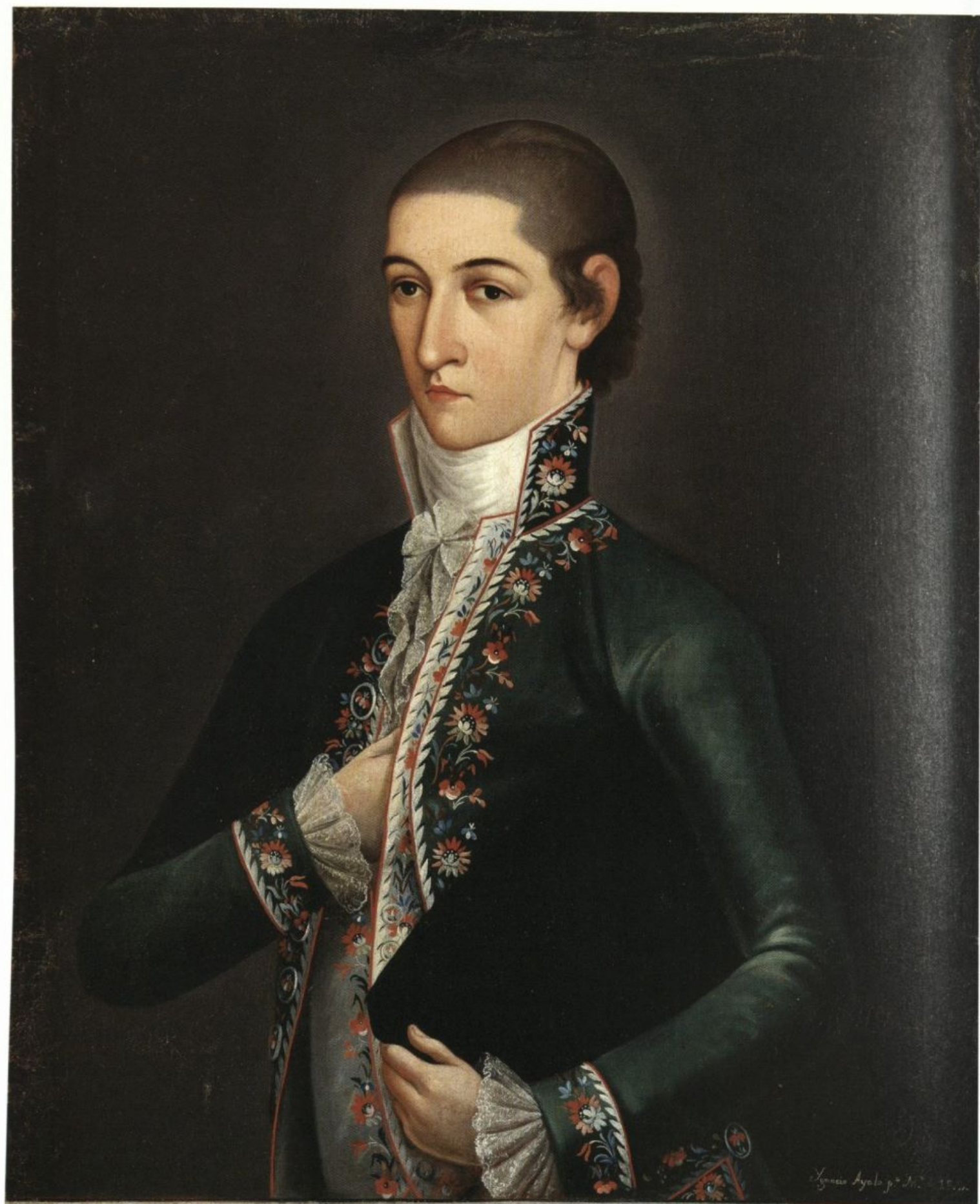

Reimagining Race, Class, and Identity in the New World

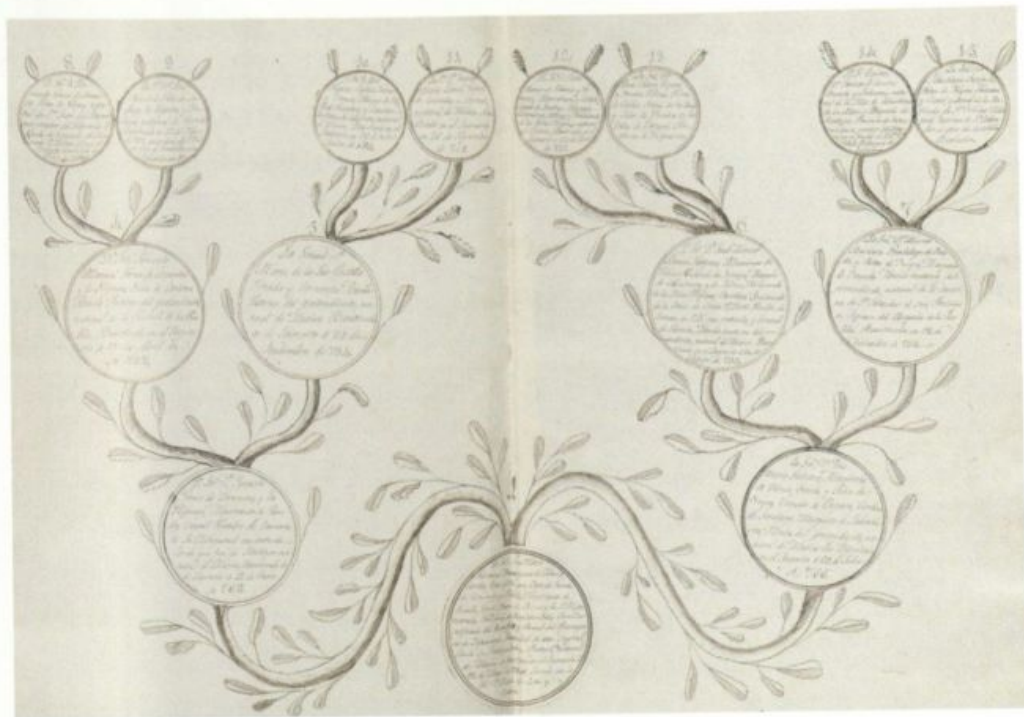
Mia L. Bagneris

An 1802 portrait by Ignacio Ayala (fig. 180) captures the likeness of a dashing gentleman of unequivocal status, his haughty gaze—ever so slightly downward and askance—underscoring his superior position. Outfitted in an elegant lace-trimmed shirt topped with a high-collared, emerald green jacket and an ivory waistcoat, both magnificently embellished with floral embroidery, Don José María Gómez de Cervantes y Altamirano de Velasco, the scion of two old, distinguished Creole families in New Spain and heir to the title of count of Santiago de Calimaya, is the very picture of noble distinction, a young aristocrat with nothing to prove. By 1810, however, Don José did find himself with something to prove: during that year and part of the next, the young Creole occupied himself with the task of submitting proof of his qualifications for election to the Order of Charles III, an exclusive honorary knighthood. In addition to demonstrating “personal merit and service to the king,” candidates for the honor had to provide evidence of their impeccable lineage. The book of family records prepared by Don José in support of his nomination attests to his *nobleza* (nobility) and *limpieza de sangre* (purity of blood)—his descent from a noble lineage considered uncontaminated by Jewish or Moorish ancestry. In a visual expression of the botanical metaphors, such as *raíces*, *tronco*, and *ramas* (“roots,” “trunk,” and “branches”), that Spaniards regularly employed to describe lineage in legal and social contexts, the hopeful Creole offered a pictorial genealogy in the form of a detailed family tree that includes all eight great-grandparents (fig. 181). He presents himself as the fruit of its distinguished branches, with his pure and noble blood traceable along each of the graceful, foliate boughs.¹

Ultimately, Don José’s vision of Spanish Creoles as fruit of the Old World born in the New could not survive long on American soil, nor could the ideology of blood



El Sr. Don Joseph M.^a Cervantes y Velasco Pacilla y Obando, de 17 años de edad.
año de 1802.



OPPOSITE:

180. Ignacio Ayala (Mexican, active 1800–1814). *Don José María Gómez de Cervantes y Altamirano de Velasco, Count of Santiago de Calimaya*, 1802. Oil on canvas, 33 × 25 1/8 in. (83.8 × 63.8 cm). Brooklyn Museum, Museum Collection Fund and the Dick S. Ramsay Fund, 52.166.7*

LEFT:

181. Don José María Gómez de Cervantes (Mexican, 1786–1856). *Genealogía formada con total arreglo a la instrucción de la real y distinguida Orden Español de Carlos tercero à pedimento del Señor Coronel Don José María Cervantes . . .* (Family Book of Records), 1810–11, pp. 14–14a. 12 1/2 × 8 1/2 in. (31.8 × 21.6 cm). Brooklyn Museum, Special Collections, Algara de Terreros Estate*

purity upon which it was based. Just two decades after he sat for the Ayala portrait, Don José and many of his Creole peers would imagine their identities in very different, distinctly American terms. In Spain notions of pure lineage were defined primarily by religion and hereditary nobility, but in the New World, race became an integral and salient factor in the construction of social identity. Focusing primarily on the Spanish Americas and using examples from the British colonies in North America and the Caribbean as illuminating points of comparison and contrast, this essay will explore the construction of and relationship between social and racial identity in the colonial New World. Beginning with purity of lineage as the historical foundation of Spanish social identity, it will analyze the changing implications of this ideology as it traversed the Atlantic and will explore the challenges faced by Creole Spaniards who struggled to circumscribe identity and status in the New World while managing how they were perceived on the Iberian Peninsula. Although the purity discourse associated with Spanish conceptions of social identity had no real British analogue, problematic dynamics concerning race and status also destabilized British life in the American colonies, and Spaniards and Britons developed similar strategies, albeit manifested in quite different ways, to contend with these challenges.

