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978-1-107-00342-2 - The Body of the Conquistador: Food, Race and the Colonial Experience in Spanish America, 1492–1700

Rebecca Earle

Excerpt

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Introduction: Food and the colonial experience

In November 1493 Christopher Columbus made a disagreeable discovery: things were not going well in the little Spanish colony he had founded on the Caribbean island of Hispaniola. Earlier that year, after his epochal landfall in the West Indies, Columbus had established a small outpost on the island (modern-day Haiti and the Dominican Republic) consisting of thirty-eight semi-volunteer Europeans housed in a makeshift fort. He then sailed for Spain, leaving these men to act as the vanguard of a future Spanish settlement. The admiral returned in the autumn with some 1,500 additional settlers, hoping to expand the fledgling colony. To his dismay, he found that not one of the original thirty-eight was still alive. Conflict and disease were the culprits, and the new arrivals, too, quickly began to sicken. Illness among the colonists prevented Columbus from amassing as much gold as he had anticipated, and impeded attempts to explore the island.

Why had so many Europeans fallen ill? In Columbus's view the explanation was simple but had alarming implications for the nascent Spanish colony: Europeans simply did not thrive in the very different environment of the new world. The principal cause of the dreadful ailments afflicting the small Spanish settlement was, he believed, the unfamiliar air and water of the Caribbean, which were inimical to the European constitution. The challenges the new environment posed to the European body might have implied that all attempts at settlement were doomed, but Columbus was confident that a solution could be found. Mortality, he maintained, would cease once the settlers were provided with 'the usual foods we eat in Spain'.¹ In particular, the settlers needed fresh meat, almonds, raisins, sugar and honey, as well as the wheat flour and wine that formed the backbone of the Iberian diet. Columbus was certain that these wholesome old-world

¹ Columbus, 'Memorial que para los Reyes Católicos dió el Almirante a don Antonio de Torres', 30 Jan. 1494, in *Los cuatro viajes del almirante*, pp. 155–68 (quotation p. 158).

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foods would restore the settlers to health and allow the resumption of his enterprise.

Historians of early Spanish colonisation in the Caribbean have generally been more concerned with the precipitous decline in the region's indigenous population than with sickness among European settlers.² Within a decade of the establishment of this initial settlement Europeans were expressing anxiety that their newly conquered indigenous labour force might evaporate, which would leave only Spaniards and a small number of enslaved Africans to mine gold and grow food – an unpalatable prospect for colonists. Such fears were entirely justified, as by the 1530s the indigenous Taino had, in the words of one demographic historian, 'completed their course to extinction', having succumbed to the combined weight of disease, famine and overwork.³ (We will return to the explanations settlers at the time offered to account for indigenous mortality.) In 1493, however, it was the Europeans, rather than the Taino, whose survival worried Columbus. He was convinced that the damaging effects of an unfamiliar climate and inadequate and inappropriate foods posed a serious threat to his settlers that could be surmounted only by the swift importation of healthful European food. European food, he insisted, would counteract the deleterious effects of the new-world environment and make feasible the dream of colonisation.

He was not alone in this belief. Columbus's assertion that European food was vital to the survival of such settlements forms part of a vast current of discourse that links diet to discussions of Spanish health, Indian bodies and overseas colonisation. This book examines the centrality of food to Spain's colonial endeavour. Its aim is not simply to demonstrate that Europeans were concerned to maintain adequate supplies of familiar foods, but rather to show how colonisation was as much a physical enterprise as an economic or ideological one, and to explore how ideas about food and bodies underpinned the ways Europeans understood the environment and inhabitants of the new world. For early modern Spaniards food was much more than a source of sustenance and a comforting reminder of Iberian culture. Food helped make them who they were in terms of both their character and their very corporeality, and it was food, more than anything else, that made European bodies different from Amerindian bodies. Without the right foods Europeans would either die, as Columbus

² For discussion of Spanish mortality in the ill-fated settlement see Cook, 'Sickness, Starvation and Death in Early Hispaniola'.

³ Livi-Bacci, 'Return to Hispaniola', p. 4.

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feared, or, equally alarmingly, they might turn into Amerindians. With the right foods, European settlers in the Indies would flourish and Amerindians might perhaps come to acquire a European constitution. The ability of certain crops to thrive in the Americas revealed God's providential design for humankind, and the similarities and differences between European and indigenous foodways marked out the distance Amerindians needed to travel were they to become fully civilised human beings. By paying attention to how Spanish settlers thought about food, in other words, we gain a clearer understanding of how they thought about the most fundamental features of the colonial experience.

