Un-Typing Casta is an installation of individual prints and site-specific paintings that weave a complex web of historical, “fine” art, pop culture, and commercial references appropriated and pieced together by Mexican-American contemporary artist Maria Cristina Tavera. Tavera creates a clever visual dialogue about identity and Latinidad, and more specifically, the complexities of cultural markers and icons as they have traveled across time and space, reconfiguring their meanings in infinite ways. Often influenced by her transnational upbringing in Minnesota and Mexico, her work draws from Latin American myths, legends, and popular culture, investigating the way that cultural icons transcend national borders to express complex identities and construct shared communities.

The installation takes as its point of departure the historical genre of casta paintings, a colonial Mexican art form that visualized a social hierarchy based on the racial and ethnic mixing of Spaniards, Africans, and indigenous Americans. Theoretically based on a scientific classification of social groups according to percentages of racial and ethnic blood-mixing, these paintings more accurately reflected the social anxiety of the ruling classes when confronted with an increasingly diverse society. Tavera revisits the casta format as a visual metaphor for the similarly complicated process of articulating notions of Latino/a identity within the United States. In doing so, the artist creates a dialogue between historical and contemporary forms that asks the viewer to consider Latinx identity in the Americas.

The female figure depicted here is Rarotonga, a character in a long-running Mexican historieta, or comic book, entitled Lágrimas, Risas y Amor (Tears, Laughter and Love). One of Mexico’s most popular historietas, Lágrimas is a romantic fantasy novel featuring a large cast of idealized, stereotyped characters. Rarotonga is the mysterious and sensual “jungle queen,” a brown-skinned, natural-haired, hypersexualized vamp. Repeatedly objectified, she is always displayed in as little clothing as possible amidst the lush, tropical South Pacific island with which she shares her name, often surrounded by palm trees, volcanoes, and dashing (white) international men of intrigue, even though she was also an international corporate business woman. Visually, she represents a romanticized iconic “type,” a pervasive stereotype consumers of popular culture will readily recognize. Tavera has paired Rarotonga’s figural image with genetic charts that delineate the genes necessary to result in her brilliant eye color. She has also created visual echoes of the eye, which further call attention to her green eye color, another
manifestation of Rarotonga's exoticization and rarity. Thus, the charts also reference “type” by literally referencing genotypes and phenotypes, our inherited genetic identity and the expression of that identity through our physical characteristics.

This print, and the installation as a whole, constantly remind viewers of both the biological and the socially constructed links that are drawn between race, ethnicity, and physical appearance, asking the audience to consider which aspects of one’s apparent identity might be based on genetics which are based on prejudice, misconceptions, and racism. However, according to the colonial casta system, these social classifications were categories that went beyond skin color and physical features. Race, ethnicity, adherence to gender roles, and behavior, as well as social, economic, and cultural factors, were all seen to influence the calidad, or quality, of an individual.¹ Un-Typing Casta has a similarly wider scope as it speaks from a position of intersectionality, interrogating the many components that come together to form “identity.”

By incorporating historical images into her prints, Tavera additionally investigates the role of history in creating and perpetuating the narratives and myths that uphold such identity-based perceptions over time. Malinche Conquistada presents a national casta-like myth deconstructed through a series of layered images. The composition is dominated by a central couple, a man and a woman, rendered in red and black. The man, dressed in armor, his hands folded over the hilt of a sword, casts his eyes downward. The woman, seated below him, possessively grasps his leg and boldly gazes out of the picture. To those familiar with Mexican cultural iconography, the couple is Hernán Cortés, the Spanish conquistador, and Malinche, his native interpreter and companion who aided him in his conquest of the Aztec capital of Tenochtitlan. Surrounding the central image are four scenes, three of which also include male-female pairings. The one in the lower left-hand corner references Cortes and Malinche in her role as interpreter. The fourth scene in the upper left-hand corner echoes the Conquest theme, as it appears to be an image of hand-to-hand combat. Each of these scenes has been appropriated and collaged together into print form from a popular art source.

