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HASTA LA CASTA

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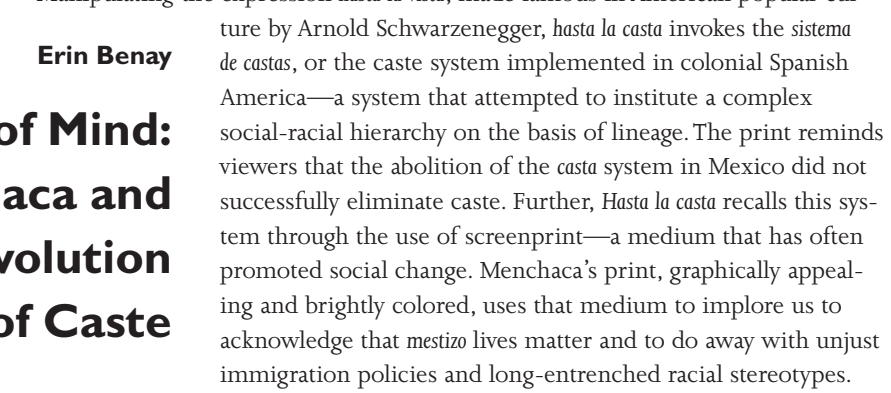

Michael Menchaca, *Hasta la casta*, 2017, screenprint, image 23⅝ x 17¼ in. (60 x 43.8 cm), sheet 27¾ x 21¼ in. (70.6 x 54.1 cm) (image provided by Michael Menchaca)

Bound in a tight circle of interlocking forms, immigrants to the United States frame their matriarchal ancestors at the center of Michael Menchaca's *Hasta la casta*.[1] Feline and hybridized animal bodies are strewn across the cobbled foreground; their limbs overlap the harsh, pixelated message printed at the bottom of the scene, which indicates that the proverbial game is over. *Hasta la casta*.[2] Manipulating the expression *hasta la vista*, made famous in American popular culture by Arnold Schwarzenegger, *hasta la casta* invokes the *sistema de castas*, or the caste system implemented in colonial Spanish America—a system that attempted to institute a complex social-racial hierarchy on the basis of lineage. The print reminds viewers that the abolition of the *casta* system in Mexico did not successfully eliminate caste. Further, *Hasta la casta* recalls this system through the use of screenprint—a medium that has often promoted social change. Menchaca's print, graphically appealing and brightly colored, uses that medium to implore us to acknowledge that *mestizo* lives matter and to do away with unjust immigration policies and long-entrenched racial stereotypes.

Bold and menacing in its graphic mode, Menchaca's work more generally points to the relevance of caste in the twenty-first century and reminds viewers of a colonial American history at risk of being forgotten. In her bestselling recent book, Isabel Wilkerson problematically harnesses caste as a catchall through which to understand systemic racism. In so doing, she suggests that racial categories are determined by skin color and are relatively fixed to particular strata, omitting the ways in which racism has been articulated through the performance of socioeconomic class, among other factors.[3] In contrast, Menchaca's visualization of caste articulates a far more nuanced understanding of such racial divides and points to a history in which caste was (and is) transient, flexible, ever changing. Wilkerson has brought renewed and widespread attention to the racial implications of caste, but it is telling that she does not mention the very *casta* system that was most geographically relevant to the formation of caste in America.[4] Caste in the United States arguably did not emerge solely with the Atlantic slave trade but rather with the *sistema de castas* in colonial New Spain. Menchaca's art subtly, and in some cases subliminally, asks viewers to consider how caste has inflected our understanding of race and immigration without relegating the colonial history of the Americas to a footnote in a story of American racism. In so doing, Menchaca reminds us of the deeply interwoven and multiple histories of caste, racial stratification, and oppression that continue to subjugate Latinx peoples today.

Menchaca explores this disturbing colonial history most explicitly in his series *La Raza Cósmica* 20XX, a reinterpretation in sixteen screenprints of the canonical early modern *pinturas de castas* (caste paintings). *Casta* paintings, made by Creole artists throughout the eighteenth century, typically present a mother, father, and child in arrangements based on images of the Holy Family. Labeled with a number and textual inscription, the paintings usually comprise sixteen racial variations (see "Table I. Casta Painting Captions" on p. 57). Each label describes the "breed" of the child in the picture: a Spanish man and an elite Indigenous woman produce a *mestizo*; a Black man and an Indian woman a *China Cambuja*; and so on. *Castas* are sometimes represented together in one unified composition, or are depicted in sets, such as in the well-known series by Juan Rodríguez Juárez. The paintings

This article was made possible by the generosity of Michael Menchaca, whose willingness to engage in art historical conversation knows no bounds. I am also indebted to Drs. Matthew Feinberg, Emily Peters, Britany Salsbury, and Ben Vinson III as well as to the anonymous readers of this manuscript, whose feedback was invaluable.

1. All of Michael Menchaca's work has been reproduced with his permission.
2. This phrase defies precise translation. *Hasta* can mean a number of things; in the phrase *hasta la vista* for instance, it means "until," as in, "until we meet again." The idiomatic expression used by Arnold Schwarzenegger in *Terminator 2* (1991) is rarely used by Spanish-speaking people, but it may also evoke a less formal version of the phrase, as in the English expression "see you later." See Jane H. Hill, "Hasta la Vista, Baby: Anglo Spanish in the American Southwest," *Critique of Anthropology* 13, no. 2 (1993): 145–76. In my interpretation of Menchaca's print, *hasta la casta* implies "see you later, *castas*" and is a cynical projection.
3. Isabel Wilkerson, *Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents* (New York: Random House, 2020). Numerous critics and scholars have criticized Wilkerson's characterization of caste. See, for example, Arjun Appadurai, "Comparing Race to Caste Is an Interesting Idea, but There Are Crucial Differences between Both," *The Wire*, September 12, 2020, https://thewire.in/books/book-review-isabel-wilkerson-caste-racism-america; Charisse Burden-Stelly, "Caste Does Not Explain Race," *Boston Review*, December 15, 2020, https://bostonreview.net/articles/charisse-burden-stelly-tk/; and Sunil Khilnani, "Isabel Wilkerson's World-Historical Theory of Race and Caste," *New Yorker*, August 17, 2020, https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2020/08/17/isabel-wilkersons-world-historical-theory-of-race-and-caste.

Michael Menchaca, *La Raza Cósmica 20XX*, 2019, suite of 16 screenprints on Stonehenge Pearl Gray paper, each 21 x 22½ in. (53.3 x 57.2 cm) (image provided by Michael Menchaca)

Table 1. Casta Painting Captions*

1. From a Spanish man and an Indian woman is born a *Mestiza*
2. From a Spanish man and a Mestiza woman is born a *Castiza*
3. From a Spanish man and a Castiza woman is born a Spaniard
4. From a Spanish man and a Black woman is born a *Mulatta*
5. From a Spanish man and a Mulatta woman is born a *Morisca*
6. From a Spanish man and a Morisca woman is born an *Albina*
7. From a Spanish man and an Albina woman is born a Throwback (*Torna Altras*)
8. From a Spanish man and a Throwback woman is born a *Tente en el aire*
9. From a Black man and an Indian woman is born a *China Cambuja*
10. From a Chino Cambujo man and an Indian woman is born a *Loba*
11. From a Lobo man and an Indian woman is born an *Albarazado*
12. From an Albarazado man and a Mestiza woman is born a *Barcino*
13. From an Indian man and a Barcina woman is born a *Zambaiga*
14. From a Castizo man and a Mestiza woman is born a *Chamizo*
15. From a Mestizo man and an Indian woman is born a *Coyote*
16. Heathen Indians

*This example derives from Miguel Cabrera's 1763 series.

