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Author(s): Magali M. Carrera

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Magali M. Carrera

Locating Race in Late Colonial Mexico

It is a warm summer morning in late eighteenth-century Mexico City. An evening rain has left a soft haze hanging over the cobblestone streets; the sweet smell of wood fires fills the nostrils as street vendors prepare fresh tortillas; the swishing sound of brooms is heard as merchants sweep the walkways in front of their shops. The bells of the cathedral drone the beginning of another busy day in the capital city of New Spain.

Early on this morning, Mauricia Josepha de Apelo, a light olive-skinned woman of about thirty-five, clothed in an old but clean silk dress and a shawl, with a strand of pearls around her neck, strides quickly down Calle Guatemala on her way to the Inquisition tribunal. She has been summoned to explain the nature of her belief in heaven and the devil. She cannot remember how many times she has appeared in the court and wonders what new charges will be brought against her. She does recall that the prosecutor's questions confuse her at times; she knows that no matter how truthful she is, the inquisitor will call her *tonta* (stupid) again. Lost in her thoughts, Mauricia accidentally bumps into a light-skinned *criollo* (Spaniard born in New Spain) woman as she descends from a carriage with the help of her *mulatta* (of black and Spanish parentage) maid. Smoothing her heavily embroidered velvet gown and adjusting a multistrand pearl necklace, the young woman hisses, "Back to your *barrio*, *mestiza* [of Spanish and Indian parentage] wretch! You may wear pearls and own a silk dress, but you are still a lowly *casta* [person of mixed blood] who disgraces our land with your contemptible social characteristics." Mauricia stares coldly at the young woman, then pulls her shawl tightly around her head and shoulders and mumbles "*criolla* tramp" as she hurries on.

Crossing the *zocálo* (central plaza), Mauricia passes the great cathedral and notices a huge, circular, stone sculpture recently embedded in the bell-tower wall. City gossips say that it is a pagan image made by the ancient Indians. "Blasphemy! The *indios* [Indians] are the lowest of peoples. Why would the Church allow such a thing to be placed there?" she mutters to herself. As she turns the last corner to the tribunal building, she is again stopped. This time the walkway is obstructed by a stack of oil paintings leaning against the wall, waiting to be placed in a nearby carriage. Mauricia gazes at one canvas: a man dressed in the latest fashion plays a violin, and a finely dressed woman holds a squirming child who tries to grab the violin bow; they sit in an elegantly decorated room. Although almost illiterate, Mauricia can distinguish a few words. She identifies the word *española* (Spanish), inscribed next to the image of the woman; the word *castizo* (of mestizo and Spanish parentage) next to the man; and the word *española* above the child. Born of a *castizo* mother and an *español* father, Mauricia considers herself to be an *española*. Drawn to these people who gaze back at her, she identifies her *casta* designation, yet she does not recognize herself in this painting. The cathedral bells toll again. Jolted from staring at the picture, Mauricia hurries two doors down to the entryway of the tribunal. She turns to look at the painting one more time. She wonders who those people could possibly be.

Although fictitious, this story is based in historical fact. Mauricia Josepha de Apelo did live in late colonial Mexico City; and when she was summoned to the Inquisition court because of her alleged disbelief in the Holy Faith, her racial identity was called into question.¹ *Criollos* of Mexico City are known to have had



I. I de Español é Yndia Mestizo (I from a Spaniard and an Indian Woman, Mestizo), last quarter 18th c. Oil. 14 x 19 (36 x 48). Museo de América, Madrid.

great contempt for people of mixed ancestry, and an ancient Aztec sculpture was placed on the cathedral tower.² Finally, casta paintings, which portrayed the three major groups who inhabited the colony—Indians, Spaniards, and Africans—and their offspring were produced throughout the eighteenth century.

