato* (Spanish and Black, Mulatto) (Figure 8) portrays a physically defiant child. Both the father and the child in *De mulato y española, morisco* (From mulatto and Spanish, Morisco) (Figure 9) exhibit violent behavioral characteristics. Each mutation involving substantial African heritage warns viewers of the violent nature of these castes, aiming to subdue creole concerns over the loss of social boundaries by increasing the need for vigilance over these

⁶² Katzew, *Casta Painting*, 39-41.

⁶³ Olson, "Casta Painting and the Rhetoric Body," 311.

⁶⁴ Olson, "Casta Painting and the Rhetoric Body," 325.

castes. In reality, ordinary members of the public usually could not tell the difference between a *mulato*, a *morisco*, a *zambaigo*, or a *cambujo*, but artistic classification attempted to exaggerate the slight distinctions between classes to restrict social mobility and maintain creole control over the masses.⁶⁵ Perhaps never effective for the general public, *casta* paintings found popularity among elite creoles who most feared rebellion and social equality.

Casta paintings, although created in the colonies, actually found their greatest success in European markets. A significant number of *casta* paintings belonged in European collections, purchased by visiting Spaniards in the colonies or by peninsular governors.⁶⁶ This begs the question of whether the paintings were directed at colonial or European society. By circulating the paintings among both creole and peninsular circles, creoles were able to visually show the unique identity of their own society. *Casta* paintings attempted not just to maintain social control, but also to provide a singular identity for the colonial ruling class outside the shadow of the peninsular Spanish culture.⁶⁷ *Casta* paintings tangibly personified colonial society, and the paintings' circulation among European courts demonstrated the creole desire for affirmation as a people different from peninsular Spaniards. The paintings and the caste system strove to assert that creoles were equal in status to Spaniards yet at the same time were culturally different from Spaniards. For example, Meña did not include Santiago de Matamoros, patron saint of Spain, above his *cuadros de casta* (Figure 1), but rather the Virgin of Guadalupe, a uniquely Mexican symbol.⁶⁸ Thus, the extension of the caste hierarchy in the Spanish colonies and the subsequent creation of *casta* paintings reminded the Iberian peninsula of the formation of a uniquely

⁶⁵ Katzew, *Casta Painting*, 107-109.

⁶⁶ Olson, "Casta Painting and the Rhetoric Body," 312.

⁶⁷ Olson, "Casta Painting and the Rhetoric Body," 312.

⁶⁸ María-Theresa Hernández, *Latinidad: Transnational Cultures in the United States: Virgin of Guadalupe and the Conversos: Uncovering Hidden Influences from Spain to Mexico* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2014), 124.

American identity. The need to present a very particular representation of colonial society can be found not only in *casta* paintings but also in other works of colonial art exported from the colonies to Spain. For instance, *Portrait of Francisco de Orense y Moctezuma, Count of Villalobos* presents the subject in impressive luxury with diamond shoe buckles and silver and gold clothing but, interestingly, also proudly proclaims the Count's heritage as Aztec and Spanish nobility (Figure 11). The lavish clothing, European hairstyle, and the obedient hunting dog at the Count's feet evoke a regal characteristic but the proclamation to his indigenous heritage exemplifies the colonial desire during the eighteenth century to prosper as an entity separate from the Spanish Crown. The inclusion of Aztec heritage effectively points to New Spain's indigenous past and, despite the oppression of indigenous populations in society, legitimizes the Count's indigenous heritage as a "classical pedigree comparable with that of the Greeks and Romans in Europe."⁶⁹ Visual items such as portraits of creole society acted alongside *casta* paintings to present a very stilted, but exotic and luxurious view of the colonial elite in Europe.