(and castes) are organized hierarchically and are often numbered to reflect this structure: they begin with the genealogical pairing that produces the "purest," whitest offspring depicted in the series, the *mestizo,* and end with the most racially convoluted mixture of Spanish, Indigenous, and Black bloodlines. Shocking in their blatant revelation of colonialist miscegenation, *casta* paintings have been the subject of much art historical literature.[5] Enigmatic and haunting, the early modern pictures have been interpreted as souvenirs for wealthy European patrons, as "exotica" for eclectic *Wunderkammers*, as taxonomic records, and as ethnographic evidence of *mestizaje* (racial mixing); and indeed they may have simultaneously served all of these roles to varying degrees and at different times.[6] Regularly incorporated in art history courses and texts about global early modernisms, *casta* paintings are invoked as evidence of a deeply troubling colonial past, but they are rarely used as a lens through which to understand the present.[7]

And yet, Menchaca's interpretation of and dialogue with the *casta* painting tradition calls attention to the endurance of *casta* thinking in the twenty-first century. Although he has been included in three major national exhibitions held in the past year, recently received an inaugural Latinx Artist Fellowship from the US Latinx Art Forum, and is arguably one of the most important ascending Latinx artists in the United States, Menchaca's work has received very little scholarly attention.[8] Menchaca's relative art historical invisibility is symptomatic of what Arlene Dávila has called the "whitewashing and erasure" of Latinx artists from histories and economies of American art.[9] Frequently omitted from studies, exhibitions, and sales of *both* contemporary American art *and* Latin American art, Latinx art and artists are too often categorized as "neither here nor there"—a rhetorical failure that reinforces the dominant Black/white racial discourse and further racializes Latinx people as "foreigners."[10] This essay seeks to combat the "regimes of value" that have typically excluded Latinx artists from serious art historical study.[11]

4. Hazel V. Carby discusses this omission in her review of Wilkerson's book. Carby, "The Limits of Caste," *London Review of Books* 43, no. 2 (January 2021), https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v43/no2/hazel-v.-carby/the-limits-of-caste.
5. See Ilona Katzew, *Casta Painting: Images of Race in Eighteenth-Century Mexico* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2004), with a discussion of the historiography of this subject on 5–9.
6. Katzew, *Casta Painting*.
7. See, for instance, "Representing Race in Mexico," in the art history textbook *Art and Its Global Histories*, ed. Emma Barker (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 2017), 63–68. Here, *casta* paintings are used as the sole example for the section.
8. Menchaca's work was included in *A Graphic Revolution: Prints and Drawings in Latin America*, Cleveland Museum of Art, Cleveland, Ohio, March 8–November 29, 2020; *Estamos Bien—La Trienal 20/21*, El Museo del Barrio, New York, New York, March 13–September 26, 2021; and *¡Printing the Revolution! The Rise and Impact of Chicano Graphics, 1965 to Now*, Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, DC, May 14–August 8, 2021. See also the exhibition catalogs *Estamos Bien,* ed. Elia Alba, Rodrigo Moura, and Susanna V. Temkin, exh. cat. (New York: El Museo del Barrio, 2021); and *¡Printing the Revolution! The Rise and Impact of Chicano Graphics, 1965 to Now*, ed. E. Carmen Ramos, exh. cat. (Washington, DC: Smithsonian American Art Museum; Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2020); and Britany Salsbury's review of "Gotta Catch 'Em All!" by Michael Menchaca, *Art in Print Review* 6, no. 6 (2017): 15–16. Menchaca is one of fifteen artists to receive the new Andrew W. Mellon–funded fellowships for Latinx artists. See https://mellon.org/programs/arts-and-culture/latinx-artist-fellowship/.
9. Arlene Dávila, *Latinx Art: Artists, Markets, and Politics* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2020), 7–8. Michael Menchaca does not appear in Dávila's "Noncomprehensive List of Artists Everyone Should Know," 177–88.
10. Dávila, *Latinx Artists*, 10, 45.
11. Ibid., 10.

***Las Castas*, Mexico, 18th century**, oil on canvas, 40⅞ x 58¼ in. (104 x 148 cm). Museo Nacional del Virreinato, Tepotzotlán, Mexico (artwork in the public domain; photograph © Schalkwijk/Art Resource, NY)

Looking at Menchaca's prints alongside the early modern paintings that have fueled his artistic production is more than a matter of academic dexterity; it is a manifestation of a broader move toward the decolonialization of art history.[12] Such a disciplinary decolonization requires that we radically revise the Eurocentric canon, expanding it to include artists of color, women artists, LGBTQ+ artists, and objects that move beyond the parameters of "fine art." Although such a move would seem by now to be well underway, Dávila's work proves that there is much left to be done to break the art historical habits that favor particular geographic and racial narratives. Bringing Menchaca's oeuvre to the fore of conversations about race, caste, and art making in America constitutes one such intervention. Breaking these scholarly habits, however, also entails revealing, whenever possible, evidence of the "colonial wound" inflicted by

12. The decolonization of art history was the subject of a recent special issue of *Art History* 43, no. 1 (2020): 8–66.

Juan Rodríguez Juárez, *De español y de india, produce mestizo,* ca. 1715, oil on canvas, 31¾ x 41½ in. (80.7 x 105.4 cm). Breamore House, Hampshire, UK (photograph © Bridgeman Images)

European conquistadors and their progeny.[13] By closely examining the mechanisms of modern *mestizaje* at play in Menchaca's complex *casta* series, a new *sistema* emerges in which racial identity and caste are bound to an ever-expanding technological matrix.

La Raza Cósmica 20XX

La Raza Cósmica 20XX is the outcome of a 2019 collaboration between Menchaca and the printmaker Julia Samuels at Overpass Projects in Providence, Rhode Island. In his artist's statement, Menchaca articulates a complex goal: to "blend the framework of ancient Meso-American codices, European bestiaries, and Japanese video games with the seductive, attention-seeking user interface (UI) designs developed by Big Tech corporations."[14] In the suite of sixteen prints, he does this through "animal archetypes and narrative pattern designs" that articulate a newer, contemporary iteration of *mestizo* identity. Flattening the pictorial space with repeating patterns, swaths of opaque ink, and overlapping shapes, Menchaca digitally renders his images on a computer before manually screenprinting them on paper. The result is a velvety, saturated surface that appears void of human touch despite the skill, labor, and mechanics of what is a messy, physically exerting process. Because it is sifted and aerated prior to its arrival on the paper, the ink is especially pristine, totally opaque, and uniformly flat, which is why, as Jennifer Roberts has explicated, it has always been appealing in commercial modes of printing.[15] Screenprint is a medium that deceptively conceals its system of manufacture, and it is for precisely this reason that it has been inextricably bound both to consumer culture on the one hand and to artistic expressions of political and social unrest on the other.