In my fictional narration these seemingly disparate fragments of late colonial life in New Spain intersect with two distinct notions of race: biological (based on perceived physical characteristics, such as skin color or hair texture, believed to identify one as of a particular race) and social (based on social perceptions, associations, and definitions believed to delimit one as of a particular race).³ This essay will examine the functioning of these conceptions of race in a late eighteenth-century casta painting series (figs. 1–5). The realism, detail, and organization emphasized in casta paintings persuade the viewer that he or she is seeing accurate and comprehensive illustrations of the diverse peoples who composed the colonial society of New Spain. In fact, casta paintings do not illustrate race but instead locate it in the intersection of certain physical, economic, and social spaces of late colonial Mexico. Analyses of colonial definitions of casta rankings, Mauricia's encounter with the Inquisition, and late eighteenth-century views on the social ordering of urban Mexico City provide narrative positions for this examination.

Social identity in colonial Mexico was embedded in the belief that New Spain consisted of two distinct republics: *república de los indios* and *república de los españoles*. The two republics, however, were populated by three distinct peoples or races: Indians, Spaniards, and sub-Saharan Africans (the last were brought to New Spain to fulfill certain labor needs but fit into neither republic). Despite the imagined binary social division, the mixing of blood produced a tertiary, intermediate people identified as castas and resulted in a complex and contradictory society.⁴

As early as the 1540s, the Spanish crown sought ways to bring the castas into social and economic alignment with the two republics. A society of castes was established in which fourteen to twenty distinct castas were ranked according to the amount of mixing of Spanish, Indian and/or African blood.⁵ For example, a person of half-Spanish and half-African ancestry was designated as mulatto; a person of mulatto and Indian ancestry, *zambo*; and so on. Further mixing was duly classified and labeled. As used in reference to castas, the term *español* indicated someone whose blood had returned to the state of being Spanish—that is, a person having one-eighth or less Indian ancestry. This system also proscribed the physical and social mobility of castas. Castas were not allowed to live in the Indian neighborhoods; certain official posts were denied to mestizos; and sumptuary legislation denied specific types of clothing and jewelry to certain castas.⁶

Mauricia was well acquainted with the casta system and the dilemma of having a labeled identity. She was called to the Inquisition in two separate proceedings: sometime between 1768 and 1773 and then again between 1784 and 1785. Her confessors claimed that Mauricia did not believe in certain articles of faith.⁷ After extended hearings and surveillance reports, the court determined that she had “disruptive spiritual diseases or illnesses” and ordered her to undergo certain curative penances.⁸

Although for the most part the inquisitors assessed Mauricia's spiritual con-

1. *Inquisición fiscal de Sto Oficio contra Mauricia Josepha de Apelo, española de estate soltera vecina de esta ciudad. Por dichos y hechos hereticales. Espontanea. Reclusa en el Hospicio y declarada loca. México Inquisición*, AGN Ramos de Inquisición 1768, tomo 1009, exp. 15 fs 309–353, Archivo General de la Nación, Mexico City.

2. Antonio León y Gama, *Descripción histórica y cronológica de las dos piedras que con ocasión del nuevo empedrado que se está formando en la plaza principal de México se hallaron en ella el año de 1790*, 2d ed., ed. C. de Bustamente (Mexico: Alejandro Valdés, 1832).

3. Patricia Seed, “The Social Dimensions of Race: Mexico City, 1753,” *Hispanic American Historical Review* 62, no. 4 (November 1982): 574.

4. Douglas Cope, *The Limits of Racial Discrimination* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1994), 3–7.

5. Magnus Mörner, *Race Mixture in the History of Latin America* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1967), 51–58.

6. Cope, 15–17.

7. *Inquisición*, fs 311–13.