The book's first chapters explain why Spaniards ascribed such importance to food, and how diet helped structure their understanding of the differences between themselves and Amerindians, looking particularly at the importance of humoralism, the model for understanding the human body universally embraced in early modern Europe. The later chapters consider the broader implications of these beliefs in light of the contradictory aims at the heart of Spanish colonialism, which sought simultaneously to make Amerindians like Europeans and to keep them separate, and which emerge with particular clarity from a consideration of the relationship between food, bodies and colonisation. This book in short argues that we cannot understand the nature of early modern colonialism if we do not attend to the multi-layered importance colonisers ascribed to that most quotidian of activities, eating.

Colonies, environments and diets

Many aspects of early modern colonial expansion proved unsettling for its European protagonists. The encounter with entirely new territories and peoples raised doubts about the reliability of existing knowledge and also posed theoretical and practical questions about the proper way for Europeans to interact with these new peoples and places. Far from being an enterprise based on an unquestioning assumption of European superiority, early modern colonialism was an anxious pursuit. This anxiety is captured most profoundly in the fear that living in an unfamiliar environment, and among unfamiliar peoples, might alter not only the customs but also the very bodies of settlers. Perhaps, as Columbus suspected, unmediated contact with these new lands would weaken settlers' constitutions to such an extent that they died. Or perhaps it might instead transform the European body in less destructive but equally unwelcome ways, so that it ultimately ceased to be a European body at all.

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Scholars have long recognised the challenges that unfamiliar climates were believed to pose to the European body.⁴ In particular, all sorts of alarming disorders were attributed to the malign impact of very hot, damp environments. This made European settlement of such regions problematic, which was ironic, because, as eighteenth-century theorists would later insist, warm climates also sapped natives' ability to govern themselves effectively, and therefore rendered them particularly suited to European conquest. European hostility towards hot climates has thus often been associated with the rise of colonial and racial ideologies. A growing body of scholarship, however, suggests that early European reactions to the *American* environment played an important role in the articulation of these ideologies not because the new world's climate was considered fatal to Europeans, but precisely because it was not. In fact, in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries many Europeans believed that under the right circumstances they could prosper in the new world. Amerindian bodies, in contrast, seemed unable to thrive in their own native environment, for they succumbed easily to the many diseases that swept across the continent in the wake of European settlement. A number of scholars have therefore asserted that early modern colonial writers explained this apparent paradox by insisting that the bodies of Amerindians were essentially different from, and inferior to, their own. Fixed and substantial physical differences, it is claimed, were said to separate Europeans from Amerindians, which accounted for their divergent responses to the same environment. In constructing European and indigenous bodies as radically and permanently incommensurate, such studies maintain, early modern settlers laid the foundations for a racialised vision of human difference.⁵

Such research certainly highlights the dilemmas that overseas colonisation posed to Europeans, and helpfully focuses attention on the fact that early colonial actors ascribed great significance to the differences they perceived between their bodies and those of Amerindians. Nonetheless, it accords a disproportionate importance to climate as a challenge to both European and indigenous bodies. In fact, climate was but one of a number of forces believed by Europeans to affect health and character, and it assists our analysis of neither the early modern body

⁴ See for example Kupperman, 'Fear of Hot Climates'; Lavallé, *Las promesas ambiguas*; and Harrison, *Climates and Constitutions*.

⁵ See in particular Chaplin, 'Natural Philosophy and an Early Racial Idiom in North America'; Cañizares Esguerra, 'New Worlds, New Stars'; Chaplin, *Subject Matter*; Aubert, '"The Blood of France"'; Cañizares Esguerra, *Nature, Empire, and Nation*; Greer *et al.*, eds., *Rereading the Black Legend*; and Cañizares Esguerra, 'Demons, Stars and the Imagination'.

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nor the history of colonialism to isolate climate from these other forces. This book directs our attention to the role of food. When we attend to food's place within early modern discourses about human difference it becomes clear that fluidity, rather than fixity, was the hallmark of the early modern body, and that this fluidity had striking implications for the coherence of colonial ideology, as well as for our understanding of how early modern Europeans understood human difference.