Similar to the portrait of the Count of Villalobos, *Garden Party on the Terrace of a Country Home* (Figure 13), a silk folding screen, idealistically portrays creole society as lavish, cultured and wealthy. Elaborately dressed women play cards on the left while even the lower classes are dressed well and play music while surrounded by flowers. By expressing the success of civic life in the colonies, artistic representations of the colonies attempted to communicate to peninsular Spain that the Spanish colonies functioned as a sophisticated, civilized society, while *casta* paintings promoted creole success in controlling the colonies' inferior races. Art often played a propagandistic role in colonial society by presenting a false reality of the colonies and

⁶⁹ Katzew, *Casta Painting*, 69.

propping up the creole sense of reigning security. *Casta* paintings, and other similar works, aimed to calm creole fears, regulate society, and present an idealized way of life to Europeans while portraits and silk screens romanticized the luxurious lifestyle of the creoles.

Defiance and Manipulation

Despite extending into the public sphere through sumptuary laws, public conflict, and the infamous circulation of *casta* paintings, the seemingly rigid caste hierarchy contained loopholes. The intricacy of the caste system, with its numerous classifications, theoretically categorized each member of society into, at most, sixteen castes; but, in reality, the caste system only functioned in terms of four: creole, mestizo, Indigenous, and African. Slight fluctuations between various indigenous races or African races received legislative distinction but the general public tended to recognize daily society into these main racial categories. With so many theoretical castes, confusion between races occurred regularly, as found in the aforementioned 1782 case between doña Theresa and the *castiza* woman, Josefa.⁷⁰ To upper class nobility, mixed races fell into the categories of either black or indigenous, and creoles crafted insults accordingly. *Casta* paintings described dozens of racial categories, but in practice the three original bodies maintained the strongest sense of permanency.

Despite creole attempts to control the actions of each caste, actual implementation of the caste system appeared more lenient. For example, the enforcement of sumptuary laws met regular resistance as mixed races often wore prohibited clothing anyway. While elite creoles ridiculed these attempts to emulate the upper classes, many accounts exist of indigenous and *mestiza* women wearing expensive dresses in public in an attempt to improve their status and marriage prospects.⁷¹ While dress codes may seem like a trivial aspect of the racial hierarchy,

⁷⁰ Lipsett-Rivera, "Scandal at the Church," 218.

⁷¹ Earle, "'Two Pairs of Pink Satin Shoes!'," 184.

clothing communicates a variety of ideological statements. The caste system relied on public acts to maintain its rigidity. To present oneself in public in inappropriate clothing threatened the efficiency of racial separation by presenting an opportunity for informal social mobility. Successfully dressing inappropriately to one's class was a way to elevate that person to a higher status, or at least, confuse the boundaries of status.⁷² In order to function, the colonial racial hierarchy relied on controlling appearance, as one can see by the visual nature of *casta* painting, clothing regulation, and rehearsed public behavior. Defying public norms challenged the caste system itself. Despite creole attempts to regulate mixed races, it was simply not feasible to successfully control society without incurring acts of opposition.

Perhaps the best-known loophole to improve social status in colonial society, *gracias al sacar* (rights of recategorization) acted as the only legal route to redefine one's position in society while also receiving the approval of previously established elites. Most common towards the end of the 1700's, but available throughout the entire eighteenth century, "*gracias al sacar*" allowed individuals to legally change their race by petitioning the Spanish Crown for an official legitimization of racial heritage.⁷³ *Gracias al sacar*, like *limpieza de sangre*, derived from peninsular Spain where petitions for legitimization to receive inheritance entered into common use in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.⁷⁴ These were introduced into colonial society, where they offered the prospect of cleansing unwanted racial roots. However, *gracias al sacar* documents were not a viable option for all members of society due to their exclusivity nor did the petitions act as a guarantee of social mobility. Petitions in the early 1700's were routinely approved by the governing body, the *Cámara de las Indias*, but required an expensive monetary payment to

⁷² Earle, "Two Pairs of Pink Satin Shoes!!," 187

⁷³ Twinam, *Public Lives*, 262.