Many of these strategies involved visual and material culture. While references to *sangre* dominated the language of status in Spanish culture, pure and noble blood bled red just like everyone else's, and one could not wear a genealogy pinned to the chest;

therefore, clothing, accessories, and other material goods had historically stood in for blood, charged with visually conveying the status beneath the skin. As Alan Hunt observes in his scholarship on sumptuary legislation, the rise of modernity prompted rising anxieties about the policing of social status, especially as money (rather than ownership or control of land) became the primary indicator of wealth.² Although clothing and status symbols had always been controversial and unreliable signs of one's station, they proved especially so in an upstart colonial environment where the social controls and institutions that had traditionally policed identity in Europe were absent and where mercantile capitalism made luxury goods more accessible to everyone.

In Spanish America, it was not only Spaniards who capitalized on the power of visual and material culture to convey status, nor was Spanish identity exclusively or unequivocally privileged by everyone to the same extent. Those who were not at the top of the socio-racial hierarchy negotiated the complex dynamics of visual and material culture in nuanced ways to use self-representation to their advantage, and they sometimes, often simultaneously, managed to affirm their unique cultural traditions or self-identifications in a manner that belies the dominance of Spanish American constructions of identity.

The Challenges of Genealogical Botany: American Blossoms of the Spanish Elite and the Ideology of Pure Lineage

For Europeans in general, and for the Spanish perhaps more so than others, hierarchical stratification based on hereditary rank served as an essential touchstone of civilization and "a necessary precondition of social life."³ Purity of lineage constituted the ideological foundation of social identity and of the deeply entrenched systems of stratification that governed relations of power on the Iberian Peninsula and in the Spanish Americas (albeit with different emphases and implications). In Spain the social hierarchy had been defined by the conventional estate system, which divided the populace into two discrete groups: the nobility, who collected tribute, and the plebeians, who were obliged to pay it. What María Elena Martínez characterizes as "the Spanish obsession with lineage" initially derived from the need to establish a firm boundary between the two groups by constructing nobility as an essence disseminated through blood.⁴

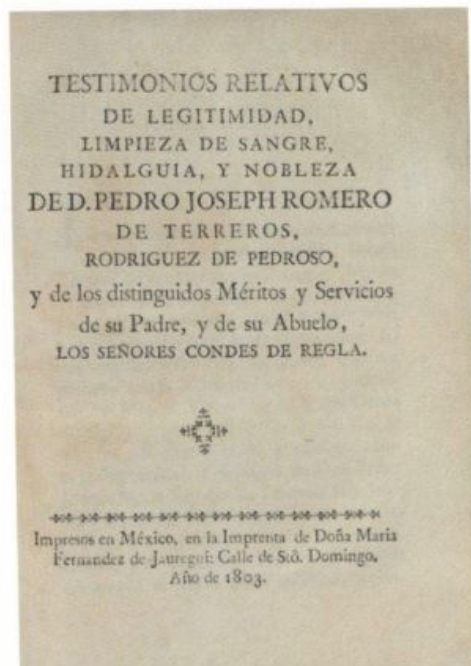
Originally, the obsession with descent and "fetishization of genealogies" applied only to establishing one's *nobleza de sangre*, or descent from unbroken noble lineage.⁵ With the rise of Protestantism, the Counter-Reformation, and the Spanish Inquisi-

tion in the sixteenth century, however, the emphasis shifted to *limpieza de sangre*, a bloodline untainted by Jewish or Moorish forebears. Subsequently, in the latter half of the century, the traditional aristocracy merged the two criteria in order to guard against feared infiltration of its ranks by upwardly mobile *conversos* and *moriscos* (Jewish and Muslim converts, respectively) and commoners of “pure blood” with lofty social aspirations.⁶ Although the ideology of *limpieza* and how it was defined changed over time and across geographies in the growing Spanish empire, “purity” and the idea of social identity as determined by blood remained keystones of Spanish life, as did the notion of social hierarchy that was predicated on them.