13. In his seminal consideration of the "idea" of Latin America, Walter Mignolo articulates the "colonial wound" as a physical and psychological consequence of racism. Mignolo, *The Idea of Latin America* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2005), 8.
14. Michael Menchaca, conversation with the author, January 26, 2021.
15. Jennifer Roberts, "Contact: Art and the Pull of the Print," pt. 4: "Strain," the 70th A. W. Mellon Lectures in the Fine Arts (National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC, May 16, 2021).

Michael Menchaca, *Mestizo No. 1*, from *La Raza Cósmica 20XX*, 2019, screenprint on Stonehenge Pearl Gray paper, 21 x 22½ in. (53.3 x 57.2 cm) (image provided by Michael Menchaca)

Menchaca's prints, like those by the canonical Pop artists Roy Lichtenstein, Ed Ruscha, and Andy Warhol, employ the seemingly invisible system of screenprinting as a tool through which to literally and metaphorically sift ink and images, pressing them through a fine mesh sieve that reveals a latent and powerful system of corruption and abuse.[16] Harnessing the very medium used to produce images in magazines, signs, and other consumer products, these artists deliberately blurred or obscured the boundaries between popular culture, news, and art. In Menchaca's case, the prints call attention to the ills of a digitized consumer culture, where (ironically) replication and circulation threaten to erode the individual's sense of self. That the images perform this work through the medium of screenprinting places them in overt historical dialogue with artists of the Chicano print revolution of the 1960s, a point to which I will return.

Despite the seemingly festive, vibrant graphic repertoire of Menchaca's images, the series suggests a neocolonial caste structure in which little has changed since the eighteenth century and the beginning of the *pinturas de castas* tradition. In the early modern paintings, the Spanish colonial superstructure is less overtly menacing, but in Menchaca's prints the caste families appear trapped, bound both by their quatrefoil frames and by the technological occupation of the world they inhabit. There is no *hasta la casta* here. Menchaca's use of identical frames, a consistent palette, and serialized images binds his series to the early modern type, which were similarly repetitive.[17] Banderoles unfurl at the bottom of each print to reveal abbreviated caste names based on the longer inscriptions which accompanied the *casta* paintings during Spanish rule. In the first print in Menchaca's series, *Mestizo No. 1*, a white *español* (Spanish man) dons a wide-brimmed black hat (perhaps a *sombrero cordobés*, or a Cordovan hat, made in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in Córdoba, Spain), a striped serape, and breeches that will partially identify "Europeanness" in subsequent scenes. Facing

16. Ibid. Roberts makes this point with regard to Ed Ruscha in her lecture on "strain" in printmaking.
17. Even the quatrefoil format may derive from a series of *casta* paintings on one canvas painted in 1777 by Ignacio Maria Barreda (Real Academia Española de Lengua, Madrid) in which the pictorial plane is divided into sixteen fictive architectural niches.

***Codex Borgia*, page 10, Tolteca-Chichimeca, ca. 1500**, 1898 facsimile edition of MSS_Borg. mess 1/0010, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, Rome (artwork in the public domain)

***Codex Fejérváry Mayer*, page 36, Tolteca-Chichimeca, ca. 1500**, facsimile, British Museum AM1902,0111.1 (artwork in the public domain; image provided by the British Museum under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial ShareAlike 4.0 International License)

his androgynous, Indigenous wife, the man appears poised to pass her his smartphone, a tangible manifestation of his colonizing power. Standing in profile, the mother's headdress and nose piercing announce her indigeneity in exaggerated visual terms. Their feline child gives explicit visual expression to the biological interbreeding that is represented in less animalistic terms in *casta* paintings of old. Head tilted and inherited hat akimbo, the kitten, too, holds a phone and looks vacantly out at the viewer.

Here and throughout the series, Menchaca builds his iconographic repertoire in part from disembodied components of the Mixtec Borgia Group codices.[18] Created by the confederacies of the Tolteca-Chichimeca in the early sixteenth century, the Codex Borgia and the Codex Fejérváry Mayer are sacred calendars and divinatory manuals that were used to invoke the prophecies of the Nahua gods.[19] From these richly illuminated codices, Menchaca mines human faces (as in *Mestizo No. 1*), patterns, and animals, and reconfigures them in original combinations: the eagle-headed man in *Torna Atras No. 7* and the feathered monkey-child of *Albarazado No. 14* are but two instances of such pastiche. Culturally and historically dislocated from their sacred context within the codex, these composite creatures evoke the Mixtec aesthetic vocabulary without conjuring their explicit meanings in any legible way. Nevertheless, codices of the type referenced by Menchaca were proscriptive and, among other purposes, were used to predict favorable marriages. Although the efficacy of the Nahua gods has been thwarted by Menchaca's metaphorical scissor work, the adoption of codex iconography elicits a moment, prior to colonization, when marriages and fertility were the purview of the gods, and not European noblemen.

18. Conversation with Michael Menchaca, August 1, 2021.
19. John Pohl's work on these codices is extensive. See, for example, Pohl, "Mexican Codices, Maps, and Lienzos as Social Contracts," in *Writing without Words: Alternative Literacies in Mesoamerica and the Andes*, ed. E. Hill Boone and W. D. Mignolo, 137–60.

Pinturas de castas Reimagined

Despite the lush, vegetal environ depicted in *Mestizo No. 1*, the sidewalk confrontation is void of the domestic intimacy found in the earliest examples of eighteenth-century *pinturas de castas*, in which fruitful marriages resulted in adoring offspring. In a set of *casta* paintings attributed to Juárez, the first painting of the series, *De español y de india, produce mestizo* (*Spaniard and Indian Produce a Mestizo*) depicts a dark-skinned, elite Indian woman dressed in a beautifully embroidered *huipil* (native cloak). Her *mestizo* baby is carried by a darker-skinned servant at her waist. A fair, angelic-cheeked father, dressed elegantly in French fashion, warmly strokes the head of his infant. When such a Spaniard fathered a child with an Indian woman in colonial Mexico, a decision needed to be made about that child's legitimacy that extended well beyond marriage: children who were accepted became socially white, while those who were rejected became socially Indian.[20] Juárez makes this choice one of paternal pride. Through his fatherly touch, the *español* seems to pass on his creamy complexion, thus conferring visual legitimacy to his *mestizo* child and eradicating the outward manifestation of his mixed breeding.

