

Before Mestizaje

This book opens new dimensions on the history of race and caste in Latin America through examining the extreme caste groups of Mexico, particularly *lobos*, *moriscos*, and *coyotes*. In revealing the experiences of members of these and other groups and tracing the implications of their lives in the colonial world, a deeper understanding is rendered of the connection between *mestizaje* (Latin America's modern ideology of racial mixture) and the colonial caste system. Using bigamy records, marriage cases, census documents, and inquisition cases, this book argues that before mestizaje emerged as a primary concept in Latin America, an earlier form of racial mixture, hybridity, and elasticity existed that must be taken seriously as its precursor. *Before Mestizaje* synthesizes the history of race and caste systems, while tracing the evolution and long-term impact of unique caste categories in Mexico.

Ben Vinson III is the Dean of the Columbian College of Arts and Sciences at The George Washington University, Washington, DC. He was formerly the director of the Center of Africana Studies at Johns Hopkins University. Vinson is the author and coauthor of numerous books, including *Bearing Arms for His Majesty: The Free-Colored Militia in Colonial Mexico* (2002) and *African Slavery in Latin America and the Caribbean* (2007). He is the editor in chief of *The Americas: A Quarterly Review of Latin American History*.

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(continued after the index)

Before Mestizaje

The Frontiers of Race and Caste in Colonial Mexico

BEN VINSON III

The George Washington University, Washington, DC



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To Allyson, Ben, and Brandon

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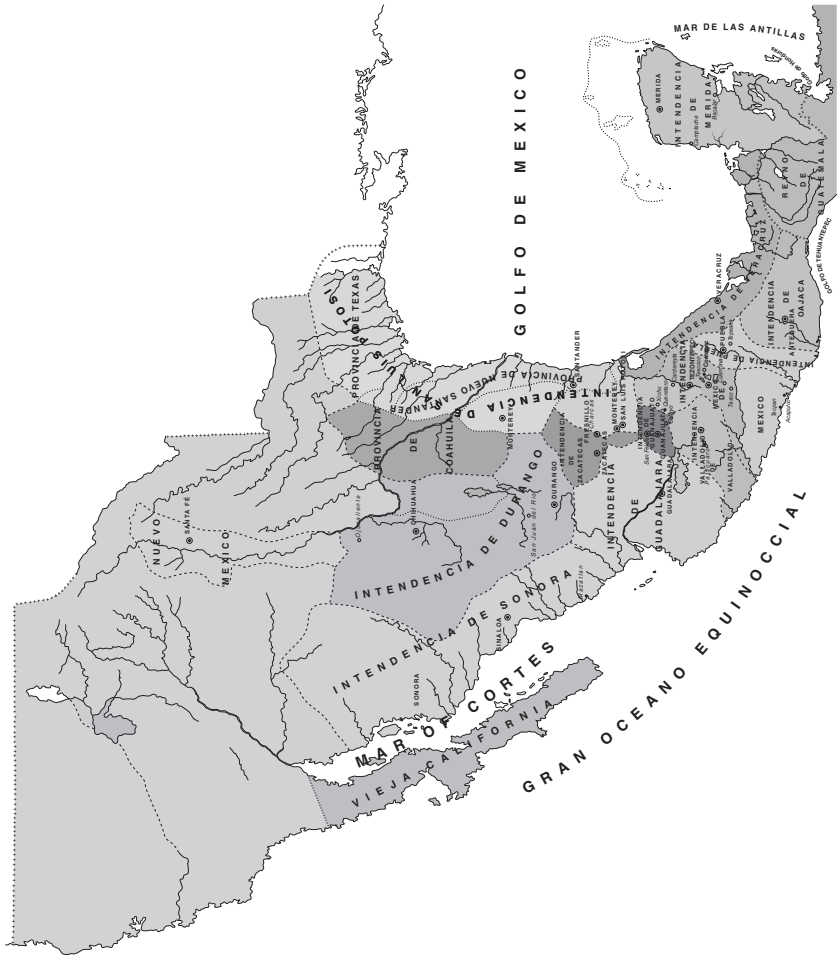
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The Kingdom of New Spain, ca. 1800.
Source: Antonio García Cubas, *Reyno de la Nueva España, Atlas pintoresco e histórico de los Estados Unidos Mexicanos*, 1885.
Courtesy of The Newberry Library, Chicago, call no. Ayer 655.59.G2 1885.

