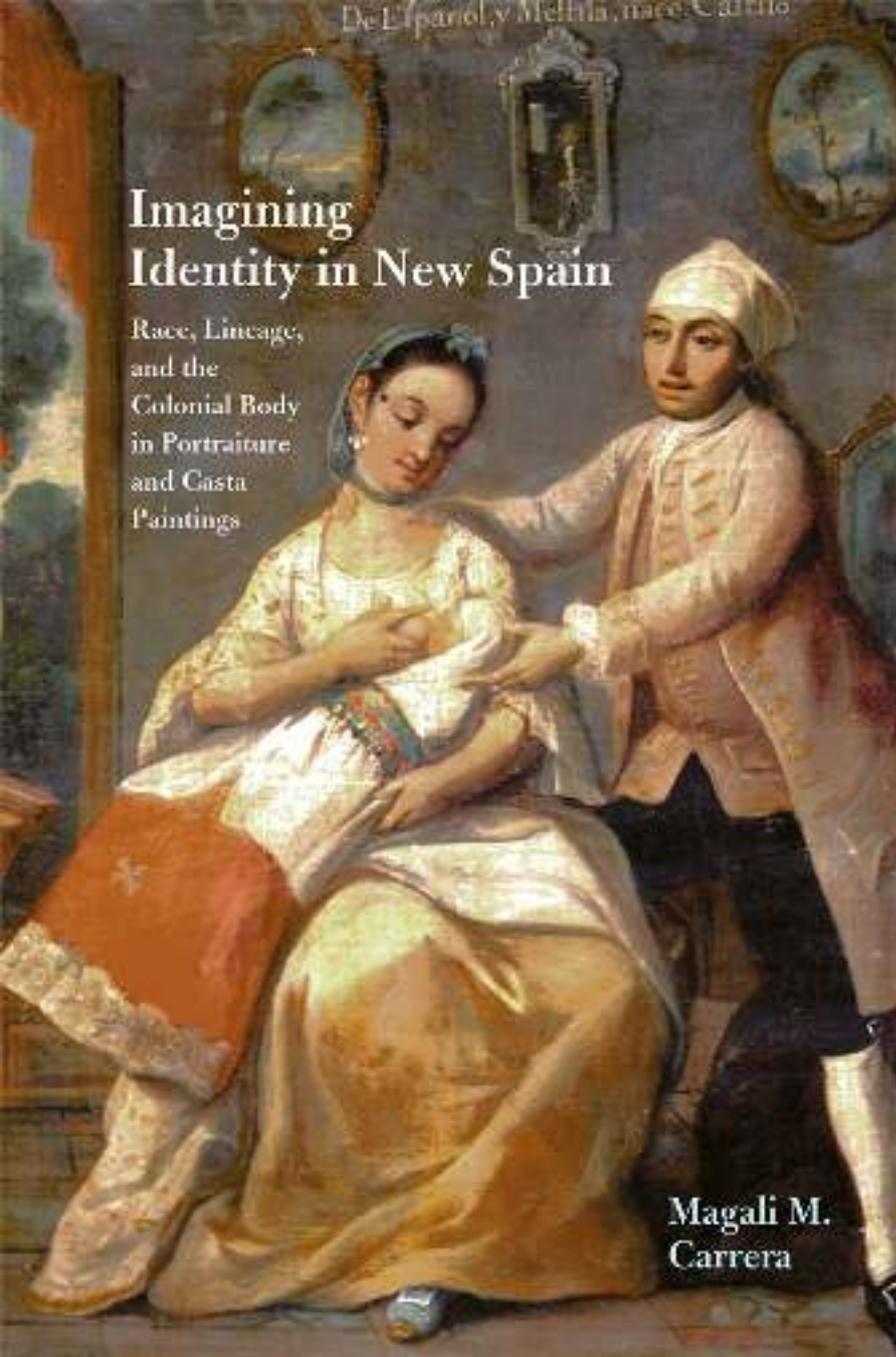


De Espanol y Melilla, nace Castiño

Imagining Identity in New Spain

Race, Lineage,
and the
Colonial Body
in Portraiture
and Casta
Paintings

Magali M.
Carrera



Imagining Identity in New Spain

*JOE R. AND TERESA LOZANO LONG SERIES IN
LATIN AMERICAN AND LATINO ART AND CULTURE*

Imagining Identity in New Spain

*Race, Lineage, and the Colonial Body
in Portraiture and Casta Paintings*

MAGALI M. CARRERA



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With gratitude and love, I dedicate this book to
My mother and father, who told me about the ocean,
Alan, who always helps me see and hear the ocean,
and
Arin and Ana, who bring me joy as immense as the ocean.

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Introduction

Visual Practices in Late-Colonial Mexico

. . . colonial discourse produces the colonized as a social reality which is at once an “other” and yet entirely knowable and visible. It resembles a form of narrative whereby the productivity and circulation of subjects and signs are bound in a reformed and recognizable totality. It employs a system of representation, a regime of truth, that is structurally similar to realism.

Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*

In the process of researching and writing this book, I found myself constantly returning to the 1769 painting *The Painter’s Cupboard*, an image I had first encountered at the Pinacoteca Virreinal in Mexico City many years ago (figure 1.1). This beautifully executed image by Antonio Pérez de Aguilar, who was active in New Spain between 1749–1769, is one of the few surviving still-life images of the colonial period. It is a painting that one could easily disregard or overlook. Its ostensible topic, artists’ tools and props, seems inconsequential and mundane, especially when compared to other opulent and ornate religious and secular paintings of eighteenth-century New Spain. In the painting, keys dangle in the lock of the wooden cabinet’s