8. *Ibid.*, 332.

dition, various asides in the tribunal records provide glimpses into her life as a casta. She was identified as the thirty-five-year-old unwed daughter of Martín de Apelo, español, and Phelesia Galizia, castiza, and servant to Francisco Azullar de Maianry, an artisan. Theoretically, Mauricia was of the highest level of casta classification—an española. But in spite of her confirmed parentage, throughout the court documents her caste was identified inconsistently: sometimes she was labeled a castiza; at other times, a mestiza. Furthermore, in an unusual digression a notary responded to Mauricia's claim to be an española with the comment, "It's doubtful."⁹ This confusion about her casta category probably indicates that Mauricia's physical racial markers (skin color, hair texture) were not easily classified. Most likely, she was identified as a castiza or mestiza because she was illiterate, a servant, and unmarried. That is, in the court proceedings, intellectual, economic, and social markers located Mauricia's racial designation more readily than her physical characteristics.

Living with this mislabeling and confusion about her casta designation irritated Mauricia. She complained to her confessor that certain supposed española ladies in the hospital where she took her curative penances were allowed to use their parish priest, while she had to use the hospital chaplain.¹⁰ More informative is her elaboration of the nature of heavenly reward. She believed that there are seven heavens and in all there is glory, but with this difference: that in the highest heaven, and most glorious, are the priests and nuns; in the next level are the españoles, in the third, others of inferior quality according to their color and caste. Of course, the Indians and the blacks are in this last heaven and here there is not that much glory because it does not conform to one's merit, but to one's caste.¹¹

The court did not receive this view of heaven well. For Mauricia, however, no mysteries of faith or curative penances could clarify why the earthly hierarchy of race did not exist in the spiritual world. Analysis of this episode of Mauricia's case reveals that her "disruptive illness" exposed the ambiguous and contradictory boundaries of race and suggests that she attempted to undermine her labeled identities—mestiza and castiza—and to relocate her preferred identity, española, in an important spiritual space, the afterlife.

In her daily movements through the streets of Mexico City, Mauricia would have seen sculptural fragments of ancient monuments embedded in many colonial edifices as building material. In 1790 two sculpted monoliths were unearthed near the city's central plaza. One—a large, flat, disc-shaped relief later named the Sun Stone or Calendar Stone—was displayed for public viewing on a tower wall of the cathedral.¹² In 1792 Antonio León y Gama, a mathematician with an interest in antiquities, published a lengthy and detailed essay on the Sun Stone. He concluded that, as a complex calendar, it manifested the great intellectual achievements of the ancient Indians.¹³ Two years later, reacting to caustic criticism of his original essay, an odd, parenthetical discussion of racial identity surfaced in León y Gama's writings.

A certain writer, José Alzate y Ramírez, had questioned the validity of León y Gama's research by asserting that one of his primary sources was not authentic; he alleged that it was written by a mestizo, not an indio.¹⁴ León y Gama justified his scholarly reasoning for using this source, then claimed that he knew the differences in character between indios and mestizos because of his daily

9. *Ibid.*, 323.

10. *Ibid.*, 351.

11. *Ibid.*, 351–51b.

12. León y Gama, 11.

13. *Ibid.*, 5.

14. This edition was published posthumously; Antonio León y Gama, *Descripción histórica y cronológica de las dos piedras que con ocasión del nuevo empedrado que se está formando en la plaza principal de México se hallaron en ella el año de 1790*, 2d ed., ed. C. de Bustamente (Mexico: Alejandro Valdés, 1832), 1–40.