Although all nominees for the Order of Charles III and similar honorary knight-hoods, whether born and living in Spain or in the colonies, had to provide proof of their genealogical credentials, the burden of this proof was heavier for Spanish Americans, particularly for Creoles like Don José, who made up less than 10 percent of the membership of the order. Their claims to pure lineage were compromised by the persistent view of the New World as a place of fluid and nebulous boundaries in which any Spaniard, regardless of lineage, might assume the prestigious title of Don.⁷ The observations of the English Dominican friar Thomas Gage, who traveled through Mexico in 1626, demonstrate the wide perception of lax policing of social identity in New Spain: “Everyone will call himself a descendant from a Conqueror, though he be as poor as Job, and ask him what is become of his estate and fortune, he will answer that fortune hath taken them away, which shall never take away a Don from him.”⁸ Moreover, the territories were characterized as a land teeming with *castas*, or people of mixed race. The first mixed-race progeny appeared in the Americas roughly nine months after the Spanish did, and in the Spanish Americas—indeed, in the colonized Americas generally, though with local differences—social status acquired a racial dimension that makes any discussion of social and racial identity in mutually exclusive terms nearly impossible. In the New World, the two concepts were inextricably intertwined.

Within the context of such challenges to Creole status, testaments like the Gómez de Cervantes y Altamirano de Velasco family book reaffirmed Old World standards of social hierarchy and reiterated Creoles’ ties “with a broader Spanish community of blood” (even as they developed increasingly strong local identities and pride as residents of New Spain).⁹ Moreover, Creoles continually rehearsed this process, since the accumulation of new offices and honors often required individuals from families whose pure lineage had been previously certified to reestablish their pristine origins. This practice accounts, perhaps, for the publication, in 1803, of the genealogy of the counts of Regla (fig. 182), which attests to the unimpeachable *limpieza*, according to

182. Pedro Joseph Romero de Terreros. *Testimonies of the Legitimacy, Purity of Blood, and Nobility of the Counts of Regla* (Mexico City: La Imprenta de Doña Maria Fernandez de Jauregui . . . , 1803), title page. 8¼ × 5¾ in. (21 × 14.6 cm). Brooklyn Museum, Museum Collection Fund and the Dick S. Ramsay Fund, 52.166.72 *



every possible criterion, of a distinguished Creole about whose pure lineage there should have been no doubt. Pedro José Romero de Terreros's grandfather, elected to the prestigious Order of Calatrava in 1752 and named the first count of Regla in 1768, undoubtedly would have undergone comprehensive *limpieza* investigations in association with both of these honors, as his father would have done on becoming the second count of Regla. Repeating this process, however, underscored the nobleman's identity as unequivocally rooted in the Iberian Peninsula even as it blossomed in New Spain.

"Disorderly Connexions" and Damage Control: Managing the Conundrums of Being Creole

For most of the colonial period, "race" was a more elastic and contextually contingent concept in the popular imagination than it is today. Although the construction of race as an essential, fixed, discrete, and empirical element of identity initially developed and became more and more calcified during the period, race simultaneously remained a rather unstable concept well through the eighteenth century; by then, increasingly biological models competed with more ambivalent protoracial ideologies, which stressed religion, civility, and social rank as more significant indicators of fundamental human difference than skin color or other physical attributes.¹⁰ The lack of consensus resulting from these rival ideologies significantly informed the increasingly fraught state of racial identity for those of European descent born in the colonial Americas, where boundaries of social identity were notoriously nebulous. For example, the perceived threat of interracial sexual relations to the colonial order, as well as indictments of Creole degeneracy and the insinuations of so-called climate theory (which asserted that climate played an integral role in determining a person's biology, appearance, and character; see essay by Aste in this volume), resulted in distinctive performances of social identity by both Spanish and British Creoles sensitive to how they were perceived in the European mind. In the Spanish Americas, which were made up of several overseas provinces rather than colonies, these concerns chiefly manifested themselves in an interest in preserving Creoles' cultural identities as fully Spanish (even while, beginning in the eighteenth century, simultaneously forging new cultural identities as proudly American).

The perception of the Americas as overrun with mixed-blooded *castas*—who themselves embodied the transgression of "proper" boundaries—tarnished, if only by association, the perception of Spanish Americans' "purity of blood." The *casta* system emerged as an attempt to impose order on an increasingly diverse society by containing, at least theoretically, the mixing of races through a hierarchically structured

taxonomy.¹¹ This scheme essentially defined people on the basis of their distance from a Spanish ideal, classifying individuals according to the races of their parents. Each of the various combinations of Spanish and Indian, Spanish and African, and, least desirably, African and Indian resulted in a different *casta* with its own designation. However, the very nomenclature of the *casta* system itself, which sometimes offered inconsistent designations for the same racial mix and included fanciful descriptions for some admixtures—such as *torna-atras* (literally, “return backward”; also called a *salta-atras*, or “jump-back”), *tente en el aire*, “held up in the air,” and *no te entiendo*, “I don’t understand you”—suggests the Herculean task of imposing a sense of order on New Spain’s diverse population.

In an effort to fix the seemingly infinite permutations and protean boundaries of the *casta* system into neat and discrete categories, *casta* painting emerged during the eighteenth century as a visual representation of New Spain’s system of racial castes.¹² Created in Mexico (though one Peruvian set is extant) and often intended for export to Spain, the paintings offered peninsular Spaniards a neat and orderly picture of a Spanish American society anchored by an easily discernible socio-racial hierarchy. *Casta* works were typically rendered in a series of fourteen to twenty separate paintings on canvas or on copper (or occasionally as a single subdivided panel), each depicting an interracial family composed of father, mother, and one or two of their children. Each image was accompanied by a textual formula that at once explained and defined the racial mixture represented, as seen in *From Indian and Mestiza, Coyote*, circa 1760 (fig. 183), attributed to José de Alcívar. Particularly after the mid-eighteenth century, the racial taxonomy reified by *casta* paintings often reflected a social and economic hierarchy; family groups considered more racially desirable wear sumptuous costumes and harmoniously inhabit luxuriously furnished spaces, while more racially mixed, less desirable unions are represented in markedly diminished and sometimes discordant domestic circumstances.¹³