Food, as this book shows, shaped the colonial body in a number of ways. To begin with, the right foods protected Europeans from the challenges posed by the new world and its environment. Spaniards believed that they would not suffer from the alien climate and unfamiliar heavens of the Indies if they ate European food. For this reason colonisers and settlers in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Spanish America were consistently concerned about their ability to access European food-stuffs, and generations of chroniclers noted the deleterious effect of the indigenous diet on Europeans unwise enough to consume it. More fundamentally, food helped *create* the bodily differences that underpinned the European categories of Spaniard and Indian. Spanish bodies differed from indigenous bodies because the Spanish diet differed from the Amerindian diet. In the view of Europeans, it was the food that they ate, even more than the environment in which they lived, that gave Amerindians and Spaniards both their distinctive physical characteristics and their characteristic personalities. Amerindians, explained one Spanish doctor, 'don't have the same humours as us because they don't eat the same foods'.⁶

As this comment suggests, food's impact on the human body was framed in accordance with the tenets of Galenic medicine, which understood all bodies to consist of a balance of humours. Each individual possessed a particular, characteristic humoral balance, but that balance was always in uneasy equilibrium, subject to the impact of external forces, of which food was the most important. Different foods could radically alter an individual's humoral balance, which in turn could induce dramatic perturbations in both their physical and emotional condition. As one seventeenth-century Mexican writer put it, 'through eating new foods, people who come here from different climates create new blood, and this produces new humours and the new humours give rise to new abilities and conditions'.⁷ Bodies were thus in a state of

⁶ Benavidez, *Secretos de cirugía*, pp. 26–7.

⁷ Vetancurt, *Teatro mexicano*, tratado 1, chap. 6, p. 11. Vetancurt paraphrases Henrico Martínez's 1606 *Reportorio de los tiempos e historia natural desta Nueva España*, tratado 3, chap. 8, p. 283.

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constant flux, in which scarcely anything was ever fixed and in which permanence was illusory. If we view the early modern body from this perspective, it becomes difficult to speak of a sixteenth-century vision of permanent embodied difference. For early modern Europeans, bodily differences were real, but by no means permanent. Bodies could alter just as easily as could diets. In this universe, the physical differences separating Europeans from Amerindians were more a function of food than of either climate or destiny.

Difference, cultures and bodies

In focusing on the ways in which Spaniards understood the physical differences that they perceived between themselves and Amerindians, I do not mean to imply that the categories of ‘Spaniard’ and ‘Amerindian’ are themselves transparent. After all, Catholic Spain was only beginning the process of political unification at the time of Columbus’s first voyage, although a sense of Hispanic identity had arguably begun to emerge several centuries earlier. A number of scholars have indeed observed that the experience of overseas colonisation itself helped meld the Peninsula’s diverse inhabitants into a common community of Catholic Spaniards.⁸ It is, moreover, quite clear that the features that helped differentiate ‘Indians’ from ‘Spaniards’ were to a large extent socially and culturally determined. To begin with, ‘Indian’ was a fiscal and juridical category. In particular, paying the head tax known as the Indian tribute and possessing entitlement to the use of communal land were key markers of indigenes for much of the colonial era. Whether an individual was subject to paying tribute or entitled to use communal land depended in part on arguments about genealogy and ancestry, but these were not the only factors on which such decisions were based. On the contrary, classifications often derived as much from clothing, language and other cultural markings as from notions of lineage. That is, individuals who embraced important features of indigenous culture were more likely to be considered Indian than those who did not, whatever their personal ancestry. In addition, tributary status might depend more on fiscal exigencies than either ancestry or appearance. European disease in the centuries after the Spanish conquest greatly reduced the size of the tribute-paying population, and as a result the officials who drew up the tax rolls might, in an attempt to

⁸ On the emergence of the idea of Spain see Maravall, *El concepto de España en la Edad Media*; Herrero García, *Ideas de los españoles del siglo XVII*; Lomnitz, ‘Nationalism as a Practical System’; and Herzog, *Defining Nations*.