The poignant representation of caste families in early examples of the eighteenth-century genre contributes to the jarring effect of the paintings: concealed behind these vignettes is a murderous history of colonization. Although the *Reconquista* and Spanish vilification of the "Moor" had long shaped European attitudes toward racial difference, the sixteenth century witnessed a new obsession with conceptualizations of lineage, rank, and acculturation, the full history of which lies outside the scope of this essay.[21] The influx of Black Africans into the European continent during the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries resulted in the codification of ideas about race that had been articulated first in antiquity and throughout the medieval period.[22] Dependent on folkloric and Christian traditions, Latin dictionaries of the thirteenth century assigned demonic attributes to the color *niger* (black) and angelic properties to *albus* (white) that directly impacted the ways that skin color was inculcated with broader ideologies of difference over the course of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.[23]

As a result, the conquistadors who arrived in the New World could justify their appropriation of land and exploitation of people under the auspices of a greater salvific project.[24] Over the course of the seventeenth century, Iberians became increasingly concerned with maintaining blood purity (*limpieza de sangre*) that was associated not just with whiteness and status but with reason and rational thinking.[25] Despite their early efforts to create a republic of Spaniards and a republic of Indians and to "transplant the hierarchies of the Old World onto the racial landscape of the Americas," Spanish settlers failed to maintain the dual republic.[26] Racial mixing increased exponentially as Spanish control expanded and African and Chinese slaves were brought to the New World. By the end of the eighteenth century, one quarter of Mexico's population was "mixed" in infinite combinations of three main bloodlines: *españoles* (whites), *indios* (Indians), and *negros/morenos* (Blacks).[27] Regardless of the anxieties of the Spanish noble class, racial mixing facilitated social mobility and threatened the *sistema de castas* at its core.[28]

Casta paintings emerged, at least in part, from Spaniards' fixation on *limpieza de sangre*, but the hyperrational organizational structure of *casta* paintings was in fact never a reality: the mechanisms of *mestizaje* were never so clearly delineated, nor

20. Ben Vinson III, *Before Mestizaje: The Frontiers of Race and Caste in Colonial Mexico* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 11.
21. The legacy of the *Reconquista* is a subject of extensive scholarly attention. See, for example, James H. Sweet, "The Iberian Roots of American Racist Thought," *The William and Mary Quarterly* 54, no. 1 (1997): 143–66. More generally, see Simon Barton and Robert Portass, eds., *Beyond the Reconquista: New Directions in the History of Medieval Iberia (711–1085)* (Leiden, the Netherlands: Brill, 2020). For the origins of racism before the nineteenth century, see also T. F. Earle and K. J. P. Lowe, eds., *Black Africans in Renaissance Europe* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2005), particularly 1–14.
22. Kate Lowe, "The Stereotyping of Black Africans in Renaissance Europe," in Earle and Lowe, *Black Africans in Renaissance Europe*, 20.
23. Ibid., 20–21. See also Vinson, *Before Mestizaje*, 2–6; and Barbara Fuchs, "The Spanish Race," in *Rereading the Black Legend: Discourses of Religious and Racial Difference in the Renaissance Empires*, ed. Margaret R. Greer, Walter D. Mignolo, and Maureen Quilligan (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 88–98.
24. Mignolo, *Idea of Latin America*, 15.
25. Vinson, *Before Mestizaje*, 2.
26. María Martínez, *Genealogical Fictions: Limpieza de Sangre, Religion, and Gender in Colonial Mexico* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2008), 61–90; and Vinson, *Before Mestizaje*, 3.
27. Vinson, *Before Mestizaje*, 44. Today 62 percent of the Mexican population identifies as *mestizo*. See "Mexico Demographics Profile," IndexMundi, https://www.indexmundi.com/mexico/demographics_profile.html.
28. Vinson, *Before Mestizaje*, 10.

the castes as rigidly fixed as the pictures seemingly convey. As Ilona Katzew and others have proven, the paintings also indexed the pride (*criollismo*) of their American-born Spanish makers. The cultural and natural bounties of the New World depicted in *casta* paintings surely enticed European patrons and collectors and were signs of how food, clothing, and industry worked in concert to create caste.[29] *Casta* paintings could, therefore, simultaneously serve an "exoticizing function" for Spanish collectors and patrons and an "identificatory function" for Creoles.[30] Over the course of the eighteenth century, numerous formal evolutions in *casta* painting indexed changing attitudes toward racial mixing. For example, the earliest-documented series, a set of sixteen separate canvases by Manuel Arellano (1711), focused on conveying individual racial categories, while a subsequent set by Juárez (ca. 1715) deviated from Arellano's prototype and introduced the full-length format as well as scenes of familial activity (such as eating tamales).[31] As the century progressed, the aspiration to realize the positive potential of *mestizaje* gave way to the desire to articulate the differences among classes.[32] In the paintings, images of abjection, domestic discord, and nomadism visualized the underlying social strife that was less explicit in the earlier canvases. If *casta* paintings served a didactic function, as did other types of serialized images in the early modern world, then that function certainly changed over the one-hundred-year period during which the genre was popular.[33] Because little is known about the mechanisms of Creole artists' studios or how the particular subject matter of unique *casta* series was selected, however, it remains difficult to determine the rhetorical function of these pictures: they might have chronicled a racial fiction and asserted colonial control, but they also promoted an "emerging sense of Creole American identity."[34]

Contrary to the impression created by *casta* paintings, caste was understood to be simultaneously a genealogical condition, inherited through blood, *and* highly mutable, capable of change even within the same generation. In turn, *casta* paintings rendered logical and intelligible a process that was in reality extraordinarily complex and constantly in flux.[35] As such, they participated in a "colonized social reality" that, as Homi Bhabha explains, produces an "other" that is "entirely knowable and visible."[36] Indeed, the paintings employ a colonial "system of representation, a regime of truth, that is structurally similar to realism," and yet any such interpretation of the genre is complicated by the incongruity between painted "reality" and the malleable operations of caste on the ground.[37]

As signs of colonizing oppression, *casta* paintings seem to conform to Bhabha's theory, which posits that the colonized (*castas*) appear to act and *be* like the colonizer.[38] Such mimicry, Bhabha suspects, will ultimately lead to ambivalence, which undermines colonial dominance. One way that these indications of *casta* ambivalence are countered in the paintings is through gesture and touch. In Juárez's painting, for instance, the genealogical legitimacy of his child seems to be constructed in part through his gesture of paternal recognition. A later painting of the same *mestizo* caste by Miguel Cabrera similarly relies on both the father and mother's physical embrace of their daughter as an outward sign of acknowledgment. The child's filial gaze is directed lovingly toward her father, whose face is turned away—both from her, and from us. Cabrera's painting was made in 1763, forty-eight years after Juárez painted his version of the *mestizo* caste; for Cabrera, dress, occupation, and domestic rituals function as crucial tells—denoting social

29. Rebecca Earle, "The Pleasures of Taxonomy: Casta Paintings, Classification, and Colonialism," *The William and Mary Quarterly* 73, no. 3 (July 2016), 440–43.
30. Christa Olson, "Casta Painting and the Rhetorical Body," *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 39, no. 4 (2009): 307–30.
31. Katzew, *Casta Painting*, 16. Katzew has brilliantly detailed the changes in the *casta* painting convention over time.
32. Katzew, *Casta Painting*, 63–110, 111–63.
33. Ibid.
34. Katzew, as well as Magali Carrera (*Imagining Identity in New Spain: Race, Lineage, and the Colonial Body in Portraiture and Casta Paintings* [Austin: University of Texas Press, 2003], 44–105), argue the former, while Olson suggests the latter. See Olson, "Casta Painting and the Rhetorical Body," 320.
35. This is a central point made by Carrera. See, in particular, Carrera, *Imagining Identity in New Spain,* 44–105.
36. Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 70–71.
37. Ibid.
38. Carrera, *Imagining Identity in New Spain,* 17; and Bhabha, *Location of Culture*, 85–86.