Preface

This book began as a simple idea at Harvard more than 15 years ago. Stuart Schwartz, the renowned historian from Yale, was lecturing on campus at Bernard Bailyn's spring workshop on the History of the Atlantic World, which I had the good fortune of attending. The topic was the Latin American caste system, and as is customary for lectures on *casta*, it was accompanied by a wealth of gripping images, taken from the exquisite series of caste paintings produced in Latin America during colonial times. Many of us in the field routinely use these images in our classes on colonial Latin American history to help students visualize what may seem strange, and to help make intelligible the registers of racial mixture that demarcated difference in the Spanish kingdom. For those of us in the United States, these paintings particularly help us grapple with understanding the differences between a fluid, multilayered conception of race and what have been our own somewhat more stationary views.

There came a point in Stuart Schwartz's lecture where those less familiar with the complexities of Latin American history began to smile. Others looked at some of the images in disbelief. As we moved from *mestizos* to *moriscos* to *lobos* to *coyotes*, and ultimately, the *salto para atrás*, the audience members could not contain themselves. It seemed obvious: history was crossing a line, becoming visual fiction. Except that was not my reaction. Having recently completed my own book on free-coloreds in the Mexican militias, several of the projected images made me recall what I had seen and read in documents in Mexico's national archives. *Lobos*, *moriscos*, *coyotes*, and *chinos*, in particular, were familiar indeed, and even plentiful in the colonial record.

In the brief span of the lecture session, I decided that I would write a social history, bringing back to life what seemed to me were largely

“forgotten castes.” My work on the militias had also led me to believe that rather than being fiction, these groups might have had concrete racial identities. I saw a clear avenue for exploring a hidden history. The project would be quick, so I thought, and the methodology easy: just collect everything that could be had on the forgotten castas from the archives, consider the different domains of existence of these groups, and tell their story. Maybe it would be an article, maybe a book.

What I did not completely understand then, and what I fully comprehend now, is the extent to which their experiences stretched beyond their individual lives. In the way that these categories were utilized in colonial records, there was a greater story – one about caste legacies, footprints, and patterns. The various and often surprising ways in which these fringe casta populations were construed and lived had a dynamic effect on the very system of caste organization under which they were classified, and may have established precedents – faint though they might be – for later, far grander conceptualizations of racial order. These “forgotten castes” – I now term them “extreme castes” – represented the limits of racial mixture and therefore offered clues into what has become known to the world as the ideology of mestizaje. Could it be that in these groups, and their forms of interaction with society, there were lessons for the future, for unlocking hidden registers of mestizaje itself?

As this book slowly began taking shape, it also bespoke trends that have been taking place in the now burgeoning field of Afro-Mexican history. At least in my view, recent scholarship appears to indicate that there was something afoot culturally in Mexico, approximating the genesis of a black cultural sphere, which started thriving as early as the seventeenth century. A black world of intricate ritual practice thrived, fusing elements of African spiritual arts with New World forms. There were sanctioned arenas of so-called black magico-spiritual authority that were well recognized across a wide spectrum of society, bestowing on black populations a discrete status in New Spain. Multiple crown-endorsed institutions such as militias and confraternities were organized for black participation, and these were sometimes veritable incubators of identity, even as they helped blacks assimilate and maneuver within colonial society. Distinct black conceptions of freedom, shaped by absolutism and slavery, were further forged in the conversations that blacks had among their kinship networks. There was an evolving sense of black honor that while mimetically associated with elite culture, remained unique. Colonial black honor was inevitably shaped by the social ceilings, opportunities, and interactions that peoples of African descent had among

Preface

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themselves and with other colonists. Even as blacks occupied interstitial roles in their societies – often brokering between whites and native populations occupationally, socially, and culturally (as in colonial Yucatán) – these midlevel subaltern spaces could nevertheless constitute a rallying source of collectivity that ebbed and flowed as needed. The black cultural sphere that scholars have been uncovering was fragile, pocked with holes, and permeable. Indeed, there were moments when the power of the crown, regional patron-client networks, and even the strength of native communities suffocated the expressions of their cultural world. Nonetheless, scholarship is continuing to reveal an underlying canvass to black life that provided a common texture to the black presence, despite the acknowledgement of real divisions and differences that existed among black populations. The black castas featured in this book, hybridized as they were, meandered in and out of this cultural sphere, revealing its complexity, atomization, and integrity throughout colonial times.