⁷⁴ Twinam, *Public Lives*, 247.

achieve the desired result. Later, however, as the caste system became more restrictive and more publicly organized, the Cámara required more in depth information in regards to parentage, racial background, and recommendations from the colonial elite to preserve the status quo and to prevent creoles from having to accept large numbers of previously lower-class individuals as their peers.⁷⁵ As a result, if a well-known mulatto wanted to claim his pure Spanish heritage, not only did he need to have the required, and often arbitrarily assigned, cash payment, but he also needed numerous documents, a birth certificate, and several eye witnesses to corroborate his claims. An *arancel* (tariff document) from 1795 states that the fee to verify the quality of a *pardo*, a person of both African and Spanish blood, cost 500 *reales*. However, to approve the quality of a *quinteron*, someone with a heavily African heritage, cost 800 *reales*.⁷⁶ According to documentation compiled by Dr. Ann Twinam that displays the frequency of *gracias al sacar* petitions within each major city of the colonies, Mexico City submitted nine different petitions to the Cámara in 1780. Santo Domingo, on the other hand, sent 23 in 1790, a noticeable jump from Mexico City's nine petitions, but still very far from being proportionate to Dominican society.⁷⁷ *Gracias al sacar*, then, did allow social mobility to be a possibility in a society structured against improving racial and economic status, but due to the monetary and legal requirements needed for a favorable decision, the petitions could not offer a widespread solution to improving one's socio-racial status.

Those who did receive approval, however, act as key examples to the true fluidity of colonial society. The ability of mixed race populations to alter their racial identity, and thus social status, with a legislative document reveals the social, rather than biological, emphasis on

⁷⁵ Twinam, *Public Lives*, 244, 256.

⁷⁶ AGN, Mexico City, Expediente 015, 1795.

⁷⁷ Twinam, *Public Lives*, 8.

the construction of race in the colonial era. Moreover, it contrasts with original principle that those of Indigenous and African heritage contained irreparable physical and behavioral deformities. *Casta* paintings promulgated the idea that race could not be changed yet the establishment of *gracias al sacar* petitions indicates that colonials experienced the need for less rigidly dictated racial assignments. The colonial elite frequently voiced their opinions of petitioners to the Cámara de las Indias, either promoting the legitimation of an already informally accepted member of society or condemning a forced inclusion of an inferior outsider.⁷⁸ By vouching for certain petitions, even the creole elite acknowledged that the ideology represented in the *casta* paintings did not consistently serve their interests. Approving *gracias al sacar* petitions occurred on a highly individual basis, allowing colonial elites to influence the outcome. Ultimately, the approval of *gracias al sacar* petitions allowed wealthy members of favorable lower castes to increase their sense of public honor and prestige in a society so ruled by exclusion and “*mala raza*.” *Gracias al sacar* proved that the caste system was not in fact completely static, but allowed for the mobility of those persons who had already gained some sense of prestige in colonial society.

Gracias al sacar petitions often occurred in cities such as Mexico City or Santo Domingo, because urban settings simultaneously created a wide range of economic and social interactions between classes and fostered greater need to control racial castes. Capitals of the viceroyalties adopted the racial hierarchy as creoles and peninsular Spaniards vied for political and civic control but, in rural areas, the racial class lines blurred in some cases. For example, a court case from Quito 1768 depicts interactions between races that question the institution of the hierarchy. As part of a murder investigation, testimonies describe a night of card playing and

⁷⁸ Twinam, *Public Lives*, 258.

drinking at a hacienda north of Quito. The testimony of the doña's black slave, Cathalina Sánchez, provides insight into the structure of typical social events. Cathalina discusses the walk she took with Doña María, noting that she walked alongside the doña, instead of behind her as social decorum would suggest. Later that night, the slave's master invited all of the servants to drink alcohol with the creole guests, "taking a flask of wine from the liquor case" and giving it to "the señoras, to the witness, and to the rest of the servants."⁷⁹ While one can argue that the slave incorrectly spoke of the walk as an invitation for social equality, the multiple accounts of the drunken state of the entire household point to different conclusions. This social mixing between servant and master clashes with the caste society's emphasis on separation between races. Even in such a highly stratified era, the social code on the rural hacienda differed from urban life. The slave's description of the leniency between races provides a counterexample to the rigidity of the caste system in urban areas. The inability to control both urban and rural settings clashes with idealized descriptions like that of the silk screen, *Garden Party on the Terrace of a Country Home*, which portrays distinct socio-economic divisions despite the rural setting. Rural reality, far from the complex cities, created perhaps more ambiguity that allowed for much more fraternization between races and between classes.