The early eighteenth-century work *From Spaniard and Indian, Mestizo* (fig. 184) features a Mexican family composed of a Spanish father, his Indian wife, and their young son. Compositionally, the members of the familial trio form an inverted triangle, with



183. Attributed to José de Alcívar (Mexican, active 1751–1803). *From Indian and Mestiza, Coyote*, circa 1760. Oil on canvas, 31 × 39¾ in. (78.7 × 101 cm). Philadelphia Museum of Art, Gift of the nieces and nephews of Wright S. Ludington in his honor, 1980-139-1



184. *From Spaniard and Indian, Mestizo*. Mexico, early 18th century. Oil on canvas, $31\frac{1}{2} \times 40\frac{3}{16}$ in. (80 × 102.1 cm). Brooklyn Museum, Bequest of Samuel E. Haslett and Charles A. Schieren, gift of Alfred T. White and Otto H. Kahn through the Committee for the Diffusion of French Art, by exchange, 2011.86.1 *

the inscription of the illustrated racial formula at the top of the painting joining the two vertices constituted by the parents. This textual equation (expressed almost literally in “A + B = C” form) served a crucial didactic function, teaching viewers to make sense of the figures before them. Moreover, by presenting interracial relationships as fruitful unions ostensibly sanctified by marriage, such images imposed legitimacy on liaisons that might otherwise have been viewed as illicit. Generally promoting the idea of unity and harmony in each individual painting and placing each interracial union within the hierarchy represented by the series as a whole, *casta* painting neatly brought the appearance of order to a potentially disorderly colonial world.¹⁴

In this work, both parents cast their eyes downward, lovingly regarding their child, who sips *pulque* from a bowl offered by the mother. Once reserved for sacred use, this milky beverage made from the fermented sap of the maguey plant enjoyed widespread

popularity during the colonial period. It was an important source of tax revenue for the Spanish crown and was often featured in *casta* works, which, in addition to relating the caste system in visual terms, were also expressions of Creole pride that often showcased native food products (such as the abundance of fruits and vegetables in the foreground of figure 183), flora, fauna, and other items with distinctly local significance, thereby highlighting the bounty of the New World and the value of its natural resources to Spain.

The elegantly dressed Indian woman wears a fine white *huipil* (tunic) with a subtle chevron pattern that is decorated with bands of embroidered appliqué trim at the shoulders and neck. Ruffles at the collar and cuffs belonging to the European-style under-shift finish her traditional indigenous garment, lending it a European flair. Despite these European elements, she is identified as an Indian not only by the painting's text but by the style of her headdress, a fashion that in *casta* images appears to be worn exclusively by women designated as Indian, especially those who are better dressed. The headdress may suggest that she is an indigenous woman of some status, whose social position would have been enhanced by her union with a Spaniard.¹⁵ The child's Spanish father, also handsomely outfitted, stands beside his wife scooping another bowl of *pulque* from a wood basin and completing the picture of familial harmony.

Beneath this pleasant domestic narrative, however, lurked an implicit problem for Spaniards living in the Americas: what was to become of the family line of the Spaniard, who, gazing adoringly at his mestizo son, seems to dispense with his family's *sangre limpia* as nonchalantly as he dispenses the *pulque* from its vat. The phenomenon of "blood mending" offered a somewhat problematic solution. Through this redemptive process, it was believed, successive infusions of pure Spanish blood could, over several generations, undo the damage of intermixing with Indians so that the child of a *castiza* or *castizo* (the progeny of a Spaniard and a mestizo) and a Spaniard was once again a Spaniard, as illustrated in a painting of 1720 (fig. 185).¹⁶ Significantly, although those of African descent could improve their socio-racial status through various other means, including, for example, submitting petitions to religious and civic authorities, African blood was not generally considered to be redeemable through this process. Despite the genealogical redemption that racial blood mending promised, however, its very existence implied a fundamental difference between American-born and peninsular Spaniards.

As the principle of blood mending demonstrates, the *casta* system both defined socio-racial boundaries and pointed to their potential permeability. The latter was often reflected in dress. The elegant ensemble worn by the Indian woman in *From*



185. Attributed to Juan Rodríguez Juárez (Mexican, 1675–1728). *Castizo and Spaniard Produce a Spaniard*, 1720. Oil on canvas, 40¾ × 57¼ in. (103.5 × 145.4 cm). Colección Pérez Simón, Mexico City. Photo: Arturo Piera

Spaniard and Indian, Mestizo reflects not only her status but also the general extravagance of fashion in early *casta* painting, in which, as Rebecca Earle has observed, all classes and races are sumptuously attired and ornately accessorized: “To be sure, Spanish men and women are shown in European clothes, while Indians wear ‘Indian’ dress, but both are adorned with ruffles, laces, pearls, and jewels.”¹⁷ While this lavish appearance is no doubt exaggerated in some *casta* series, the general accuracy of such representations is borne out by contemporary commentators such as Juan de Viera, who noted in 1778 that Indian women who came to trade in the plazas in Mexico City “regarded it fashionable to wear a necklace with six or eight strings of pearls and coral, many reliquaries, and rings of gold, silver and red gold.”¹⁸ If anything, the understated elegance of the Indian woman’s dress in the painting demonstrates a degree of restraint not exhibited in the often showy sartorial displays by women of all races in other *casta* works, such as a painting of about 1715 attributed to Juan Rodríguez Juárez featuring an extravagantly attired Indian woman with her ears, neck, and wrists laden with jewelry and her elaborately patterned *huipil* and traditional headdress embel-

lished with finely worked European lace (fig. 186). Also luxuriously dressed, her Spanish husband wears a crimson coat with gold buttons, an elegant shirt with lace at the collar and cuffs, and a powdered wig. Similarly, their baby daughter's lace collar is set off by a brooch and her hair adorned with a bright red bow.

In the Spanish and British American colonies, the nearly obsessive preoccupation of many visitors and residents with the sumptuous material display effected by individuals of all races and stations indicates the anxiety that this sartorial equality prompted among the European elite. Such luxuries had been their exclusive right on the Continent, conveying their intrinsic superiority, but in the Americas consumer goods became less reliable indicators of social identity. Traveling through South America during the 1740s, the Spaniards Jorge Juan and Antonio de Ulloa recorded their impressions of fashion in Lima with palpable disdain: "The distinction between the several classes is not very great, for the use of all sort of cloth being allowed, *everyone wears what he can purchase* [italics added]. So that it is not uncommon to see a mulatto, or any other mechanic, dressed in a tissue equal to anything that can be worn by a more opulent person, they all greatly effect fine clothes."¹⁹ Similarly, Juan de Viera observed that the wives of common artisans in Mexico City dressed in a manner "indistinguishable from that of the greatest ladies . . . [such that] one cannot tell which is the wife of a count and which the wife of a tailor."²⁰

Such concerns were not exclusive to Spaniards. In a telling anecdote that underscores Britons' anxieties about policing racial and social identity in the New World, Mrs. A. C.