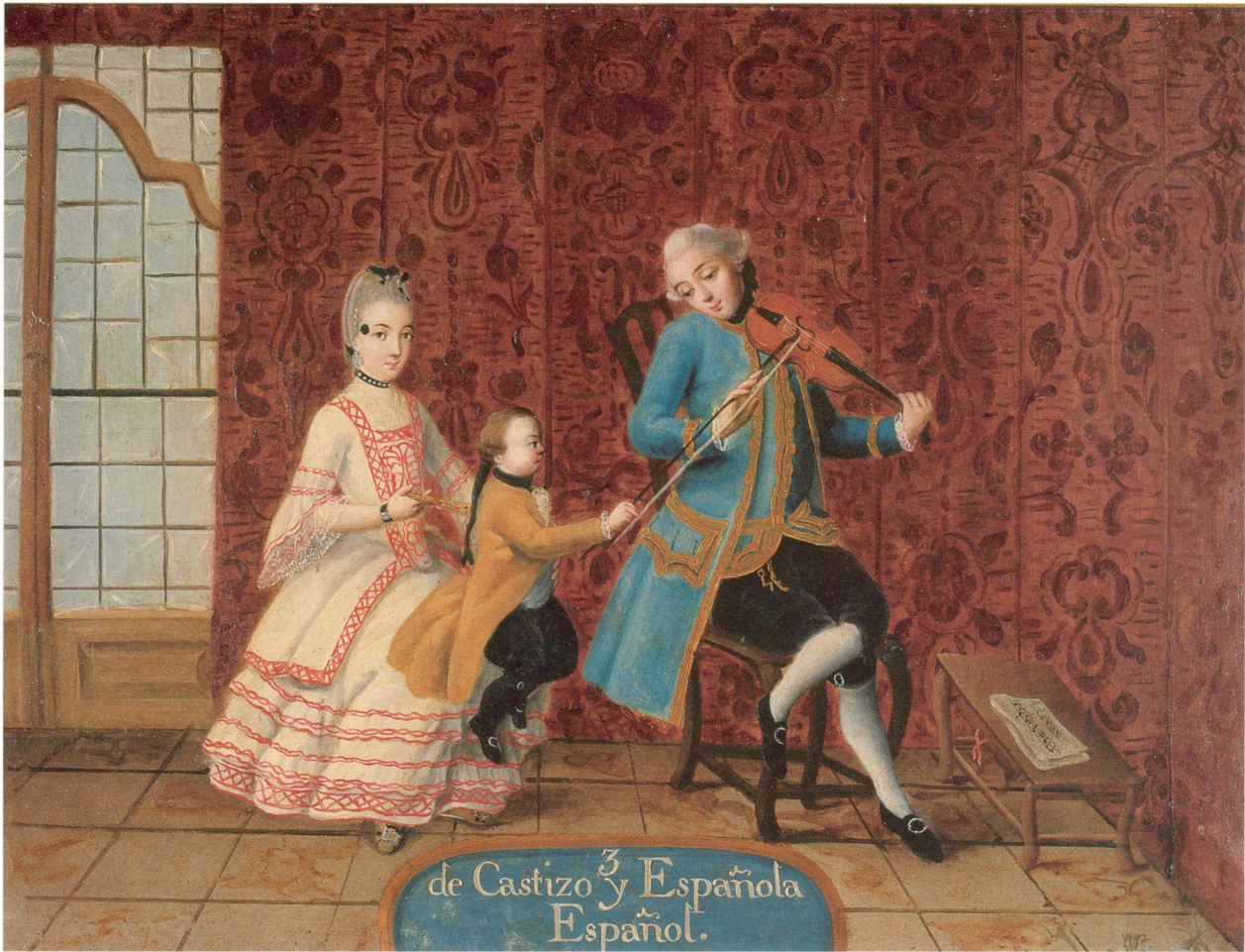
2. 2 de Mestiza y Español Castizo (2 from a Mestizo Woman and a Spaniard, Castizo), last quarter 18th c. Oil. 14 x 19 (36 x 48). Museo de América, Madrid.

business encounters with these people. Although both indios and mestizos knew Spanish well, he stated that the indios adulterated “our language” and were better able to explain themselves in their native tongue.¹⁵ Furthermore, he dared Alzate to go to the corridors of the palace, where he would find “real” indios with last names like Cortés, Mendoza, Peña, Luna, and Mendez, which were properly Castilian surnames. It was ridiculous, León y Gama concluded sarcastically, to believe someone was a mestizo just because of a last name.¹⁶

Like Mauricia’s lived confusion of racial labels, León y Gama’s comments attest to the discontinuity between racial theory and lived social reality in New Spain. Distinguishing between mestizos and indios was confusing if one depended on skin color or labels, such as surnames. For León y Gama, categorizing people by race was a process of knowing the boundaries of language usage and listening to how non-native speakers manipulated the limits of usage in certain public contexts. Here, León y Gama directed his critic—and reader—to consider the authenticity of race in the context of urban encounters. In fact, the ordering of metropolitan spaces was a crucial theme of late colonial culture. In calling for a reordering of urban spaces, various writers cited Mexico City’s disorderly and unsanitary physical conditions caused by

15. *Ibid.*, 12–13.