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increase revenues, include as tribute-payers individuals who themselves denied being Amerindians. Colonial archives record the many disputes occasioned by this sort of fiscally driven classification.⁹

The complex nature of what scholars loosely call ‘racial’ classifications has been shown with particular clarity by Douglas Cope in a now-classic study on plebeian culture in colonial Mexico City. Cope’s work stressed that racial or caste identities were essentially social. They were certainly not based solely on physical appearance; as Cope noted, when individuals ‘wished to convince the authorities of someone’s racial status, they went beyond physical characterization’, also adding information about dress, speech, occupation and name.¹⁰ Ancestry might be discussed, but this did not necessarily provide definitive answers; the parish records in which such classifications were supposed to be recorded sometimes either omitted information on caste or contained ambiguous or contradictory classifications. Family members themselves might disagree about the caste status of other relatives; Cope cites many examples of individuals described variously as Indian and Spanish. As he observed, for plebeians ‘defining race was functional rather than logical, pragmatic rather than theoretically sound’.¹¹ Elites sought to rely on ancestry and concepts of blood purity, but they too were intimately entangled in pragmatic colonial practices that viewed race fundamentally as a social and cultural attribute. Caste status might be proved through genealogy, but it was demonstrated on a daily basis through a mastery of Castilian and a steadfast embrace of the other emblems of Iberian culture.

These included, in addition to competence in Spanish, the use of European clothing, particular hairstyles and a range of other cultural practices. The significance of clothing to the performance of caste identity is made clear by its regular appearance in colonial lawsuits. Individuals seeking to establish their status might appeal not to the genealogies of their ancestors, but rather to the clothing that they typically wore. When in 1686 in Quito one Blas de Horta tried to demonstrate that he was not an Indian, he did not summon his parents. Rather, he produced a witness to affirm that he always wore Spanish dress.¹²

⁹ See for example Lutz, *Santiago de Guatemala*; and Jackson, *Race, Caste, and Status*.

¹⁰ Cope, *The Limits of Racial Domination*, pp. 5, 50, 53 (quotation, p. 56); and Lewis, *Hall of Mirrors*.

¹¹ Cope, *The Limits of Racial Domination*, pp. 57 (quotation, pp. 68–9).

¹² Minchom, *The People of Quito*, pp. 158, 190. Or see Schwartz and Salomon, ‘New Peoples and New Kinds of People’, pp. 482–94; Bauer, *Goods, Power, History*, pp. 74, 80, 110; Earle, ‘Nationalism and National Costume in Spanish America’; and Martínez, *Genealogical Fictions*, pp. 104–5.

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Such sartorially based classifications did not simply reflect social convention but also enjoyed semi-legal status. As one seventeenth-century Peruvian lawyer opined, people of mixed ancestry who lived ‘with the Indians, wearing their clothes and following their practices’, should for legal purposes be classed as Indians, although he admitted that ‘in truth they are not entirely Indian’.¹³ One gains a sense of the complexities involved in such classifications from the case of Nicolasa Juana, investigated by the Mexican Inquisition in the 1680s for various doctrinal lapses. An official report described her as

a white mulata with curly hair, because she is the daughter of a dark-skinned mulata and a Spaniard, and for her manner of dress she has flannel petticoats and a native blouse ... She wears shoes, and her natural and common language is not Spanish but Chocho, as she was brought up among Indians with her mother, from whom she contracted the vice of drunkenness, to which she often succumbs, as Indians do, and from whom she has also received the crime of [idolatry].¹⁴

Nicolasa Juana was thus simultaneously white, a mulata and an Indian, whose identity resided in both her appearance and her comportment, which was itself viewed as evidence of her indigenous ancestry. Eating, like drinking (too much, in the case of Nicolasa Juana), also played an important role in enacting caste identity. This book argues that diet was believed to help *create* the physical differences that separated Europeans from Amerindians and Africans, but in addition scholars have long recognised that certain foods were closely associated with Spanish, indigenous or African cultural identity. Guinea pig, for example, was universally labelled an ‘Indian’ food, and people who ate it were likely to be classed as Indians.¹⁵ In colonial Spanish America, in other words, caste difference, although ostensibly concerned with ancestry and genealogy, was profoundly performative.

In early modern Catholic Spain, the most important social distinctions were likewise delineated as much through daily practice as through ancestry. There, concerns about difference coalesced around distinguishing ‘Old Christians’ (Spaniards whose families had long practised Catholicism) from ‘New Christians’. New Christians were individuals

¹³ Olabarrieta Medrano, *Recuerdo de las obligaciones del ministerio apostólico*, chap. 4, p. 96.

¹⁴ Tavárez, ‘Legally Indian’, p. 91.

¹⁵ See for example Francisco de Acuña, ‘Relación fecha por el corregidor de los Chimbivilcas’, 1586, in Jiménez de la Espada, ed., *Relaciones geográficas de las Indias: Perú*, vol. 1, p. 319; Atienza, *Compendio historial del estado de los indios del Perú*, p. 53; and Weismantel, *Food, Gender, and Poverty in the Ecuadorian Andes*. Pilcher, *¡Que vivan los tamales!*, provides a lucid discussion of the Mexican case.