So what began in a dark Harvard classroom as a simple project has now become a tangled exploration into both lives and patterns, into social history and theory, into the social vision of the colonial era, and beyond. The result is for me a curious book. In the pages that follow you will encounter many things: stories of obscure and long-forgotten castas, overlapping and often contradictory notions of social categorizations and social systems, diachronic tales that weave their way from the deep colonial period to the outset of the twentieth century. There is much to learn here about the origins of the caste system, its evolution, and its legacies. I hope that this book will open as many conversations as it tries to reconcile. And I hope it will inspire more thought and research on the links between caste, blackness, and mestizaje. I leave it to you, the reader, to decide these outcomes.

Of course, I owe deep gratitude to many who touched this project along the way. In fact, there are too many people to acknowledge. To Bernard Bailyn, I tender my thanks for accepting me as a full-fledged member of his History of the Atlantic World Seminar in 2002, where the earliest ideas that became this book were aired. I also thank the National Humanities Center in North Carolina for providing me a succession of opportunities to confer with colleagues in a constellation of disciplines and to think, write, and talk about this project with them. I thank Claudia Lomelí Rodríguez and Fabiola Meléndez, my dear friends in Mexico City, who helped me locate and acquire boxes of documents during the periods when I could not be present at the national archives. Tatiana Seijas has been an endless supporter and cheerleader for this project, funneling me references

and documents from her forays into various repositories. At various stages of this work, I derived tremendous value from conversations, contact, and friendship with Matthew Restall, Danielle Terrazas Williams, Pablo Sierra, Patrick Carroll, Maria Elisa Velázquez, Juan Manuel de la Serna, Stefan Wheelock, Trey Proctor, Colin Palmer, Jaime Rodríguez, Andrew Fisher, Justin Wolfe, Juliet Hooker, Herman Bennett, Sandy Darity Jr., Zachary R. Morgan, Alejandro de la Fuente, Joan Bristol, Nicole von Germeten, Rachel O'Toole, Kathryn Burns, Leo Garofalo, Gabriel Haslip Viera, and Michele Reid-Vázquez. My graduate students from Johns Hopkins and Penn State – Norah Andrews, Joseph Clark, Katherine Bonil Gómez, and Robert Schwaller – have also been incredibly resonant sounding boards, thought partners, and colleagues. I thank you so much for your generous insights. Barbara Tenenbaum (Tasha) at the Library of Congress has not only been a great friend, but also was incredibly helpful in assisting me in the hunt for rare images and photographs.

Franklin Knight, my treasured colleague at Johns Hopkins, read early drafts of the opening chapters and provided sage guidance and criticism. Sherwin Bryant allowed me to test some of the premises of my argument at Northwestern, and Henry Louis Gates Jr. invited me to present several chapters of this project in the Huggins Lectures at Harvard. I am grateful to them for such memorable opportunities. At George Washington University, where I am now Dean of Arts and Sciences, Patrick Funciello helped me push this project through to the finish line – I could not have completed it without him. Jill Gisnburg's expert editorial eye also improved the book's flow, and I thank her for her time, dedication, and patience. I also thank Kiara Osiris and Emmanuella, two brilliant high school students in Cambridge who attended the Huggins Lectures and whose questions inspired me to write the Coda of this book.

And, of course, I owe much to my children, Allyson, Ben, and Brandon; my wife, Yolanda; and my mom and dad – you have had to live with this project in more ways than one. Thank you for providing the bedrock upon which I could write this book; it was impossible to do this without you. Finally, much is due to my steadfast mentor Herbert S. Klein. Your inspiration, vitality, prolific energy, and keen interpretive sense have always been my model.



FIGURE 1 Cuadro de Castas (Caste Chart).
 Source: Museo Nacional del Virreinato, Tepotzotlán, Mexico, 18th Century (anonymous painter). Castas Painting, Oil on canvas H 148 × W 105 cm, Courtesy of Art Resource.