Miguel Cabrera, *Pintura de Castas, 1. De Español e India, Mestiza*, 1763, oil on canvas, 53⅜ x 40⅝ in. (135.5 x 103.5 cm). Collection of Lydia Sada de González, Mexico (artwork in the public domain)

hierarchy in more important ways than skin color alone.[39] Cabrera's painting indicates that it is as much though rich, sumptuous clothing that race is performed as it is through pigmentation. Unlike the grid style of taxonomic *casta* painting that was far less popular but is nevertheless often reproduced,[40] Cabrera's picture entangles its protagonists in a far more ambiguous depiction of *casta* identity and hints at the unraveling of illusions of strict racial classification that would pervade the later eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

The complex familial dynamics that unfold across many painted *casta* series are flattened in Menchaca's series, where the humility, love, boredom, and irritation of his figures is concealed by animal heads and Mixtec masks. The animal inbreeding and taxonomic clarity of castes grows ever more convoluted in Menchaca's prints. Like the *casta* paintings upon which they are based, the prints point deceptively toward systemization—through numbers and inscriptions—but they also thwart legibility to an even greater extent than their early modern precursors. Although the *sistema de castas* itself attempted to codify racial status into neatly conceived categories, the application of this system was far from effective. After all, such categorization depended on a precise knowledge of ancestry that was rarely known to the ruling Spaniards or their subjects.[41] The absurd impracticality of the *sistema* is exaggerated to poignant effect in Menchaca's series, where even the taxonomic inscriptions fail to describe neat ancestral categories.

39. Katzew, *Casta Paintings*, 106–9.
40. Ibid., 5–6. The grid style was less common than sets of sixteen separate paintings.
41. R. Douglas Cope, *The Limits of Racial Domination: Plebeian Society in Colonial Mexico City, 1660–1720* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1994), 57.

Michael Menchaca, *Castizo No. 2*, from *La Raza Cósmica 20XX*, 2019, screenprint on Stonehenge Pearl Gray paper, 21 x 22½ in. (53.3 x 57.2 cm) (image provided by Michael Menchaca)

Menchaca's titles notably do not comply with the racial equations proffered in eighteenth-century paintings in which x and y produce z. Instead, he labels only the by-product, the hybridized child-type that is ostensibly the yield of cross-fertilization. This decision calls attention to the outcome rather than the process of mating. When combined with a number, the inscriptions in Menchaca's series dissemble. Illogical and opaque, the labels and increasingly freakish animal offspring depicted by Menchaca parody the incoherence of the *sistema de castas* that attempted to bring order and compliance to the colonized New World.

In *La Raza Cósmica 20XX*, Menchaca further articulates the theme of control and compliance through the inclusion of technological iconography. In *Mestizo No. 1*, for instance, the Spanish father acknowledges his offspring through the emotionally impoverished replication of his most important attribute: a smartphone. The child in Menchaca's print is no stray cat but is rather domesticated, as indicated by his embrace of technology and his European dress. In *Castizo No. 2*, our kitten is fully grown to a cloaked cat; his wife is a beaked, sun-goddess native, their child a split-bodied creature. The *castizo's mestiza* mother wears a *huipil*, but it is unmistakably branded with a reversed Facebook "f" at its center. Woven between, behind, and through the animal-hybrid family is a wallpaper of Amazon.com icons. If smartphones signaled a digital presence in *Mestizo No. 1*, these and other Big Tech pictograms become symptoms of a pervasive technological colonization in the remaining prints. In *Español No. 3*, the Twitter bird is poised in the tropical flora; *Español No. 4* sees the Facebook symbol made into decorative wallpaper. In *Quarteron No. 6*, the offspring of a Mulatto-and-Spanish couple holds a cell phone, the action seemingly paused, a large "play" button poised at the center of the composition. In the distance, the ubiquitous Amazon.com arrows repeat. Elephant, bird, and child, the *quarteron* stands on ground comprised of repeating, empty profile pictures. The child's identity, like that of

Michael Menchaca, *Albarazado No. 14*, from *La Raza Cósmica 20XX*, 2019, screenprint on Stonehenge Pearl Gray paper, 21 x 22½ in. (53.3 x 57.2 cm) (image provided by Michael Menchaca)

an unphotographed digital user, is unknown, suspended. Integrated holistically and unmistakably into each of the sixteen *castas*, Menchaca renders the hieroglyphic language of social media omnipresent.

Alluding to a broader thesis in Menchaca's work, these traces of the digital web are symptomatic of what the artist has called the "digital caste system," a neocolonial structure that keeps Black and Brown people chained to technological oppressors that limit access, representation, and power on a global scale.[42] Menchaca's depictions of smartphones, and Amazon, Facebook, and Twitter logos, fulfill a similar purpose as still-life objects and domestic trappings in *casta* paintings, where these mimetic inclusions at once advertise the bounties of the New World and convey the socioeconomic implications of particular trades.[43] But Menchaca's fabric of technological symbols is less indicative of *criollismo* and more representative of an insidious disease, common to all castes, including those at the highest echelons of society. In the *mestiza/o* world of Menchaca's digital *sistema*, all Black and Brown "users" are targeted for their consumer potential, a topic to which I will return.

As the series progresses toward the lowest castes, Menchaca's animal-hybrid creatures become more complex, their features and combinations improbable and frightening despite their cheerful colors and appealing format. *Albarazado No. 14*, depicting the offspring of a *Lobo* (Amerindian and African mix) man and an Indian woman, features a feline-masked mother, an elephant-headed father (undoubtedly signifying his African bloodline), and a *quetzal* (an iridescent tropical bird), feather-framed child. In the final, sixteenth, and lowest caste, *Ahi Te Estas No. 16*, the racial mixture has become so convoluted as to be visually jarring. The father's serpentine neck and head turn at a right angle away from his body, slithering across the center of the composition toward the female figure, whose face is a fragmented combination of Indigenous masks. Her breasts jut at anatomically impossible angles from

42. Conversation with the artist, August 1, 2021.
43. Carrera, *Imagining Identity in New Spain*, 83.

her torso, and the masked child seems to hand her his phone. Menchaca's increasingly fractured Mixtec mash-up further complicates the rhetorical legibility of the *sistema de castas* that he depicts. In early modern treatments of *Ahi Te Estas*, multiple generations of mixing yield a racial incoherence that is indexed by phrases like "you stay here," or "I don't understand you," or "hold yourself in the air."[44] In both Mechaca's print and early modern typologies, the implication of this final category is one of hopeless illegibility, the attempt to define race by place (here, or in the air), noted in the ambiguous taxonomic labels.