closed glass door, and the three shelves inside contain various objects that seem hastily placed. Crammed on the top shelf are a pen, loose paper, books, what appears to be a lute, a violin, and a basket that holds a doll, a clay jar, a palette, and brushes. The middle shelf contains a haphazard arrangement of two silver plates, circular wooden boxes, two loaves of bread, a small clay pitcher with a spoon, and a shallow bowl askew on top of a small wooden barrel. On the bottom shelf, the artist has left a straw basket, another pitcher (possibly of copper) topped with a small ceramic bowl, a patterned plate, three glasses, and two dark glass bottles, one with a short neck and one with a long neck.

Given the late-colonial artists’ propensity for highly ordered imagery, a painting of disheveled objects resting on shelves seems an anomaly. One



Figure 1.1. Antonio Pérez de Aguilar. *The Painter's Cupboard*. Oil. 125 x 98 cm. Museo Nacional de Arte, Mexico City.

scholar has suggested that in this painting the artist has shifted from the contrived composition of baroque still life to the austere Enlightenment idea of “The portrayal of ordinary objects in the dignity of their everyday existence.”²¹ In its present location in the magnificently refurbished Museo Nacional de Arte in Mexico City, the painting’s adjacent label states that the painting is a metaphor for human existence: objects on the top shelf refer to the life of the mind, that is, literature, art, and music; and items on the other shelves are concerned with daily physical subsistence. These stylistic and metaphorical references are, without a doubt, critical elements of the image. I am fascinated, however, not just with the totality of the cupboard but also with the specificity of its contents and their ordering. I am interested in unlocking the cupboard, opening the glass door, looking at each object, and wondering how it came to be made, who was meant to use it, and why it appears on one shelf and not another.