16. *Ibid.*, 15.



3.3 de Castizo y Española Español (3 from a Castizo and a Spanish Woman, Spaniard), last quarter 18th c. Oil. 14 x 19 (36 x 48). Museo de América, Madrid.

unkempt street vendors and such activities as maintaining livestock within the city limits.¹⁷

The notion of structured and bounded metropolitan spaces is projected into high relief in José Fernández de Lizardi's late colonial novel *El periquillo samiento* (*The Itching Parrot*, 1816).¹⁸ Living in Mexico City, Fernández de Lizardi (1776–1827) would have encountered the same people and places as de Apelo and León y Gama. The novel tracks the slow moral, social, and financial deterioration of Pedro Sarmiento, who was born into the criollo rank of Mexican society, but without the family financial resources to support his desired life of elite leisure. Fernández de Lizardi critiques Pedro's life as a scoundrel and charlatan by having him explore the shops, marketplaces, bars, jails, hospitals, and rich and poor houses where people of diverse social and casta rank work and live. Here, the people of late colonial Mexico City are characterized by their actions in the specific, hierarchical, metropolitan spaces they inhabit. Fernández de Lizardi's novel expands and confirms the concept of spatial ordering—physical, social, and economic—as being a significant defining and locating boundary of late colonial life.

Casta paintings explore the same boundaries and contradictions of race in late colonial Mexico lived by Mauricia, evoked by León y Gama, and critiqued

17. See *Antología de textos sobre la ciudad de México en el periodo de la Ilustración (1788–1792)*, ed. Sonia Lombardo de Ruiz (Mexico: Instituto Nacional Antropología e Historia, 1982), 12–17.
18. José Fernández de Lizardi, *El periquillo samiento* (Mexico: Editorial Porrúa, 1964).

by Fernández de Lizardi. Produced in Mexico from the eighteenth through the beginning of the nineteenth century, these paintings typically were executed in series, with each panel showing a specific *casta* grouping. An inscription annotates the *casta* nomenclature of the group. The earliest paintings show half-length figures with little or no background detail. After the mid-eighteenth century, figures are represented more consistently full-length in explicit locales, including domestic interiors, commercial cityscapes, and open landscapes. Within these urban and countryside settings, material aspects of colonial life, such as clothing, foodstuffs, and vocational/trade items and activities are also depicted.¹⁹

Little is known about who commissioned the *casta* cycles. Because many of the paintings have been located in Spain, it is thought that the intended viewers were Spaniards or criollos.²⁰ Some scholars suggest that the paintings were executed as souvenirs for Spaniards returning to their native land,²¹ and documents indicate that certain *casta* paintings were presented to the king of Spain.²² Because of their wide dispersal in public and private collections in Europe and the Americas and their scant documentation, scholarship on *casta* paintings has been limited. María Concepción García Sáiz's 1989 catalogue provided the first comprehensive survey of the genre. More recently, an exhibition catalogue edited by Ilona Katzew offered an overview of current scholarship.

Katzew argues that the paintings promoted a regulated and controlled image of the colony, which countered the anxiety fostered by the perceived threat of the *castas*. The paintings also precisely demonstrated those aspects of colonial society that distinguished Mexico from the Old World.²³ As strategies of self-representation, Katzew continues, *casta* paintings emphasized the overall stratification of society through the metaphor of race, highlighted the wealth and abundance of Mexico, and involved "the deliberate mediation of reality . . . through scenes selected for representation."²⁴ Unexplored in these interpretations, however, is the critical question of how the meanings of race circulated within the painted images through the location and depiction of certain boundaries and limits.