The image of Cortés and Malinche is appropriated from a painting by Mexican painter and illustrator Jesus de la Helguera, called La Noche Triste, from 1949. Helguera became well known for his romanticized and iconic images of Mexican history and myth, paintings that would be widely used for advertising purposes, mostly reproduced on calendars. Distributed by local Mexican- and Latino-owned businesses in the U.S., the calendars were an economic way for the popular masses to have “art” in their houses, as well as a way for cigarette, liquor, and tire companies to increase sales. But with their overwhelming popularity, the Helguera images also promoted a very specific and idealized aesthetic standard.

Images like La Noche Triste display a problematic reimagining of history in their depiction of light-skinned women and muscular masculine heroes with European features. La Noche Triste nearly erases Malinche’s native ethnicity, which has been reduced to Orientalizing features such as her dark hair and piercing, exotic eyes. Helguera’s images, like the casta

paintings, also privileged whiteness and European heritage. The casta paintings of the 18th century generally followed a standardized format, usually representing 12-16 castas or categories of inter-ethnic mixing that occurred in colonial New Spain amongst Europeans, Africans, and indigenous Americans. Depicted in series of individual canvasses or on single-canvas charts, the casta paintings visualized each caste through a family unit (a man, a woman, and at least one child), delineating the classifications according to a racial taxonomy and attempting to impose a rational system of organization onto racial and ethnic makeup. However, as the paintings demonstrate, what was constructed through these mostly fictitious categories was a “pigmentocracy,” whereby those who have the highest or “purest” amount of European heritage, identified by their dress, surroundings, and “civilized” behavior, clearly occupy a place of privilege. The prominent position of Cortés and Malinche in this print series by Tavera is fitting, as they are historically considered to be the primary casta couple in Mexican history—the union between Europe and indigenous America that produces the mestizo, or mixed race, nation of Mexico, at least according to 20th century political and cultural rhetoric.

The image in the top right-hand corner of the print also shows a man and woman, but with a dramatically different social dynamic. The man leans toward the woman, his hand extended back as if to slap her, while she leans away from him, a hand raised in defense and a look of alarm on her face. This image was also appropriated from a popular media source known as the fotonovala, which gained popularity in Mexico in the 1950s. The books consisted of a sequence of still photos accompanied by balloon captions telling a story, usually around 30 pages in length. Closely linked in publishing to Mexican comic books, fotonovalas often carried officially sanctioned historical narratives and communicated traditional gender, class, and racial stereotypes. Valle de Lagrimas (Valley of Tears), the fotonovala referenced in Tavera’s print, is an example of a novela roja, a subgenre focused on explicit sex and violence against women. The inclusion of Valle de Lagrimas here by Tavera adds several layers of meaning. First, it can be seen as another reference to Cortés and Malinche and their campaigns for alliance and conquest throughout the Valley of Mexico. Second, as a novela roja with its sexually explicit and violent content, it disrupts the core social unit that supposedly stabilized the casta system and was visually repeated throughout the paintings: the family.

Thus, in reconfiguring the casta, the sexual violence and family trauma of the novela rosa is an affront to the biological mechanism by which the classifications are formed. Finally, the sexual violence of the fotonovala is echoed once again in the final scene of the print, which shows a man forcibly pushing a struggling woman into a vehicle while he exclaims “I will not wait any longer!” This image, taken from a comic book, has been reprinted here as if appearing on a US dollar bill, acknowledging the currency in sexual assault that occurs in transnational sex trafficking but also the cultural currency of the symbolic sexual assault perpetrated on Malinche in Mexico, where although she was most likely traded as a slave, she is still regarded as a traitor to her people and at times referred to as La Chingada, meaning the “the fucked” or the violated. Taken together, these are images of gender, ethnic, and racial violence that harken all the way back to the Conquest of the Americas as the initial source of a traumatic blending of cultures that would be visually negotiated two centuries later via the casta paintings.