Latin American society today still reflects much of the racial hierarchy instituted during colonial times. While the creoles imposed racial castes upon their own society, the decision to racially segregate society did not occur arbitrarily. European scholars condemned the newly encountered Americas with scientific evidence of the stars' ill effects on the masculine Spanish population, predicting irreversible degenerative effects. Spaniards born in the Americas faced the

⁷⁹ Ann Twinam, "Drinking, Gambling, and Death on a Colonial Hacienda," in *Colonial Lives: Documents on Latin American History, 1550-1850*, ed. Richard Boyer and Geoffrey Spurling (New York: Oxford University Press: 2000), 187-188.

choice of whether to accept a subordinate status in the eyes of their mother country or whether to fight for their honor as a titled noble class. In part to assert their equality to Spaniards, creoles asserted their domination over colonial society, and blamed indigenous and African members as the true source of idleness and effeminacy. Despite attempts to create their own legitimate culture, they inherited long-established social and legal principles from the Spanish Reconquest that, in turn, influenced the organization of the caste system. *Limpieza de sangre* arguably planted the concept of racial superiority and inferiority in the colonies by providing the concept of “pure” versus “impure” blood and aligned the result with social prestige. Finding the original two-republic structure too insufficiently prepared for the exponential growth of racially mixed populations, creoles aimed instead to categorize society in a hierarchically-based system that accounted for innumerable racial classifications. Public demonstrations of power, administrative oppression, and the propaganda that included the use of *casta* paintings maintained the image of a creole superiority and a sophisticated social organization. However, the inability to confidently determine each person’s race, and the acceptance of some members into the creole echelon through *gracias al sacar* ultimately provided key venues for mobility that the public portrayal of the caste system did not recognize. By the end of the colonial era, colonial social structure diverged completely from Iberian culture to create an institution uniquely Latin American.



Fig. 1: Luis de Meña, *Escenas de Mestizaje*, 1750, oil on canvas, 119 cm x 103 cm, Museo de América, Madrid.



Fig. 2: Theodorum de Bry, *Cusco urbs nobilissima & opule[n]tissima Peruani regni in occide[n]tali sita*, 1596.



Fig. 3: Georg Braun, *Civitates orbis terrarum*, 1575



Fig. 4: Manuel de Arellano, *Rendering of a Mulatta*, 1711.



Fig. 5: *De Español y India Produce a Mestizo*, 1780.



Fig. 6: Miguel Cabrera, *De Mestizo y India; Coyote*, 1763.



Fig. 7: Francisco Clapera, *De Español, e India, Mestizo, De Español, y Castiza, Español, De Lobo e India, Sainbaigo, Sanbaigo, e India, Cambujo*, 1775.



Fig. 8: Francisco Clapera, *De Español, y Mestiza, Castizo, De Español, y Negra, Mulato, De Cambujo, y Mulata, Albarazado, De Albarazado, y Mestiza, Barcina*, 1775.



Fig. 9: Francisco Clapera, *De Mulato, y Española, Morisco, De Morisco, y Española, Alvina, De Barcino, y Mulata, China, De Chino, e India, Genizara*, 1775.



Fig. 10: Francisco Clapera, *De Alvina, y Español, Torna-Atras, De Torna-Atras, e Indio, Lobo, De Genizaro, y Mulata, Gibaro, De Gibaro, y Mulata, Tente en el ayre*, 1775.



Fig 11: *Portrait of Francisco de Orense y Moctezuma, Count of Villalobos, 1761.*



Fig 12: *Garden Party on the Terrace of a Country Home, 1725*

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