Carmichael, who devoted an entire chapter of an 1834 account of her five years in the West Indies to the dress of the enslaved and free colored population, disapprovingly described a "coloured domestic female slave, who would not demean herself by wearing anything so vulgar, and, as she expressed it, 'unlike a lady,' as cotton stockings . . . [and insisted upon] white silk ones"; similarly, John Colthurst, a British magistrate in

186. Attributed to Juan Rodríguez Juárez (Mexican, 1675–1728). *Spanish and Indian Produce a Mestizo*, circa 1715. Oil on canvas, 31 3/4 × 41 1/2 in. (80.7 × 105.4 cm). Breamore House, Hampshire, England





187. Attributed to José Francisco Xavier de Salazar y Mendoza (Mexican, active in Louisiana, circa 1750–1802). *Marianne Celeste Dragon*, circa 1795. Oil on canvas, 37¼ × 30¼ in. (95 × 77 cm). Louisiana State Museum, New Orleans, 5750

Saint Vincent during the 1830s, chronicled the trial of a black woman named Dutchess accused of stealing money in order to buy sartorial luxuries, including “flashy dresses without number, necklaces and earrings without end, rose coloured silk stockings and two pairs of pink satin shoes!”²¹

European Americans who guarded their place at the top of the social order had cause for concern about the leveling effect of fashion. Theoretically, the *casta* system imposed order and stability on the unprecedented and anxiety-producing diversity in the Americas by neatly defining everyone’s place in the Spanish colonial socio-racial hierarchy. In practice, however, its boundaries were more fluid than fixed. Those with significant means improved their positions by legally challenging or buying their way into a higher caste through *cédulas de gracias al sacar*, or certificates of whiteness, or by simply dressing the part. Viceroy Antonio María de Bucareli y Ursúa observed that many *castas* insinuated themselves into Indian communities and “in time and through the intercourse with the Indians have adopted their dress, and thus have been reputed to be Indians and come to enjoy their privileges.”²²

Moreover, in one of the oldest extant paintings from Louisiana’s Spanish colonial period (1769–1803), Marianne Celeste Dragon, a free woman of mixed European and African descent, uses European fashion to assert a social identity that appears at odds with her dark complexion (fig. 187). Attributed to the colony’s first documented and most esteemed painter, the Mexican-born José Francisco Xavier de Salazar y Mendoza, the painting of about 1795 showcases the sitter in a brilliant blue gown with diaphanous ruffles framing the décolletage and cuffs. Her robe, as well as the multiple strands of gold beads adorning her fashionable *à la hérisson* (literally, “hedgehog style”) coiffure and dripping from her ears, neck, and waist, announces her wealth, privilege, and European tastes, as does the genteel pursuit in which she engages—leisurely arranging flowers in a basket. The portrait was most likely commissioned to advertise Dragon’s availability for marriage, and her strategic match with a man of Greek origin a few years later demonstrates her successful manipulation of visual

and material culture to advance her social position. Furthermore, after her marriage, she and her descendants passed as white for generations until a contentious political campaign exposed the family's secret.²³ It is difficult for today's viewers to understand how Dragon came to be regarded as white if her portrait provides an accurate representation of her likeness and, in particular, her complexion, but her example indicates how, despite the rigid organization implied by the *casta* system, "in reality the perception of economic position and social standing carried as much weight in the overall identification of a person as did appearance."²⁴

Such cases underscore why the interrelationship of class and race in the Americas amplified colonial anxieties about the potential for individuals to look a part they were not, by birth, entitled to play. If even the most common Indian market woman could show up at the plaza drenched in pearls and trimmed with ruffles and lace, and a mixed-race woman of African descent could, in large part, dress her way into whiteness,²⁵ how were those at the top of the socio-racial hierarchy to distinguish themselves from the rest of society? Ironically, the strategies that colonial elites in both Spanish and British America adopted to contend with this question ultimately distinguished them as uniquely Creole, even as they tried to assert their ties with their countrymen in Europe.

Gridley McKim-Smith notes that in both New Spain and Peru, Creoles emphatically maintained the basic structure of Spanish dress, especially in very public, commemorative, or enduring performances of social identity such as participation in a parade or sitting for a portrait.²⁶ Their antiquated and often exaggeratedly Spanish styles, however, inevitably and ironically marked them as Creole. For example, on the occasion of a 1711 Mexico City parade to celebrate the birth of the infante, a group called Gentlemen of the Republic required its members to be thoroughly "Hispanicized, literally from head to toe," outfitted in old-fashioned boots called *borcegueís* and feathered hats "a la española."²⁷ Ironically, such items were anachronisms, long out of fashion on the Iberian Peninsula. Likewise, Miguel Cabrera's painting of Doña María de la Luz Padilla y Gómez de Cervantes (see fig. 144) presents an exaggerated affectation of European court style that would rarely have been worn in Mexico; it is not Doña María but her spectacular gown, worn over panniers (side hoops) so wide that the skirt fills the entire bottom third of the canvas, that commands the portrait. Both examples suggest the importance of visual and material culture in the "hyperbolic and conservative" performances of Spanishness that, characteristic of Spanish Americans, ceased to be truly Spanish but were distinctly Creole.²⁸

The same affectedly European style evinced in Doña María's portrait also appears in a carpet probably dating to the late eighteenth century, most likely used as a prayer



rug, from Arequipa, Peru (fig. 188). The carpet features a man and woman attended by an enslaved black figure and has two sets of initials woven into the corners, leading some scholars to argue for its principal function as a commemoration of the couple's marriage. The male figure wears European clothing; however, his dress is much simpler than the woman's and supports an alternative identification of his role as another attendant rather than her husband.²⁹ In contrast, the Spanish woman dons decidedly upper-class European attire; indeed, although her face is presented frontally, her body is angled in a way that emphasizes the wide silhouette of her dress, expanded by hoops (she wears the same style of *tobajilla* dress, and of the same period, as Doña Mariana Belsunse y Salazar; see fig. 178). Behind her, an enslaved child in Oriental dress carries the hem of her skirt and is, likewise, inextricably tied to the woman's performance of identity: the figure's presence and exotic attire enhance the status of the mistress while underscoring the difference between her and her human property.³⁰ The enslaved figure's costume, recalling sixteenth- and seventeenth-century traditions of European portraiture featuring aristocratic female sitters with black attendants in Eastern fashion,³¹ bears out McKim-Smith's observation that Spanish Creoles turned to antiquated European styles to underscore their socio-racial and cultural ties to the Old World.