Curiously, while studying the numerous secular images of late-colonial people, I recognized that the objects on the cabinet’s shelves are commonly found in the eighteenth-century secular paintings of New Spain. The paper, pen, books, and musical instruments of the top shelf are found exclusively in association with elite individuals (for example, see figures 3.29, 3.32, and 5.2). The doll might have been a prop used in another type of elite portrait known as a *monja coronada*, an image of a newly professed nun usually shown wearing her habit, an *escudo* or chest shield, and a flowered crown, and holding a flowered scepter and a doll-like image of the Christ child (for example, see figure 3.1). The objects on the second and third shelves—plates, ceramic vases, glass bottles, boxes, and bread—are regularly found in *casta* images, a genre of painting illustrating mixed-blooded plebeians (for example, see figures 3.23, 3.30, and 3.4).

Certain cultural associations are evident as well. Some objects are very clearly European in source: the musical instruments, the glasses, the patterned plate, the artist’s tools, and the bread. Others are truly of the Americas: the weaving technique of the basket on the bottom shelf is indigenous in origin, and the basket itself may have been used for holding tortillas, a traditional food; the clay, copper, and silver of the plates and jars are indigenous materials as well. And then there are hybrid objects, such as indigenous clay molded into European shapes. The cabinet narrates a dynamic mix of European, indigenous, and hybrid objects. The objects in

the cabinet, paralleling the inhabitants of colonial New Spain, are of diverse, distinct, and mixed identities.

Importantly, the objects are visually framed by the cabinet door and related within the ordered space: the upper shelf contains objects associated with elite living conditions, while the second and third shelves hold items that, while possibly used by the elite, most likely refer to plebeian daily existence. What may seem a disorderly but uncomplicated still life is, in fact, quite ordered and intricate: the painting becomes a portrait of the social economy of bodies and spaces that constituted late-colonial culture. Put in another way, Pérez de Aguilar's painting constructs and refers to social identity, not by reference to the figurative image of a person, but by the conceptual linking of social markers and ordered spaces associated with kinds of people. In the following pages, I explore the visual practices and themes exemplified in *The Painter's Cupboard*. I investigate how certain artistic practices of eighteenth-century New Spain visually conceptualized specific social and political constructions of the people of urban New Spain.

In chapter 1, I begin this exploration by looking at the mechanisms by which people and spaces were aligned and ordered in late-colonial Mexico. Because I believe that it is insufficient to talk about material culture without some sense of the texture and context of its production, I examine the curious 1789 court case of Doña Margarita Castañeda. Doña Margarita was an *española*, or Spanish woman, whose name had been written in the wrong baptismal record book, the *libro de castas* (book of mixed-blooded people), instead of the appropriate book, the *libro de españoles* (book of Spaniards). In trying to ascertain if this woman was a true Spaniard, the court did not consider the physical person of Doña Margarita; rather, it was her social body that was assessed, classified, and inscribed within a hierarchy of social meanings and values. Doña Margarita's case introduces the comprehensive issues of the colonial body, its territories, and eighteenth-century techniques and practices of corporeal differentiation. I argue that this case must be considered in the context of the constructs of *calidad*, or status, and *raza*, or lineage, and not of twenty-first-century notions of "race." In addition, I consider the utilization of mimicry, hybridity, and ambiguity, theoretical constructs derived from post-colonial writings, as tools to better understand the conditions and construction of New Spanish colonial discourse.

Chapter 2 provides an overview of Doña Margarita's world through a summary and analysis of social and demographic data on eighteenth-century New Spain. Based on current scholarly research, it clarifies for the reader the social and historical setting of the visual practices of New Spain. Spain's Bourbon dynasty established a social perspective that would emphasize and promote ideals of order, orderliness, and productivity effected through law and management at a time when demographic conditions in metropolitan New Spain were erupting and devolving into more and more disorder.

The next three chapters take up a detailed consideration of the visual practices of eighteenth-century New Spain through analysis of the visual structuring of examples of eighteenth-century portraiture and three sets of casta paintings. In chapter 3, we see that through time, casta paintings incorporate more and more of the lived environment of metropolitan New Spain, and surveillance of people becomes more intense. Identifying these images as illustrations of "race" is a static, twenty-first-century reading of the imagery, and it may actually obscure more complex, subtle, and comprehensive readings of the panels, especially in light of the eighteenth-century superceding notions of hybridity as formulated in the concepts of *raza* and *calidad*. Secular painting, like religious art, was dynamic in style and content and reactive to social and political changes.