It is easy to recognize specific factual references to colonial life in these paintings: the architecture of Mexico City (fig. 5); the distinctive landscape of the basin of Mexico (fig. 1); the characteristic dress of indigenous people, as well as that of the Spanish elite (figs. 1, 3); artisans making and selling their wares; and the tropical fruits and vegetables seen in every local market (fig. 5). Unexpectedly though, the physical markers of race—skin and hair color—are inconsistent, even ambiguous, and vary from scene to scene. Thus, in one vignette a mulatto may have very dark brown skin, while in a subsequent depiction a mulatta may be shown with light brown skin. *Casta* paintings depict imagined people wearing specific eighteenth-century clothing, living in particular colonial locales, and participating in the typical economies of New Spain. They commingle and confuse physical race with the sociospatial boundaries of race. Indeed, *casta* paintings inform the viewer that physical race is confusing and ambiguous. They attempt to bring order to the deceptive and equivocal nature of the physical markers of race by constructing it as social—encountered, negotiated, and lived between and among specified boundaries. In their keen attention to specific physical, economic, and social spaces, the

19. Ilona Katzew, "Casta Painting, Identity, and Social Stratification in Colonial Mexico," in Katzew, ed., *New World Orders: Casta Painting and Colonial Latin America*, exh. cat. (New York: Americas Society, 1996), 19–29.

20. *Ibid.*, 13.

21. María Concepción García Sáiz, *Las castas mexicanas: Un género de pictórico americano*, exh. cat. (Milan: Olivetti, 1989), 44.

22. Katzew, 13.

23. *Ibid.*

24. *Ibid.*, 27.

paintings are congruent with Lizardi's descriptions of colonial life. Visually and conceptually, they conflate social order with spatial order.

Visual analysis of one late series of *casta* paintings in the collection of the Museo de América in Madrid elucidates this juxtapositioning of imagined people with real and specific boundaries.²⁵ The first painting (fig. 1) shows an Indian woman dressed in a *huipil* (indigenous dress) with an *español* man who wears elegant European-style clothing. Their son, identified as a *mestizo*, walks between his parents as they stroll in the countryside. Behind the woman is a portion of a wall; the *español* father points to a building on the horizon. In the next panel (fig. 2), another family sits in a foyer of a house. The *mestizo* mother, dressed in European fashion, nurses her *castizo* child; the *español* father offers her a flower. To the right of the group, we glimpse a garden; to the left, a doorway leads to other parts of the house. In the third painting of the series (fig. 3), a finely dressed *castizo* man attempts to play a violin. The bow is grabbed by his son, an *español*, who is held by his elegantly dressed mother, also *española*. The group is seated in a decorated room with a large glass window and tapestry-covered walls.

These three panels show the “purification” of *casta* blood, moving from *mestizo* to *castizo* and finally to *español*. This purification is made explicit, not by the lightening of skin color, but by the shift from traditional, indigenous clothing to rich European-style clothing and, most significantly, by the move from a suburban setting to luxurious urban interiors. Hence, as the child of an *india*, the *mestizo* boy is located outside the city, while the *castizo* child's placement between the garden and the interior depths of the house suggests *castizo* identity is transitional between urban and suburban. Finally, in the third panel, the *español* son is depicted in the parlor, the heart of an elite house, where visitors are received and the amenities of privileged colonial life are enjoyed.

In stark contrast to the refined settings of the previous panels, the fourth scene (fig. 4) dramatically switches to the bowels of the eighteenth-century house—the kitchen. This location introduces the notion of unskilled, domestic labor. A simply dressed black woman physically accosts an *español* man with a cooking utensil. He fends off her attack while their child, a *mulatta*, pulls at her mother's skirts. This unruly exchange is diametrically opposed to the controlled, formal behavior of the *castas* of the previous panel. Unlike the purification by Spanish blood of the *indio*-mixed *mestizo* and *castizo*, the miscegenation of Spanish and African blood is contrasted with the boundaries established by behavior, clothing, and physical location in the previous panels. Furthermore, labor is introduced here as an economic marker of *casta* identity.

