Book Review


Mychal Odom

University of California, San Diego

Natalia Molina is a Professor of History and Associate Vice Chancellor of Faculty Diversity and Equity at the University of California, San Diego. Molina’s *How Race is Made in America: Immigration, Citizenship, and the Historical Power of Racial Scripts* is the second full manuscript she has published. It consists of five chapters and is split into two parts: “Immigration Regimes I: Mapping Race and Citizenship” and “Immigration II: Making Mexicans Deplorable.” Molina’s first text, *Fit to be Citizens?: Public Health and Race in Los Angeles, 1879-1939* (2006), was a regional study of racial formation in the United States. As both texts examine the correlation of racialized notions of science, health, and disease to citizenship in the United States, they are undoubtedly linked projects. While Molina is understood as a Mexican-American Studies scholar, she and her colleagues throughout the University of California system sought to understand the study of race, class, gender, and sexuality through what Molina and her colleagues have termed a relational notion of race, building on the work of senior scholars like Michael Omi, Howard Winant, George Lipsitz, David Roediger, and others. Far from a reductive theorization of race, Molina has expanded the field of Mexican-American Studies and American Ethnic Studies. Departing from the comparative model of the study of racial formation, the relational framework “recognizes that race is a mutually constitutive process and thus attends to how, when, where, and to what extent groups intersect. It recognizes that there are limits to examining racialized groups in isolation (3). As Molina has explained, relational studies can be achieved by letting research questions guide respective projects and not simply fields of study.

*How Race is Made in America* is a history of Mexican immigration to the United States between 1924 and 1965. In 1924, the United States passed its first comprehensive law restricting immigration—the Johnson-Reed Act. Conversely, amidst a host of American Civil Rights campaigns and legislation, the United States Congress passed the expansive Hart-Cellar Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965. Molina argues that it was during this period that an American immigration regime was created which still impacts popular notions of race and inclusion, “shaping the way we think about Mexicans today. Thus, this book also provides a way for scholars to discursively map the elusive historical constructions of race and account for its material consequences in policy, law, and everyday life” (2). Embodying her relational analysis, Molina’s study shows that the story of Mexican racialization in the United States is incomplete without situating the story inside a broader history of racialization that includes the experiences of other racialized groups such as African Americans, Asian Americans, and white Americans. In a highly-charged moment of American race relations where notions of colorblindness, postraciality, and transraciality have metastasized and biologically determined understandings of race have resurged, Molina has used the term racialized group to remind readers of the social construction of race. The racialization of Mexican
descended people in the United States has often eluded simple classification under the traditional markers of race, ethnicity, or nationality. Despite the shifting categorization of Mexicans in the United States, many continued understandings of “Mexicanness” have sustained. Molina’s term *racial script* allows scholars to understand the racialization of Mexican-descended people in the United States and offers a universal framework for scholars of other fields to use.

The relational study of American racial formation, Molina argues, crosses temporal and spatial boundaries and “thereby affect one another, even when they do not directly cross paths” (6). Broadly, Molina’s intervention retains immediate import because, as we have seen in recent years, American legislation regarding the enslavement and emancipation of African people in the United States has been used to curtail the civil liberties of recently immigrated people. As highly racist and misogynistic conversations of “anchor babies” have dominated American conservative airwaves, Molina explains the contestation of birthright citizenship for Mexican people in America during the 1930s. Following 1924, birthright citizenship has remained “anything but certain” for Mexican descended people in the United States but that ambiguity was built on an American legislative history that dated back to landmark supreme court decisions and constitutional amendments such as the *Dred Scott case* (1857), the Fourteenth Amendment to the American constitution, and *United States v. Wong Kim Ark* (1898) (70-88).

Understanding the power of racial scripts also allow scholars to examine the interconnectedness of racism and racial struggles that might not always be visible. Beyond legislative patterns, racial scripts are sustained and passed from one group to another through violence and cultural representations, as Molina notes. For example, the popular discourse on Asian and Black labor in the American South and the American West overdetermined the way people thought about Mexican workers. This opened Mexican descended people to not only similar popular representation as deviant, lazy, or easily exploitable. It also made Mexican people vulnerable to similar systems of racial violence in the United States (38-40).

*How Race is Made in America*, however, is not only about subjugation but is also about resistance. “When groups recognize the similarity of their stories in the collective experiences” of racialization in other communities, Molina argues that these people create *counterscripts* to American racial formation (10). In an unspoken calling upon the work of the late Afro-British scholar Stuart Hall, Molina’s counterscripts bring the most unlikely of communities together when “we can see that the process of racialization can be more important than the identity of who is being racialized” (10). For example, amid the mass deportations of Mexican people in the postwar period, African Americans mobilized in defense of people of Mexican descent as they noticed a continuity between their experiences from vagrancy laws to biased policing in the American cities and the expulsion of the Mexican reserve army of labor. It is here that Molina’s study contains a sense of urgency. Published before the rise of Trumpism, Brexit, or the Syrian refugee crisis, Molina remarkably presents what the late Michel Foucault called “a history of the present.” *How Race is Made in America* is therefore a useful study across disciplines and continents. It allows us to understand that the rise of xenophobia in the United States and Western Europe are not anomalies but also there is a tried and true methodology to study and resist these trends.