In chapter 4, I look at the question, Why would casta paintings emphatically and repeatedly illustrate a phenomenon—mixed blood—whose demographic identification was inconstant and diminishing and, ultimately, nonexistent? Analysis of the production of casta genre paintings as a visual practice must take into consideration the volatile and emerging conditions evidenced in demographic data and archival documents of eighteenth-century Mexico. By the mid-eighteenth century, the discrete categories of casta hierarchy were disappearing demographically, yet the paintings insist on illustrating a complete, and nonfunctioning, taxonomy of castas. Thus, there is a continuing production of casta paintings through the century, at the same time as the mixed-blooded people are disappearing in general from social apperception. I argue that the visual strategy of surveillance is not just about looking; rather, it constructs the very object of its observation: hybrid bodies, that is, people of mixed blood.

Finally, in chapter 5, I examine why casta painting production ends in

the early nineteenth century. I investigate the legal requirements of citizenship in the early nineteenth century, as well as the possible impact of the establishment of the neoclassic ideas and ideals of the Academy of San Carlos at the end of the eighteenth century, which emphasized nationalistic imagery.

Overall, I argue that portraiture, and especially *casta* genre paintings, may better be understood as a set of visual practices embedded in, and reflective of, broader regulatory narratives of the late eighteenth century. These secular art practices narrated an illusion of totality in order to obscure the specificity of the lives and lived conditions of eighteenth-century New Spain.²

Imagining Identity in New Spain

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Identity by Appearance, Judgment, and Circumstances

Race as Lineage and Calidad

Most esteemed Vicar General, I, Christobal Ramon Bivian, a Spaniard and resident of Mexico City, stand before you in this court of New Spain with a most grave problem. It seems that by some error, my wife's baptismal record has been caught in a most egregious falsehood: at baptism, her name was recorded in the book of castas [mixed-bloods], not the book of Spaniards as it should have been. I stand before you with a most urgent request to have this lie corrected by having her name erased from the book that identifies those with the defect of impure blood, and placed in the book for those of our calidad [quality, status].

IN THIS SCENE, I have imagined the polite but intense concern and disquiet of an elite Spaniard who had found that there was a shadow over the bloodline of Doña Margarita Castañeda, his wife. This fictitious narration is based on the archive record of Christobal Ramon Bivian's petition of 1789 in the ecclesiastic court of New Spain. Although court documents do not state why Don Bivian's request was brought forward, it is likely that if the location of Doña Margarita's baptismal record in the libro de castas were made public, it would tarnish Don Bivian's and his family's reputations. More importantly, however, the certification of Doña Margarita's bloodline as pure Spaniard would have been essential for her children's inheritance of the social and civil prerogatives of eighteenth-century Spaniard or *criollo* (American-born Spaniard) status.¹

At initial glance, the Doña's case could be construed as a simple example of late-colonial racial discrimination in New Spain. That is, Don Bivian simply wanted to certify that the Doña and their offspring were free from any taint of Indian, Black African, or mixed blood. While avoiding any confusion with other groups or kinds of New Spanish people is the intent of Bivian's request, to use the general labels of "race" and "racism" is to put twenty-first-century constructs of race into play in eighteenth-

century contexts. In fact, as the following examination reveals, the Doña's case traces the broad territory of the differentiation and alignment of kinds or categories of people of New Spain in terms of the social estates and moral qualities they represented. By demonstrating that it is Doña Margarita's public, social body that must be brought into alignment, I introduce more comprehensive theoretical issues of the colonial body, its territories, and eighteenth-century techniques and practices for its differentiation.