In the next panel a *mulatta*, an *español*, and their *morisco* son are placed in a tobacco shop. Although European in style, their clothing is not elegant, and the scene has shifted from a domestic to a semipublic, commercial space. Engaged in cigarette making, these *castas* are semiskilled laborers or possibly shop owners. Their pursuit of their trade contrasts with the leisure activities seen in the first three panels, as well as with the fractious behavior depicted in the previous panel, and confirms that social race is being described in the paintings. Each *casta* grouping is explicated by contrast with the specified boundaries of social race established in previous panels. Constant reference to

25. I thank the Museo de América for allowing me to reproduce these paintings. The complete series is reproduced in García Sáiz, 144–51.



4.4 de Español y Negra Mulata (4 from a Spaniard and an African Woman, a Mulatto Girl), last quarter 18th c. Oil. 14 x 19 (36 x 48). Museo de América, Madrid.

the city/countryside distinction further locates the social position of these people.

The series continues showing more *casta* admixtures seen laboring as tailors, cobblers, and street vendors in public and semipublic spaces. In the twelfth panel (fig. 5), a *casta* identified as *tente en el aire* (hold-yourself-up-in-the-air, a Mexican localism) and a mulatta with their *albarrasado* (white-spotted) child are depicted. With city buildings in the background, they sit under an awning on a sidewalk, selling produce from their makeshift fruit stand. We are now fully in the public domain. The vendor, like the mulatta servant and unlike the *español* cigarette maker, is unskilled. Her simple clothing mixes indigenous and European elements. A rich array of produce suggests this *casta* grouping operates between the city and the agricultural countryside outside of Mexico City. This highly mixed *casta* group is visually labeled as problematic, however, because it is stationed in a locale considered disorderly and liminal in urban society, the street.

The series ends with a sixteenth panel showing “pure” indios. The viewer is taken far from the plush interiors of the *español* house, the city streets, and even the cultivated fields to a rough, untamed environment. There people wear scant clothing made of skins and leaves and subsist by hunting and gathering. They are without any of the contrivances of colonial culture. Theoretically, in *casta* hierarchy indios were not *castas*. They conclude this series because their



5. 12 de Tente en el Aire y Mulata, Albarrasado (12 from Tente en el Aire and a Mulatto Woman, Albarrasado), last quarter 18th c. Oil. 14 x 19 (36 x 48). Museo de América, Madrid.

Magali M. Carrera is professor of art history at the University of Massachusetts, Dartmouth. Her most recent publication is "The Inquisition Case of Mauricia Josepha de Apelo: Questioning Identity," in the August 1996 issue of *The Community College Humanities Review*.

dress, subsistence economy, and locale mark that which is outside the boundaries of colonial life.

In the panels of this casta series, the viewer is walked through distinct spheres of late colonial Mexican life. As a twentieth-century viewer, I have begun to comprehend the complexity of racial identity experienced by Mauricia Josepha de Apelo. Traveling the streets of Mexico City, Mauricia met people of various skin colors, dressed in a variety of ways. She saw an urban economy consisting of neat shops tended by mixed-blood castas selling the natural and manufactured products of New Spain. She stumbled into the disorder of public space with lower casta vendors hawking their goods, obstructing the public way, and leaving the streets filthy. Mauricia was keenly aware that there were distinct, hierarchical, social and physical spaces in Mexico City. Some, like the Inquisition court, were established for surveillance and social control. Others, like elite domestic spaces, marked the social site equated with the most pure-blooded castes. As visualizations of race, casta paintings stabilize the ambiguity and complexity of physical race by locating the meanings of race in the confluence, interactions, and mediations between and among physical, social, and economic spaces.