While Tavera begins her interrogation in the 18th century, her installation undoubtedly has an even more critical contemporary significance, as demonstrated by Brown Tone, a print that features two long, thin arms and the words “Brown Pride” printed in a calligraphic text. Literally printed on a flattened brown bag, this print is a reference to the infamous “brown paper bag test,” a form of racial discrimination in the United States wherein a brown paper bag was used to determine one’s level of access and privilege. According to Audrey Elisa Kerr, this type of colorism—discrimination based on the color of one’s skin—was historically used by African-American universities, churches, fraternities and sororities, and social organizations to exclude admission to those whose skin color was darker than the tone of the paper bag. The paper bag was employed because it was believed to represent the midpoint between black and white skin tones. This test privileged those with lighter skin tones, whose lightness was more aligned with Eurocentric standards of beauty and social standing, discriminating against those with darker complexions and thus expressing a form of internalized racism among African-American communities in the 20th century.² Over the bag, Tavera has rendered a pair of arms in black outline, the color of the bag itself becoming the skin tone.

The arms are long, thin, frail, and vulnerable, one clutching the other as if physically injured by the mental and social violence inflicted by this practice.

Tavera juxtaposes these elements with the phrase “Brown Pride,” printed in a style of calligraphy that French typographer François Chastanet has termed “Cholo Writing,” the style of inscription graffiti commonly used by Mexican gangs in Los Angeles. “Cholo” itself is a term with a colonial history, when it was used as an insult towards mestizos, meaning “dog” or “mutt.” It was part of the casta vernacular in colonial Mexico and was carried into the 20th century, where it continued to be used as a derogatory term and racial slur against Latinos, especially those of Mexican descent in the United States. The term was reclaimed as a symbol of pride during the Chicano and ethnic power movements of the 1960s. It is specifically associated with West Coast pachuco and lowrider cultures. The thick, black Old English or Old Style font type used by Tavera has been commonly used by cholo taggers and tattoo artists since at least the 1960s. By adopting a font that is traditionally used on official documents, Chicanx writers crafted a handstyle that would speak with authority and even elevate their words to a sacred level.²

Merging visual and textual tools of empowerment and oppression, the artist once again asks her audience to consider social “colorism” from both historical and contemporary perspectives. By incorporating the literal brown bag as “canvas,” Brown Tone visually emphasizes the relative nature of white, brown, and black skin tones arranged according to social hierarchy, similar to the spectrum of European, Native, and African races on display in the casta paintings. Its incorporation of text similarly implicates the role that colorist language also plays in articulating social rankings—“colored,” “people of color,” and even the term “brown people,” which as a term for racial and ethnic classification has existed since the 18th century but has become increasingly common in recent popular usage to designate people of Latin American, Middle Eastern, South Asian, and mixed race descent, or even simply to refer to unspecified “ethnic” people.

In a contemporary atmosphere that is still racially-charged, Tavera’s work exposes the way that historical and contemporary images have been complicit in the construction of problematic understandings of racial, ethnic, gender, and socioeconomic identity throughout the Americas. The prints and paintings in this installation work to deconstruct—or literally “un-type”—the traumatic legacies of identity formation that have stemmed from the confrontation, blending, and co-existence of diverse cultures since the Conquest. Her collaged and polyvalent images demonstrate how aspects of gender, race, and ethnicity can be reconfigured and explored in complex, myriad, and layered ways that characterize Latinx identities. Throughout, Tavera has visualized this network of identities, for while the casta genre was regimented, formulaic, gridded, and didactic, Un-Typing Casta is a freeform collection of prints and painting that is ongoing and fluid, ephemeral and random, and literally bleeding beyond its borders.

² François Chastanet, Cholo Writing: Latino Gang Graffiti in Los Angeles (Sweden: Dokument Press, 2009).