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of Jewish or Muslim ancestry whose conversion to Catholicism had occurred within the last few generations, and whose dedication to their new religion was considered highly suspect by Old Christians. This was in large part because many of these conversions took place in coercive contexts, such as following the pogroms that swept through various Spanish cities in 1391, or the late fifteenth-century expulsion of Muslims and Jews from Spain. Conversos (Jewish converts) and moriscos (Islamic converts) were subject to increasing harassment and regulation over the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, which culminated in the expulsion from Spain of all moriscos in the early seventeenth century.

The differences between Old and New Christians, and between individuals with an unblemished heritage of religious orthodoxy and those with heretical or unconverted ancestors, were articulated through a language of blood purity, or *limpieza de sangre*. From the mid fifteenth century, individual Spanish towns and institutions began drawing up statutes that made proof of ‘clean blood’ a requirement for occupying certain positions. Individuals might be required to demonstrate their blood purity in order to attend university, join a religious order, hold municipal office or, later, emigrate to the Indies. To possess clean blood an individual needed to demonstrate that neither they nor their ancestors had been investigated by the Inquisition for heresy or, more stringently, that their family tree contained neither Jews, Muslims nor recent converts to Christianity. How far back the demand for genealogical purity went, and the stringency of the definition of purity, varied over time and from institution to institution.

As was the case with establishing one’s caste in the Indies, demonstrating purity of blood in Spain required a complicated blending of genealogy and reputation. On the one hand the idea of blood purity was based on a genealogical model. Proving purity encouraged the construction of family trees and gave rise to an entire economy of genealogical experts, advisers and forgers who could assist in constructing or perhaps fabricating the required genealogy. At the same time, the bases on which these demonstrations were constructed relied not only on certified family trees but also on the individual’s standing in the community. The investigations into an individual’s purity thus included affidavits from neighbours and acquaintances, who reported on the individual’s reputation and produced evidence that sometimes conflicted with that provided by written records. Indeed, as the historian James Casey has noted, ‘before the diffusion of baptism and marriage records in the later sixteenth century it was actually rather hard to document ancestry, other than by common

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repute'.¹⁶ For these reasons blood purity was 'unstable, accessible but easily lost, depending on one's reputation within the community (which was not necessarily fixed), personal relationships, and the outcome of the next probanza' or investigation, as the historian María Elena Martínez observes in her study of the concept.¹⁷ The extension of ideas of blood purity to the Indies produced some striking modifications of the Iberian model – Amerindians, for example, on occasion succeeded in demonstrating that they possessed pure blood – but the reliance on a combination of genealogical and social evidence persisted.¹⁸ In other words, possessing pure blood, like one's caste identity, was in part performative, enacted daily through a variety of cultural practices.

Taken together, this research into the idea of difference in the early modern Iberian world suggests that divisions between Catholic Spaniards, Jews, Amerindians and other groups were generated at least in part socially. Individuals demonstrated their Catholic or indigenous status through their daily practices and were either confirmed or rejected in these performances by the other members of their community. A substantial body of scholarship provides compelling accounts of the negotiations that these performances entailed. It also suggests that whatever the historical actors themselves may have claimed, these categories were in essence social and cultural, rather than physical. They were about reputation and were not really concerned with bodies.

What this rich corpus of scholarship explains less well is how colonial actors understood the bodies that carried out these negotiations. We tend to assume that if difference is produced through cultural production then it cannot at the same time be considered an embodied phenomenon. In fact, early modern society, at least in the Iberian world, did not classify bodies and culture as fundamentally different. Instead, the physical body was thought to be *generated* in part through the ambient culture, and in particular through diet. In other words, diet and other cultural practices were believed to have a profound physical impact on the body. The anthropologist Ann Laura Stoler's observation regarding European identity in colonial spaces that 'what is at issue here is not a shared conviction of the fixity of European identity but the protean nature of it' applies equally strongly to the European body itself.¹⁹

¹⁶ Casey, *Early Modern Spain*, p. 142; Casey, *Family and Community in Early Modern Spain*, pp. 182–95; and Martínez, *Genealogical Fictions*.

¹⁷ Martínez, *Genealogical Fictions*, p. 74.

¹⁸ On indigenous claims to purity of blood see Martínez, *Genealogical Fictions*, pp. 200–26.

¹⁹ Stoler, *Race and the Education of Desire*, p. 105.