I begin with the facts of Doña Margarita Castañeda's case. On 7 September 1789, Christobal Ramon Bivian, a resident of Mexico City, appeared before the ecclesiastical court and the vicar general of the Archbishopric of New Spain. His request was simple: There had been a flagrant error in the registration of his wife's baptism. For some unknown reason, Doña Margarita's name had been placed in the wrong baptismal record book. Specifically, her name was located in the *libro de castas*, or *libro de color quebrado* (book of mixed-bloods, or book of people of broken color), which recorded people of mixed Spanish, Indian, and/or Black African blood. In fact, according to Don Bivian, Doña Margarita was of pure blood, a Spaniard, and he stood before the vicar to request that his wife's name be removed from the *libro de castas* and placed in the *libro de españoles*.²

Such a request required investigation. Over the following weeks, a court notary collected sworn depositions from four witnesses about their knowledge of Doña Margarita and her background. In one declaration, dated 10 September 1789, Don Mariano Linarte, a priest from Tacuba, swore under oath that he had known Doña Margarita for fifteen years. Although he did not know her parents, he claimed he had knowledge that they were "españoles limpios de toda mala raza" (Spaniards clean of bad lineage, meaning without stain of Black African, Moorish, or Jewish blood). Further, according to what he had heard from two people, a brother of Margarita's father held the noble rank of Caballero Cruzado, a title that would have required an official certification of purity of Spanish blood, known as *limpieza de sangre*. Finally, Linarte stated that Doña Margarita was "tenida y reputada públicamente [*sic*] por tal Española" (considered and reputed publicly to be a Spaniard). Having communicated with her on several occasions, Linarte found her to be a woman of "circunstancias y de juicio manifestando su buen nacimiento"

(circumstances and judgment manifesting her good birth). He concluded that he had never heard or known of anything to the contrary.³

In the next, very brief affidavit, a Maestro Juan Jose Pina y Auñon, a priest from the San Pablo parish, stated that he had known Doña Margarita for fourteen years and had always considered her to be a Spaniard; however, not having known her parents or her ancestors, he declined to say more.⁴ A third priest, Mariano Aponte, stated that he had known Don Ramon Bivian for twenty years and Doña Margarita for four years. Repeating the first priest's words, Aponte stated that he knew her to be a Spaniard "limpia de toda mala raza, tenida y reputada por tal." He testified that her mother was a criolla, a Spanish woman born in New Spain, and her father was a *gachupín*, a derogatory term for a Spaniard born in Spain.⁵ They were considered Spaniards, and "lo manifestaban en sus personas y circunstancias" (they demonstrated it in their persons and circumstances). Finally, Aponte concluded that he had not heard or known of any fact to the contrary.⁶

The next witness statement is that of Petra Pozos, a free Black woman of about seventy years of age, born and living in Mexico City, and the widow of Domingo Gorospe. Petra testified that she had known Doña Margarita de Agrestas since she was a little girl because, as a baby, Margarita had been entrusted to her care, and as an adult, Petra had accompanied the young Doña to her husband's house. She stated the Doña Margarita's father was a *gachupín*; that both parents were Spaniards, "tenidos y reputados como tales"; and that Petra had never heard or known of anything to the contrary. Petra Pozos was unable to sign her deposition because she could not write.⁷

Finally, on 16 September 1789, after a review of the testimony presented, the court adjudged that it had been proved sufficiently that Doña Margarita was "de calidad española, hija de padres españoles, conocidos notoriamente por tales" (of the status or quality of Spaniard, daughter of Spaniards, well known as such). It was then ordered that the priest of San Miguel parish remove the name of Doña Margarita Castañeda from the libro de castas, where it was mistakenly recorded, and inscribe her name into the libro de españoles.⁸

At first reading, the facts of the case point to a simple incident of mistaken identity or, perhaps, a scribe's error. Whatever the cause of the alleged recording error, however, the court had to adjudicate whether

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