In the British Caribbean, an initial survey of the mid- to late eighteenth-century oeuvre of Agostino Brunias, an Italian painter working for British colonial interests, suggests that he was engaged in an enterprise very similar to the Spanish painters of *casta* works. Charged with "representing the People of different color in some of the Islands in the West Indies,"³² Brunias trained his brush almost exclusively on the islands' communities of color—Carib Indians, Africans and Afro-Creoles, and people of mixed race. His refined pictures obscured the horrors of colonial domination and plantation slavery by presenting picturesque market scenes, lively dances, and Edenic outdoor vignettes tinged with Rococo naughtiness.

Given his subject matter, the painter's work has typically been interpreted in much the same way as *casta* painting, as a part of an effort to impose order on the racial diversity and social fluidity of the colonial Caribbean. For example, Beth Fowkes Tobin claims: "Brunias's pictures function as a means of identifying types of people. One could use Brunias's paintings to distinguish a planter from a slave by noting surface traits such as skin color, arrangement of hair, clothing, jewelry, and objects that the subjects hold in their hands or surround themselves with. Just as a birdwatcher uses a field guide to identify the bird he has just seen, so one could use Brunias's pictures to identify a French mulatress or a Black Carib, for instance, and to distinguish each of these types from African slaves."³³ Much as Britons might have liked to believe

OPPOSITE:

188. Rug, Peru, Arequipa, probably late 18th century. Wool and cotton, 79½ × 39¾ in. (201.9 × 101 cm). Brooklyn Museum, Gift of Mrs. George E. Vincent, 50.155 *



189. Agostino Brunias (Italian, circa 1730–1796). *Linen Market, Dominica*, circa 1780. Oil on canvas, 19 5/8 × 27 in. (50 × 69 cm). Yale Center for British Art, New Haven, Connecticut, Paul Mellon Collection

otherwise, however, classifying people is not like classifying birds, and while certainly commissioned with such a purpose in mind, Brunias's works often point to the failure of such traits to function as reliable markers of social and racial identity. The artist often recycled the same visual cues with regard to dress and accessories from work to work, creating curious conjunctions of color and costume that potentially confuse the viewer's assessment of a figure's status and raise questions: Is the figure free or enslaved? Do the clothing and accessories constitute a display of actual wealth or merely a display of airs?

So pronounced, in fact, is the racial ambiguity in some of Brunias's works that Tobin and another scholar, Kay Dian Kriz, come to radically different conclusions about the racial identification of the captivating figure dressed in white at the center of *Linen Market, Dominica*, circa 1780 (fig. 189). Whereas Tobin reads the figure uncomplicatedly as an "elegantly attired white woman," Kriz analyzes visual cues such as the figure's placement, dress, headwear, style and texture of hair, and skin tone before

concluding: "Based on these observations one might 'read' the woman in white as white. . . . Is she or isn't she? The uncertainty of this woman's 'race' is surely one of the pleasures this figure offers its viewers."³⁴ Although I agree with Kriz's nuanced reading of the figure here and its larger implications for understanding Brunias's work, I contend that the artist's often ambiguous rendering of socio-racial identity most likely prompted as much anxiety as pleasure from its original audience, who, Kriz acknowledges, would have been concerned about the "precariousness of whiteness as an absolute value in an island culture where . . . the psychic wholeness of the Anglo-European subject [was vulnerable]."³⁵ While *casta* paintings provide the illusion of firmly delineated boundaries separating discrete racial categories, all neatly labeled with texts that leave no doubt about the racial identities of the figures, Brunias's bustling markets and crowded river scenes lack text or even original titles to help viewers make sense of the bodies before them. Instead of presenting the diversity of the New World as a carefully ordered grid of human types, Brunias offers a glorious *mélange* of multihued humanity, each brownish body shading fluidly into the next.

Dramatically depicting this human color spectrum in *Free Women of Color with Their Children and Servants in a Landscape*, circa 1770–96 (fig. 190), Brunias presents a fascinating colonial Caribbean revision of the English "conversation piece." A type of picture popular among elite circles in Georgian England, featuring subjects engaged in leisurely pursuits and genteel social intercourse, the genre offered a more informal but equally effective alternative to the posed portrait as a show of status. In Brunias's intriguing scene, a party of women, children, and servants pauses along a path in the depths of a wooded landscape. Poised at the precise center of the image, an arresting woman, dressed entirely in white, save for the tiniest hint of blue petticoat peeking out from beneath her full skirt, commands the viewer's attention. She exudes an aristocratic air with her erect carriage, accentuated by her trim waist and the elongation of her lovely neck effected by the deep V of her fichu. A fashionable gold-trimmed hat, set at a jaunty angle and perched atop a tall, tightly wrapped headdress, crowns her elegant ensemble. Further indicating her elite status are her pearl earbobs, the dainty lace embellishment at her elbow-length sleeves, the coral beads at her neck and wrists, and, especially, the dark-skinned servants in their fine livery who accompany her party.

In comparison to the skin color of the servant at her side, the mistress's flesh may be pale, but not so pale as to appear Caucasian. In place of the well-to-do white woman featured in a traditional conversation piece (the embodiment of the term "lady" and all that it connotes), the viewer is surprised to find a mulatto mistress. While the dark skin and broad features of the liveried servants highlight their mistress's relatively pale complexion and characteristically Caucasian physiognomy, her status as a person of





color is underscored by the two other mixed-race women flanking her in the picture. Given the evident family resemblance (she is virtually a twin of the slightly browner, broader woman to her left), the two women presumably represent her mother and sister, and their less ambiguous racial status is signaled both concretely, by their more characteristically African physiognomies, and symbolically, by their more colorful ensembles.

In casting a woman of color in the central role that would be occupied by the “lady of the manor” in a traditional conversation piece, Brunias forces viewers to reconsider what is usually taken for granted in the genre—namely the subjects’ race and status—and challenges their expectations and assumptions. The artist’s decision to depict a brown woman where one would expect a white woman to be (and where she might even be initially misread as white) suggests the anxieties surrounding socio-racial identity in the British West Indies, where an emphasis on “whiteness” replaced the metaphors of blood purity that predominated in the Spanish Americas. In contrast to the more fluid systems of classification developed by the Spanish and French—which recognized racial identities between black and white and informed societies in which freedom and social position were less strongly correlated to race—the more dichotomous British view essentially regarded individuals as either white or not white and assumed whiteness as prerequisite to both freedom and high social status.³⁶ Informed by laws in which a child’s status as free or enslaved followed that of the mother, “not white” was generally perceived to mean “not free” and certainly “not high born.” In practice, this was not always true, especially when the British assumed colonial authority over territories originally controlled by the French, such as the Lesser Antilles, where Brunias primarily worked and where the more fluid racial schemes had produced a large class of free people of mixed race. Nevertheless, this dichotomous view of race, along with a “get in, get rich, go home” approach to colonization, led the British to defend their socio-racial identities through strategies of their own.

