

Introduction

Racial Identities and Their Interpreters in Colonial Latin America

We are informed that it is extremely inconvenient for the welfare and good of the Indian natives of those provinces that mulattoes, mestizos, and Negroes circulate in their company, because in addition to the fact that they treat them badly and use them as servants, they teach them their evil customs and habits of laziness and also certain errors and vices that tend to corrupt and hinder the objectives that we desire for the salvation of the said Indians' souls, and that they live in an orderly society.

~Philip II to the Royal Audiencia of Panamá, 1578

All Indian women are deceitful, lustful, thieving, disobedient, and above all, great whores. . . . They prefer to live as concubines of the Spaniards, and on occasion with black and mulatto men, than marry an Indian commoner.

~Felipe Guaman Poma de Ayala to Philip III, 1615

In today's parlance, the New World has lost most of its value as a historically useful term. Critics most commonly point out that what Columbus "discovered" was not new to the millions of indigenous people whose ancestors had lived in the western hemisphere for millennia prior to 1492. To question the novelty of the "New World" is no longer a radical critique but a baseline assumption. The more significant conceptual problem is that the term privileges a precise (even pristine) condition captured at a particular moment in time. Precontact America was not, after all, populated by timeless societies beyond the bounds of history, nor was there a clear and universal endpoint for the many repercussions unleashed on what would become the Atlantic world in the aftermath of 1492. The colonial societies that coalesced in early Latin America, in