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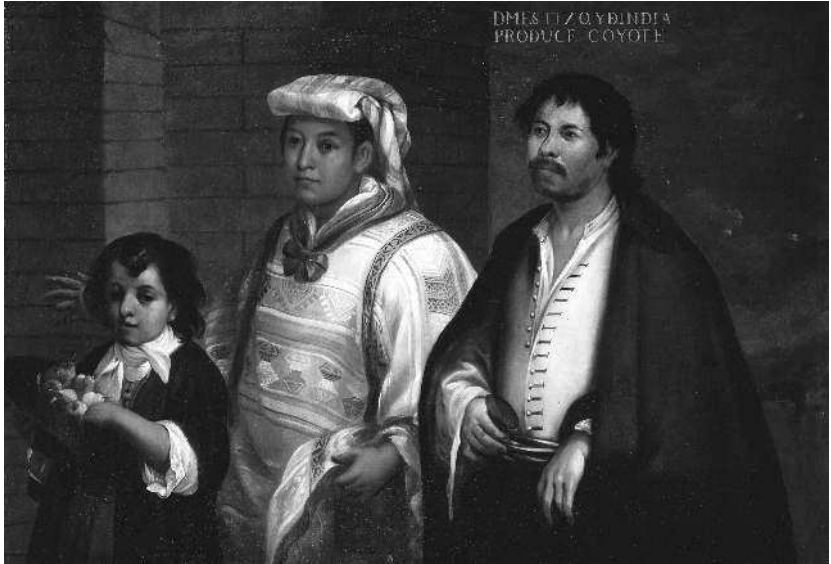


FIGURE 2 Mestizo and India Produce Coyote.
 Source: Juan Rodríguez Juárez (1675–1728), *De Mestizo, y India Produce Coyote*, ca. 1720, Castas Painting, Oil on canvas H 103.8 × W 146.4 cm, Courtesy of The Hispanic Society of America, New York.

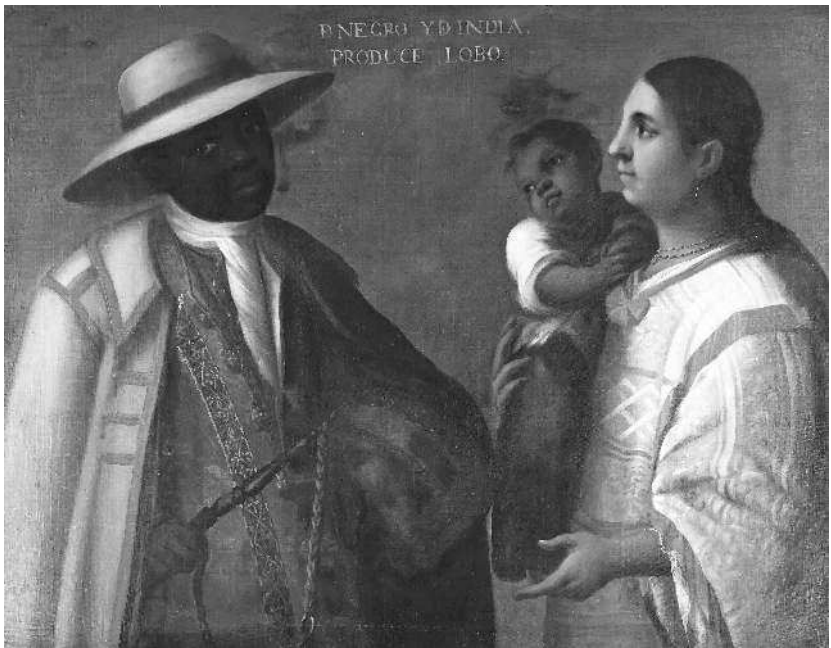


FIGURE 3 Negro and India Produce Lobo.
 Source: Juan Rodríguez Juárez (1675–1728), *De Negro, y India Produce Lobo*, ca. 1715; Castas Painting, Oil on canvas, Courtesy of Breamore House, Hampshire, UK/Bridgeman Images.

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FIGURE 4 Español and Mulata Produce Morisca.
 Source: Juan Rodríguez Juárez (1675–1728), *De Español, y Mulata Produce Morisca*, ca. 1715; Castas Painting, Oil on canvas, Courtesy of Breamore House, Hampshire, UK/Bridgeman Images.



FIGURE 5 Indio y Loba Produce Grifo, Which Is “Tente en el Aire.”
 Source: Juan Rodríguez Juárez (1675–1728), *De Indio, y Loba Produce Grifo, que es Tente en el Aire*, ca. 1715; Castas Painting, Oil on canvas, Courtesy of Breamore House, Hampshire, UK/Bridgeman Images.