As the figures in Menchaca's series degenerate into bestial anomalies, the performance of race and class is also muddied. With each step of removal from the source of *limpieza de sangre*, Menchaca's *castas* become explicitly less human, more hybridized. Long used as a theoretical framework for thinking about cross-cultural production in Latin America, hybridity often problematically distorts violent, colonial relationships as peaceful convergences of peoples and cultures.[45] In art history, hybridity has collapsed economic and power differentials by seeming to placing Indigenous or *mestiza/o* artists on equal footing as their European counterparts.[46] Reimaging the animal-gods of Mixtec codices as spiritually impoverished and technologically addicted *castas*, Menchaca's prints depict a hybridized Latinx species whose identity may be mined for data and whose resources may be exploited in a global, tech economy.

Modern *Mestizaje*

Menchaca's series vividly points to the ways that the meaning of *mestizaje* has evolved since the eighteenth century and, more significantly, to the ways that *mestizaje* challenges the Black/white binaries that are often used to characterize racial experience in the United States. Over the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, *mestiza/o* identity in Latin America was increasingly viewed as a status of achievement: through mixing, *Indígena* cultures were believed to be "rehabilitated" and legitimized.[47] Following the 1910 Mexican Revolution, *mestizaje* became an ideology of national belonging and a way of proving Mexicanness.[48] Although the history of *mestizaje* as a theory of nation building lies outside the scope of this essay, Mónica Moreno Figueroa and others have demonstrated that it is through that history that whiteness emerges as both a normalized *and* ambiguous condition, attached not exclusively to the white body but to a host of other spaces and processes.[49] Menchaca calls specific attention to *mestizaje* as an ongoing mode of whitewashing and erasure through the title of the series itself.

La Raza Cósmica 20XX is at once witty and incisive. It calls out to the Mexican philosopher and Prime Minister of Education José Vasconcelos's 1925 tract *La raza cósmica*, which proposed that race and nationality in the Americas would eventually be absorbed into an all-encompassing *Universópolis*. The utopian ideological tenets of Vasconcelos's text were critical to shaping *mestizaje* as a nationalistic strategy.[50] Mixing, argued Vasconcelos, could produce "superior beings" and this cosmic race would bring Mexico into the modern age.[51] By rearticulating mixed racial identity as a positive biological characteristic, theories of *mestizaje* combated long-standing European and American stereotypes that articulated such mixtures as "backward," "tropical," and "inferior." But Vasconcelos's essay, even as it flattened part of the Americas' racial hierarchy, reinforced others; his futuristic fifth

44. Thank you to the anonymous readers of this manuscript for pointing out that the linguistic incoherence of these classifying phrases is mirrored in the visual incoherence of Menchaca's series. The phrases themselves are written differently by painters and therefore appear in various Spanish iterations. See Katzew, *Casta Paintings,* 40–50.
45. The bibliography on this topic is extensive. See, for example, Ananda Cohen-Aponte, "Decolonizing the Global Renaissance: A View from the Andes," in *The Globalization of Renaissance Art: A Critical Review*, ed. Daniel Savoy (Leiden, the Netherlands: Brill, 2017), 67–94, with extensive notes and bibliography; and Carolyn Dean and Dana Leibsohn, "Hybridity and Its Discontents: Considering Visual Culture in Colonial Spanish America," *Colonial Latin America Review* 12, no. 1 (2003): 5–35.
46. Cohen-Aponte, "Decolonizing the Global Renaissance," 72.
47. Mónica G. Moreno Figueroa, "Distributed Intensities: Whiteness, *Mestizaje* and the Logics of Mexican Racism," *Ethnicities* 10, no. 3 (2010): 390.
48. Regina Martínez Casas, Emiko Saldívar, René D. Flores, and Christina A. Sue, "The Different Faces of Mestizaje: Ethnicity and Race in Mexico," in *Pigmentocracies: Ethnicity, Race, and Color in Latin America,* ed. Edward Telles (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2014), 36–80.
49. Figueroa, "Distributed Intensities," 387.
50. Casas, Saldívar, Flores, and Sue, "Different Faces of Mestizaje," 43.
51. Linnete Manrique, "Dreaming of a Cosmic Race: José Vasconcelos and the Politics of Race in Mexico, 1920s–1930s," *Cogent Arts & Humanities* 3, no. 1 (2016): 3.

race pointedly excluded Black, Jewish, Chinese, and Syrian people because they were viewed as "unassimilable" and would cause further national fragmentation.[52] Vasconcelos's explicit preference for a white fifth race is expressed in the second and third parts of *La raza cósmica*. "The characteristics of the white race," writes Vasconcelos, "will perhaps predominate among those of the fifth race, but such supremacy must result from free choice and taste, and not violence or economic pressure."[53] In his vision, *mestizaje* was a matter of aesthetics, eugenics a matter of taste. Vasconcelos described a whiteness that could be founded on "less carnage, less coercion, and less political controversy" than its colonial predecessor, but was no less frightening.[54]

At around the same time as the publication of Vasconcelos's text, the United States witnessed a burgeoning of eugenic proposals and policies.[55] Many suggested botanical hybridization techniques as a metaphorical framework for thinking about the "human plant," which could be improved through mating. The 1920s also witnessed unprecedented illness and violence at the US-Mexico border and helped to racialize Mexicans as diseased outsiders who would "dilute" American blood and yield "a new color problem."[56] Anti-Mexican sentiment in the United States was built largely on the premise that *mestizos* were of bad hereditary stock.[57] When Vasconcelos's phrase *la raza* therefore became the slogan of the Chicano movement in the United States during the 1960s, it was divorced from its eugenic implications and employed instead as a powerful call to unify Chicano voices.[58]

In adopting part of Vasconcelos's title, Menchaca calls attention to a controversial and fundamental trope in the story of modern Mexican and Chicano identity, but to the 1925 original, Menchaca adds 20*XX*. A reference to an unspecified year during the present millennium, 20XX also invokes video-game culture. Gamers refer to 20XX as the year when a game, platform, or event becomes completely optimized; this takes place so far in the future that the date is indeterminate.[59] The pseudo–science fiction title signals that the narrative content of the prints is at once a modernization of the *casta* painting tradition, of Vasconcelos's unrealized *Universópolis*, and a viewer/player reality that has yet to be created. When read in conjunction with the artist's pictographic language of technology, 20XX implies both the *mestizaje* of now, and the unrelenting colonization of its future.