The idea, dramatized in many of Brunias’s paintings, of a flimsy and perhaps vacillating frontier between black and white

190. Agostino Brunias (Italian, circa 1730–1796). *Free Women of Color with Their Children and Servants in a Landscape*, circa 1770–96. Oil on canvas, 20 × 26 1/8 in. (50.8 × 66.4 cm). Brooklyn Museum, Gift of Mrs. Carll H. de Silver in memory of her husband, by exchange and gift of George S. Hellman, by exchange, 2010.59 *



191. Attributed to Philip Wickstead (British, active 1763–86). *Portrait of a Lady*, circa 1775. Oil on canvas, 24 × 19 in. (61 × 48.3 cm). Private collection

underlay anxieties about the impeachability of white identity among Britons in the Caribbean colonies. This was especially true for women, whose bodies functioned as symbols of a national ideal. Citing the fraught perception of white women in the islands, Kriz has argued that Brunias shied away from painting women “who could securely be identified as white Creole or European,”³⁷ opting to paint mixed-race women instead, and indeed, the very few extant portraits of white women in the British colonies suggest the difficult challenges inherent in depicting the white female West Indian body. Those that do exist, such as the late eighteenth-century *Portrait of a Lady* attributed to Philip Wickstead (fig. 191), generally display the exaggerated Europeaness evident in portraits of Spanish American Creoles.

Set in the West Indies, Samuel Jackson Pratt’s comedic drama *The New Cosmetic; or, The Triumph of Beauty* (1790) offers a telling example of a white woman’s shifting racial identity. The play follows the trials of Louisa, an Englishwoman once revered for her fair beauty who has been cast aside by her beau because her skin has been darkened by exposure to the Caribbean sun. Louisa’s newly dusky complexion renders her not only unattractive to her former paramour but, it

seems, racially altered as well: one man describes her as “a black wench” who was no longer pursued romantically “after she became a Mulatto.”³⁸ Louisa does eventually win back her lover through the application of a cosmetic that restores her whiteness. For the purposes of this discussion, however, her restored whiteness is less significant than the idea (and fear) that she could *become* “not white” in the first place.

Both to recover their complexions and to safeguard their reputations as well-mannered ladies, many British girls were sent back to Europe around the onset of adolescence. Moreover, as Deirdre Coleman has noted, British women who did remain in the “torrid zones” used various means, including bonnets, veils, parasols, and even masks (a controversial custom reputedly adopted from mixed-race women), to safeguard their precious white skins and to cultivate an “unnatural lily-white palor” that distinguished them from their European countrywomen.³⁹ Janet Schaw, a Scottish visitor to the West Indies in the mid-1770s, described such practices of Creole women with amused fascination and at times none-too-subtle distaste. Upon seeing a friend’s face unveiled for the first time during her Caribbean sojourn, the woman’s ghostly white visage caused Schaw to lament that, although her friend was as “beautiful as ever,” unfortunately, “the lily has far got the better of the rose.”⁴⁰ In contrast to



eighteenth-century British portraits that, as Angela Rosenthal has observed, signal the socio-racial identities of their aristocratic female sitters through a hyperbolic blush, island Creoles cultivated a pallor best described as pathologically pale, and several Brunias pictures, such as *View of Roseau Valley, Island of Dominica, Showing Africans, Carib Indians, and Creole Planters* (fig. 192), feature pale-skinned women shielded by multiple layers of sun protection—parasols, hats, and elaborate veils.⁴¹ Whether they are meant to be white women or light-skinned women of African descent is in the eye of the beholder.

Like the obsessive safeguarding of their fair complexions, the general absence of white Creole West Indian women in colonial Caribbean visual culture and their invisibility behind so many layers of clothing and accessories were probably strategies to insulate them from the charges of “Creole degeneracy” that were disproportionately cast in their direction. Such cutting critiques often implicitly compared them to women of color. In his *History of Jamaica* (1774), for example, the noted commentator Edward Long observes: “We may see, in some of these places, a very fine young woman

192. Agostino Brunias (Italian, circa 1730–1796). *View of Roseau Valley, Island of Dominica, Showing Africans, Carib Indians, and Creole Planters*, late 18th century. Oil on canvas, 32½ × 45½ in. (83 × 116 cm). Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art Permanent Collection, Cornell University, Ithaca, New York, Gift of Louis V. Keeler, Class of 1911, and Mrs. Keeler



193. Agostino Brunias (Italian, circa 1730–1796). *Creole Woman and Servants*, circa 1770–96. Oil on canvas, 12 × 9 in. (31 × 23 cm). Colección Carmen Thyssen-Bornemisza, Madrid

awkwardly dangling her arms with the air of a Negroe-servant, lolling almost the whole day upon beds or settees, her head muffled up with two or three handkerchiefs, her dress loose, and without stays.”⁴² Long attributes this behavior to the influences of blacks and mulattoes, and several of Brunias’s paintings, such as *Creole Woman and Servants*, circa 1770–96 (fig. 193), visualize these concerns by depicting pale women of ambiguous race with loosened stays and slumped posture taking tea with mixed-race women of even less refined carriage.

As John Singleton Copley’s portrait *Mrs. Sylvester (Abigail Pickman) Gardiner*, circa 1772 (see fig. 147), demonstrates, the locally specific challenges to socio-racial identity that concerned Britons in the Caribbean did not obtain for those living in Britain’s North American colonies. Outfitted in a splendid blue gown topped by a pink robe, loosely gathered above the waist with a diamond-shaped brooch, and sporting an elaborate coiffure embellished with swaths of fabric and strands of pearls, Gardiner wears the exotic fashion known as a *robe à la turque*. Promoted by the English trendsetter Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, the gown was a popular choice for masquerade balls in London and essayed in public by English ladies of the bolder sort. Although it is unlikely that Gardiner would have worn this fashion in public in colonial America,⁴³ her decision to don Turkish-inspired costume for her portrait

demonstrates her familiarity with fashion trends in Britain as well as her identification with British high society. In contrast to the buttoned-up and masked ladies of the Caribbean, her costume is uncinched by the stays that Long insists are integral for ladies of good breeding, and the nonchalance of her informal pose recalls the “lolling” that Long denounces. Gardiner’s self-presentation in the portrait demonstrates a certain comfort with her own socio-racial identity, which she seems to understand as intrinsic and immutable. Gardiner’s costume and posture affirm her connection with her peers in England and suggest self-assurance concerning her own social position, but posing for the same sort of portrait would have been unthinkable for the West Indian Creole ladies Long admonishes. Dangerously close to the flowing, uncorseted dresses and head wraps worn by Caribbean women of color, the loose robes and turbans that were all the rage in England and the North American colonies were not acceptable for ladies in the West Indies.

