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# An Unsettling Racial Score Card

## An Exhibition of Mexico's 18th Century 'Caste Paintings' Is More Cause for Consternation Than Celebration

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Of the many gifts that Mexico has given contemporary American culture, few are greater than the concept of *mestizaje*—racial and cultural synthesis. After the Spanish conquest of the 16th century, modern Mexico emerged as a fusion of the old and new worlds, an amalgamated nation that is both European and Indian without truly being either.

While interracial sexual unions involving Indians, Europeans, Africans and Asians were common from the early days of the Conquest, intermarriage became increasingly accepted only in the latter half of the 17th century. In the 18th century, the threatened white elite, fearing this rising tide of *castas*—the term Spaniards used for the colony's many racially mixed people—devised a caste system to establish status distinctions between the sub-groups in order to divide them and reinforce the Spaniards' sense of their own exclusivity. In part to illustrate the system, elites commissioned paintings of the many categories of *castas*—a racial score card of sorts.

The Los Angeles County Museum of Art is currently displaying "Inventing Race: Casta Painting and Eighteenth-Century Mexico"—more than 100 examples of the genre, including a rare complete set. The exhibition has a particular resonance here in Los Angeles, which, not coincidentally, shares the distinction of being the most Mexican of American cities and having among the highest intermarriage rates of any city in the United States.

*Casta* paintings are perverse family portraits. They depict the race of the mother, father and offspring. Works of art and natural history, they also are instruments of racial oppression, the product of a white supremacist ideology that sought to control and provide a hierarchy for rampant racial mixing.

The paintings delineated racially mixed Mexicans according to their distance from the purity of

European whiteness. They sought to educate viewers on the social consequences of forging interracial alliances. Certain combinations could help mixed families regain a semblance of whiteness. Others would only lower a family's status. If a woman of Spanish-Indian heritage married an Indian man, her child would be demoted in the social scale and might be labeled as a *salta atrás*—or a jump backward.

The offspring of these mixed unions—from the mestizos and the mulattoes to the *zambos* and the *chinos*—were forced to survive in society's in-between spaces. Deprived of a stable place in the social order and without firm roots in any one heritage, the racially mixed learned to thrive amid social, racial and cultural ambiguity.

Anthropologist Eric Wolf wrote that the mestizo's "chances of survival lay neither in accumulating cultural furniture nor in cleaving to cultural norms, but in an ability to change, to adapt, to improvise. The ever shifting nature of his social condition forced him to move with guile and speed through the hidden passageways of society, not to commit himself to any one position or to any one spot."

For years, scholars believed that colonial Mexicans actually lived according to this intricate system of racial castes. They mistook these paintings as depictions of social reality. But the categories enshrined in *casta* paintings never came close to reflecting the variety and dynamism of colonial race relations. And while the minority white European elite was obsessed with racial purity, most Mexican commoners were not.

But while widespread mixture made enforcement of a true caste system impossible, the notion of a racial hierarchy did nonetheless influence the nation's self-image. Today the relative absence of dark-skinned actors on Mexican television is a legacy of this tradition. Some Latin American-born advertising executives have imported this prejudice to the United States. Their advertisements routinely feature light-skinned models in campaigns designed to target a Latino population that is distinctly heterogeneous.

Essential to understanding Mexican history, the mestizo consciousness is increasingly influencing visions of the American future. No one has put it better than Mexican novelist Carlos Fuentes when he wrote: "Is anyone better prepared to deal with this central issue of dealing with the Other than we . . . the Hispanics in the U.S.A.? We are Indian, black, European, but above all mixed, mestizo."

Accordingly, Mexican American writers—from Richard Rodriguez to John Phillip Santos—are at the forefront of imagining a racially mixed America. Indeed, it was Mexican American intellectuals who first rejected the English term "miscegenation"—with all its nasty overtones—in favor of the more neutral (or is it celebratory?) Spanish term, *mestizaje*.

And yet, Mexicans and Mexican Americans rarely acknowledge the dark side of this mixed heritage. Left unexplored are the resentment, the rivalry, the constant jockeying for position inherent in a racially fluid, 500-year-old civilization that has barely begun to congeal. "We are

unstable," wrote Mexican philosopher José Vasconcelos. "We are a new product, a new breed, not yet entirely shaped."

Ironically, given the United States' own tragic history of race relations, Mexican Americans have gradually liberated themselves from the pigmentocracy of the mother country. Perhaps the most significant legacy of the Chicano Movement was to remove the shame of brownness.

Unlike Anglo American racism, Mexican racism did not impede or deny racial mixture. But despite its official ideology of celebrating the mestizo, Mexico has yet to overcome the racial arrogance of its elites.

Despite their billing, the *casta* paintings do not "celebrate" *mestizaje*. Their original intent was to reveal its dangers, and today they remain unsettling. There is little doubt that the American future will be mixed, and that is a far cry better than the racial segregation of our not-so-distant past. But the *casta* paintings, products of colonial Mexico, are nonetheless poignant reminders of the struggles that lie ahead here in the United States. While *mestizaje* will continue to break down racial and ethnic barriers, it will also sow confusion and instability; some identities will be lost while others will be born. We must resist the inevitable efforts to impose order on this chaos.

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