That *La Raza Cósmica* 20XX makes this point through the medium of screenprint is significant for its rhetorical function. Recent exhibitions, including the El Museo del Barrio triennial, *Estamos Bien* (2021), *¡Printing the Revolution! The Rise and Impact of Chicano Graphics, 1965 to Now* (Smithsonian American Art Museum, 2021), and *The Graphic Revolution: Prints and Drawings in Latin America* (Cleveland Museum of Art, 2020) have demonstrated the print medium's "special role in staging critical debates about US history and identity," and the part the medium has played in the Latino and Chicano civil rights movement over the course of US history.[60] Included in all three of these important national exhibitions, Menchaca's work has subsequently been interpreted as a contemporary extension of earlier Chicano art that operated alongside the oral rhetoric of César Chávez and Dolores Huerta to galvanize the Chicano civil rights movement (*El Movimiento*) of the 1960s and 1970s. These exhibitions and several substantive catalogs seek to restore Latinx and Chicanx prints to their place in the broader art historical trajectory of the medium, rather than sideline them as examples of political propaganda. As Chon Noriega and Pilar Tompkins Rivas demonstrate, Chicanx artists operated

52. José Vasconcelos, *The Cosmic Race*, 2nd ed. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), 153.
53. Ibid., 65.
54. Quoted in Jared Sexton, "The Consequence of Race Mixture: Racialized Barriers and the Politics of Desire," *Social Identities: Journal for the Study of Race, Nation, and Culture* 9, no. 2 (2003): 249.
55. This is the subject of Alexandra Minna Stern's horrifying history, *Eugenic Nation: Faults and Frontiers of Better Breeding in Modern America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005).
56. As described in *Eugenical News* during the late 1920s and cited by Stern, *Eugenic Nation*, 91.
57. Stern, *Eugenic Nation*, 60–68.
58. Here I use the term "Chicano" because the more inclusive Chicanx nomenclature was not yet adopted at the time of the Chicano Movement. See I. Stavans, *José Vasconcelos: The Prophet of Race* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2001), 42–43.
59. The game *Megaman* (developed by Capcom and released in 1987) first popularized this language, and 20*XX* is now its own game (developed by Batterstaple Games; released in 2016).
60. E. Carmen Ramos, "Printing and Collecting the Revolution: The Rise and Impact of Chicano Graphics, 1965 to Now," in Ramos, ed., *¡Printing the Revolution! The Rise and Impact of Chicano Graphics, 1965 to Now*, 25.

Luis C. González, *Fiesta del Maiz*, 1979, screenprint on paper, 28 × 22 in. (71.1 × 55.9 cm). Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, DC, 2020.47.2 (image © Smithsonian American Art Museum)

within "a space between social function and aesthetics that allowed them to drop in and out of art historical styles, while still maintaining a trajectory that would illustrate the movement within the canons of contemporary art."[61] In the twenty-first century, this has coincided with a digital revolution in art making and in the use of an "electronic pipeline" that has allowed Chicanx artists to promote socially conscious art in even more broadly and easily disseminated formats, including the social-media platforms that Menchaca explicitly critiques.[62]

In his installation *A Cage Without Borders* (2021) for El Museo del Barrio's first triennial exhibition—a sweeping survey of Latinx contemporary art—Menchaca literally animates figures from *La Raza Cósmica 20XX* in a series of videos. Superimposed over custom-made wallpaper, the screens bombard the visitor with a recorded history of colonial America, of "behavioral gentrification," and of the "Virtual *Nepantla*" (in-betweenness) of the Latinx population. Even the Virgin of Guadalupe is distracted, eyes cast downward to the smartphone that she casually scrolls. Here the Virgin is implicated in mass consumer culture; she is depicted as a manifestation of (new) colonial forms of appropriation and power. Menchaca inserts this rendition into an evolving cult/art phenomenon of the Virgin of Guadalupe in which the religious figure has been both a symbol of freedom for oppressed native populations *and* a sign of colonial accommodation and control.[63] The videos urge visitors to "unsubscribe" and to "unfollow us," as part of a process of decolonization. Loud and repetitive, the videos are unavoidable in the space and integrate news clips, advertisements, and Menchaca's own graphic repertoire of *casta* figures. Framed by the elaborate wallpaper of black-and-white geometric caging and colorful *mestizo* figures, the

61. Chon A. Noriega and Pilar Tompkins Rivas, "Chicano Art in the City of Dreams: A History in Nine Movements," in *L.A. Xicano*, ed. Noriega, Terezita Romo, and Rivas (Los Angeles: UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center Press, 2011), 92.
62. This is the subject of Claudia E. Zapata's essay "Chicanx Graphics in the Digital Age," in Ramos, ed., *¡Printing the Revolution! The Rise and Impact of Chicano Graphics, 1965 to Now*, 130.
63. For an art historical overview of these two competing meanings of the Virgin of Guadalupe imagery and her cult, see Jeanette Favrot Peterson, "The Virgin of Guadalupe: Symbol of Conquest or Liberation?," *Art Journal* 51, no. 4 (Winter 1992): 39–47.


THIRD ACCENTITY

Michael Menchaca, *A Cage Without Borders*, 2020–21, 3-channel digital animation, color, sound, custom wallpaper, installation view, El Museo del Barrio, New York (image provided by Michael Palma Mir and El Museo del Barrio)

Michael Menchaca, *Virgin of Guadalupe*, from *A Cage Without Borders*, 2020–21, 3-channel digital animation, color, sound, custom wallpaper, installation view, El Museo del Barrio, New York (image provided by Michael Menchaca)

screens foretell "#settlercolonialism" and a new "digital caste system." This system ensnares Brown and Black populations in an unseen web of Big Tech surveillance and oppression, the algorithm for which is known only to an elite, mostly white, few. Michel Foucault's metaphor of the panopticon—invisible surveillance as an omnipresent technique of [colonial] oppression—is optimized in the digital future of 20XX and *Cage*.[64]

Although Menchaca is informed by scholar Shoshana Zuboff's theories of surveillance capitalism in which the onset of the digital age is synonymous with the erosion of personal autonomy and democracy,[65] he also uses virtual reality (VR) headsets and digital screens in his work, and regularly evokes the graphic style of the platform video games of the 1980s and 1990s. In Menchaca's 2019 *Minority Report*, visitors were invited to wear a VR mask and headset that at once recall Mesoamerican codices and evoke video-game iconography. Immersed in a multisensory environment, the viewer becomes a player.[66] In recent years, video-game theorists have scrutinized the problematic othering that occurs when players occupy the role of nonwhite game characters. Assuming the persona of a Black protagonist in video-game play, for instance, can become a form of "digital blackface."[67] Video games target—literally and metaphorically—Black and Brown bodies in a myriad of ways, including, in the horrifying *Border Patrol*, offering players the chance to shoot undocumented immigrants at the US-Mexico border. Menchaca's manipulation of video-game iconography and platform-player graphics, and his use of screens, VR headsets, and digitized audio tracks, amplifies the sociopolitical implications of immigration and border control. In evoking the specific visual language of Silicon Valley's Big Tech companies (Apple, Facebook, Google, and Microsoft), Menchaca draws attention to the failed promises of these companies to "diversify."[68] Google's controversial 2019 claim to have reached "quantum supremacy" only highlights the disparity between technological ascendance and socioeconomic inequality in Silicon Valley, where Black and Latinx employees remain a minority.[69]