Long and other colonial commentators struggled to reconcile fears about interracial unions with the firmly entrenched belief, inherited from the mid-eighteenth-century naturalist Georges Louis Leclerc de Buffon and others, that non-intrinsic factors such as nourishment, custom, and especially climate dictated skin color and other physical attributes. While Long admits some physical differences between Creole Britons and their European-born counterparts, noting, for example, their deeper-set eyes, he simultaneously asserts that he does “not indeed suppose, that, by living in Guiney [Guinea], they [white people] would exchange hair for wool, or a white cuticle for a black: change of complexion must be referred to some other cause.” In a more direct and vigorous defense of the whiteness of West Indian Creole Britons that also reveals Spaniards’ and Britons’ shared concerns about “contaminated” lineage, he states that undisclosed miscegenation, not climate, accounts for misconceptions about Creole whites: “Many of the good folks in England have entertained the strange opinion, that the children born in Jamaica of white parents turn swarthy, through the effect of the climate; nay some have not scrupled to suppose, that they are converted into black-a-moors. The truth is, that the children born in England have not, in general, lovelier or more transparent skins, than the offspring of white parents in Jamaica. . . . The many Mulatto, Quateron, and other illegitimate children sent over to England for education, have probably given rise to the opinion before-mentioned; for, as these children are often sent to the most expensive public schools, where the history of their birth and parentage is entirely unknown, they pass under the general name of West Indians; and the bronze of their complexion is ignorantly ascribed to the fervour of the sun in the torrid zone.” Denouncing the “disorderly connexions” between white men and women of color and the consequent “spurious offspring of different complexions” as a threat to colonial order, Long offers the Spanish colonies as a powerful admonition: “Let any man turn his eyes to the Spanish American dominions, and behold what a vicious, brutal, and degenerate breed of mongrels has been there produced, between Spaniards, Blacks, Indians, and their mixed progeny.”⁴⁴

While *casta* paintings aimed to bring order to these “disorderly connexions” by generally casting interracial unions as legitimized by marriage, with the women appropriately under patriarchal control, mixed-race beauties such as the tawny vixen at the center of *Free Women of Color with Their Children and Servants in a Landscape*—her expression at once challenging and coquettish—conspicuously dominate Brunias’s Caribbean pictures, engaging the viewer in a flirtation. Here, the lovely mixed-race woman has usurped the rightful place of the lady of the manor, and suggesting that she is more than just a flirt, she gestures toward her son, the pale-skinned boy in the

yellow suit to her left. Standing apart from the rest of the implied family group, he is also distanced from his African ancestry, a fact underscored by both his blonde locks and the dark-skinned boy in livery by his side. In juxtaposing the pale boy and his dark servant, Brunias dares the viewer to locate the similarity between them and suggests that, freed from the context of the painting, it would be easy to imagine this boy slipping seamlessly into British society like the illegitimate Caribbean offspring Long fears.

British patterns of West Indian colonization meant that the islands remained coded as exotic in the British popular imagination. In contrast to *casta* paintings, which presented, for European Spaniards, a picture of interracial unions within the context of legitimate families, the mixed-race coquettes who populate Brunias's canvases suggested the illicit liaisons potential British colonists might enjoy during their island adventures, and the paintings functioned as exotic mementos for Britons returning to Europe from the West Indies. This sense of exoticism, though without any illicit associations, surrounds a tortoiseshell casket from the 1670s (fig. 194), most likely

intended as a souvenir (or an unusual gift sent home from the islands). The compartmentalized box features not only an exotic material but a variety of exotic motifs, including cacti and other tropical flora and the Jamaican coat of arms. Two stereotypically clad natives, one male and one female, flank a shield emblazoned with an English red cross crowned by a crocodile crest adorned by five pineapples, a fruit of Mesoamerican origin often associated with hospitality (fig. 195). Frank Cundall has noted that, from 1671 to 1690, a number of tortoiseshell objects—primarily combs and comb cases featuring the Jamaican arms or similarly exotic imagery—were sent back to England.⁴⁵

In contrast, similar objects from the Spanish Americas meant for the home reinforced, like so much Spanish American material culture, connections to the mother country. For example, the portable writing boxes known as *escritorios*, immensely popular among the

198. *Writing Cabinet (Escritorio)*. Peru, Cuzco region, late 18th–early 19th century. Wood, leather, pigments, and iron fittings, 16 × 21 × 13 in. (40.6 × 53.3 × 33 cm). Brooklyn Museum, Museum Expedition 1941, Frank L. Babbott Fund, 41.1275.167*



New Spanish elite, were often made by indigenous artisans but were derived from a Spanish form popular in aristocratic homes and meant to demonstrate ties to the Continent through the unequivocal display of European influences (see essay by Rivas Pérez in this volume). An *escritorio* from Moxos, Bolivia, features, on the inside of the lid, Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden surrounded by European animal and mythological motifs including lions, stags, unicorns, and dragons (fig. 196). The general elements of the scene demonstrate the influence of medieval and Renaissance models, while its composition most likely derives from a fifteenth-century woodcut; the only indication of the *escritorio*'s New World origins is a scene on the exterior of the drop front of a man in an Andean tunic being trampled by a bull as a darker-skinned man looks on (fig. 197). The stunning workmanship of this *escritorio*'s wood inlay and its expensive materials distinguish the object as a luxury possession. The *fête galante* scene of a later Peruvian *escritorio* (fig. 198) and the Rococo and Neoclassical elements that decorate an early nineteenth-century ladies' sewing box from New Spain (fig. 199) indicate that while Britons, seeking souvenirs of their Caribbean adventures, used such objects to capture the exotic flavor of the West Indies, elite Spanish Americans often used them to reinforce their connections to European culture.⁴⁶



199. *Sewing Box*. Mexico, circa 1810–21.
Lacquered wood with painted decoration,
5 5/16 × 16 9/16 × 5 1/2 in. (13.5 × 42.1 × 14 cm).
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