Menchaca hijacks graphic media as a means to elucidate the colonization of virtual spaces, the deceptive construction of social media as open-access, and the internet as a place of inclusion. Acting as a tech glitch—a hiccup or interruption—Menchaca calls attention to the unseen "algorithms of oppression" that are at work in the world.[70] By exposing the ways in which technology acts as a colonial force, occupying the virtual landscape and controlling access to resources and data, Menchaca's work also asks viewers and participants to become cognizant of what José Esteban Muñoz called "feeling brown."[71] This affective condition, Muñoz argued, is not about being perceived *as* brown but rather about the endeavor of trying to feel white.[72] To be "cognizant of one's status as an identity-in-difference," Muñoz argues, "is to know that one falls off the majoritarian maps of the public sphere, that one is exiled from the paradigms of communicative reason and from a larger culture of consent."[73] In the digital caste system of Menchaca's graphic world, Black and Brown people are exiled from a culture of consent as their data is mined for deleterious purposes.[74] Nowhere is this point made so visually poignant as in Menchaca's *La Raza Cósmica 20XX*, in which the global future is colonized by the predominantly white-owned-and-operated proponents of Big Tech who seek to flatten and commodify identity on an unprecedented scale.

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64. Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Pantheon Books, 1979), 213–14. Homi Bhabha expands on this to suggest that omnipresent surveillance is a distinctly colonial practice. Bhabha, *Location of Culture*, 76.
65. Menchaca has noted this in a social-media statement that no longer appears on his website. See Shoshana Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power* (New York: Public Affairs, 2019).
66. Jennifer Malkowski and TreaAndrea M. Russworm, *Gaming Representation: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in Video Games* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2017).
67. Joshua Green, "Digital Blackface: The Repackaging of the Black Masculine Image" (master's thesis, Miami University, 2006). See also Paul Barrett, "White Thumbs, Black Bodies: Race, Violence, and Neoliberal Fantasies in *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas*," *Review of Education, Pedagogy, and Cultural Studies* 28, no. 1 (2006): 101. VR technology has facilitated a new sort of cultural appropriation in the form of "disaster tourism." See, for instance, the example described in Adriana Cataño, "Mark Zuckerberg Went on VR Tour of Hurricane-Ravaged Puerto Rico to Promote Facebook Products," Remezcla, October 10, 2017, https://remezcla.com/culture/mark-zuckerberg-vr-tour-of-puerto-rico/.
68. Sara Harrison, "Five Years of Tech Diversity Reports—and Little Progress," *Wired*, October 1, 2019, https://www.wired.com/story/five-years-tech-diversity-reports-little-progress/.
69. Galen Gruman, "The State of Ethnic Minorities in U.S. Tech: 2020," *Computerworld*, September 21, 2020, https://www.computerworld.com/article/3574917/the-state-of-ethnic-minorities-in-us-tech-2020.html.
70. This phrase belongs to Safiya Emoja Noble. See Noble, *Algorithms of Oppression: How Search Engines Reinforce Racism* (New York: New York University Press, 2018).
71. José Esteban Muñoz, "Feeling Brown: Ethnicity and Affect in Ricardo Bracho's *The Sweetest Hangover (and Other STDs)*," *Theater Journal* 52, no. 1 (2000): 78.
72. Ibid., 78.
73. Ibid., 67.
74. This subject was the focus of the 2019 award-winning *New York Times Privacy Project*. See A. G. Sulzberger, "How the Times Thinks about Privacy," *New York Times* online, April 10, 2019, https://www.nytimes.com/2019/04/10/opinion/sulzberger-new-york-times-privacy.html.
75. Walter Mignolo famously described this darker side of modernity as the inevitable outcome of colonialism on a global scale in his *The Darker Side of Western Modernity: Global Futures, Decolonial Options* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011).

Michael Menchaca, *Minority Report*, 2019, virtual reality headset and interactive performance, Lawndale Art Center, Houston, TX (image provided by Suzy González)

Menchaca's work is unambiguous in its assertion that such a global future will come at a cost. Encoded in the "end game" message printed at the bottom of *Hasta la casta*, *La Raza Cósmica* 20XX, *A Cage Without Borders*, and Menchaca's graphic oeuvre more generally, are signs of unavoidable epistemic violence and the subjugation of Latin American and Latinx people. Put another way, Menchaca visualizes the "darker side of modernity" as a place where Black and Brown voices are screened—on numerous ontological levels.[75] Indeed, Menchaca's prints describe a twenty-first-century Latinx population that is at once highly differentiated by microethnicity and overly generalized in the media. According to the Pew Research Center, "Hispanics" made up more than half of the total US population growth from 2010 to 2019; by 2045, a recent census projects, the United States will be "minority white" and the largest portion of the new majority will be Hispanic.[76] This projection has spurred supremacist fear of "white replacement," articulated by conservatives in government and media alike.[77] Sweeping

76. William H. Frey, "The US Will Become 'Minority White' in 2045, Census Projects," *The Avenue* (blog), Brookings Institution, March 14, 2018, https://www.brookings.edu/blog/the-avenue/2018/03/14/the-us-will-become-minority-white-in-2045-census-projects/; and Jens Manuel Krogstad, "Hispanics Have Accounted for More Than Half of Total U.S. Population Growth Since 2010," Pew Research Center, July 10, 2020, https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/07/10/hispanics-have-accounted-for-more-than-half-of-total-u-s-population-growth-since-2010/.

up swathes of Black and Brown bodies into a vast un-American caste, Fox News's Tucker Carlson and many others have rekindled a colonialist mentality in which castes of *mestizo* people, understood in the broadest sense of the word, "threaten" the foundations of American "purity." When viewed against this geopolitical landscape, Menchaca's work may be seen to function less as a catalyst for thought and more as an urgent plea for revolt.

Erudite in his layering of cultural references and graphically complex in his visual architecture, Menchaca indicates that it is through a historical framework that he creates "narrative images of class inequality, systemic racism, invasive technologies, and human rights violations."[78] Rather than see *pinturas de castas* as evidence—however augmented, fictionalized, or embellished—of a colonial episode in the "founding" of the Americas, Menchaca's work, perhaps more than any scholarly art historical article, evinces the abiding presence of a new and perhaps still more troubling *sistema*. Menchaca renders this point using the explicit, graphic language of screenprint: his hybrid creatures are at once vibrant, richly textured, beautiful, *and* enmeshed in a hidden matrix of colonial power. Hands bound to their devices, the figures in *La Raza Cósmica 20XX* testify to their own ensnarement, their enduring positions under and within that matrix. By positioning viewers before the print, digital, and metaphorical screen, Menchaca asks that we participate in the decolonization of virtual and illusory spaces—of the internet and of our minds.

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77. See, for example, Charles M. Blow, "Tucker Carlson and White Replacement," *New York Times* online, April 11, 2021, https://www.nytimes.com/2021/04/11/opinion/tucker-carlson-white-replacement.html.
78. Michael Menchaca (artist's website), https://michaelmenchaca.com/section/249943-PRINTMAKING.html.