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Title

How Race Is Made in America: Immigration, Citizenship, and the Historical Power of Racial Scripts by Natalia Molina

Permalink

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Journal

InterActions: UCLA Journal of Education and Information Studies, 11(1)

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Publication Date

2015

DOI

10.5070/D4111025653

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How Race is Made in America: Immigration, Citizenship, and the Historical Power of Racial Scripts by Natalia Molina, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014. 207 pp. ISBN 978-0-520-28008-3.

Natalia Molina presents a critical analysis of the United States (U.S.) immigration policy (1924-1965), providing an opportunity for readers to examine the racialization of Mexicans and its subsequent impact on immigration, legislation, and naturalization. Her work is also pivotal in re-evaluating contemporary border security strategies such as Operation Hold the Line (1993), Operation Gatekeeper (1994), Operation Safeguard (1995), and Operation Rio Grande (1997), as well as the militarization of the U.S.-Mexico border and other post PATRIOT Act (2001) initiatives. Although we often attribute such strategies to recurring spikes in anti-immigrant sentiments across the nation, this book provides a comprehensive look at the racial scripts that have historically fueled these types of border enforcement policies. The continuous criminalization of Mexican immigrants, the increased incarceration of undocumented people, and the immigrant deaths along the U.S.-Mexico border make this book a must read.

Molina provides an introductory chapter that proposes the terms *immigration regime* and *racial scripts* in order to chronicle the historical notions of race that continue to criminalize Mexican Americans and Mexican immigrants today. According to Molina, the rhetoric used to define racial categories during the period 1924-1965 in U.S. immigration policy still dictates the way Mexican Americans and Mexicans are viewed in this country. This regime or system continues to associate this community with illegality (p. 1). Her definition of the term *racial script* is thorough and gives the reader many points for discussion and reflection. She says, "I coin the term racial scripts to highlight the ways in which the lives of racialized groups are linked across time and space and thereby affect one another, even when they do not directly cross paths" (p. 6).

Furthermore, her explanation of the relational nature of racism encourages readers to understand how the Mexican American narrative connects to that of other ethnic groups. She proposes that the study of immigration should use a relational approach rather than a comparative one because this allows us to see links between communities of color. The concept of racial script is effectively supported by an extensive research methodology that includes discourse analysis of immigration policies and INS records, such as letters, depositions, and petitions. In summary, this first section closes with a brief review of relevant literature in Mexican American and immigration history, a description of the archival research conducted, and an outline of subsequent chapters. Readers will find a well-organized manuscript supported by a comprehensive and extensive research methodology.

Chapter one highlights the racial scripts that were used after 1924 in order to construct Mexicans as inferior and place restrictions on immigration from Mexico. This group was considered, “criminal, a social burden, diseased” and the “negro problem of the Southwest” (p. 21). She presents an analysis of the racialization of Mexicans in relation to indigenous racial scripts to show that such labeling is not just a stereotype- but the “fabric of American society” (p. 24). The subsection titled, “Whiteness as a Racial Script” presents the most significant information. She asserts, “Mexicans knew how racial scripts operated and that if classified as ‘colored’ they would face severe consequences in areas such as housing, school, and employment discrimination, which many already experienced as a result of de facto segregation” (p. 41). This explanation of racial positioning serves as a new lens for those interested in issues of interethnic discrimination, especially between Mexican Americans and Blacks.

Chapters two and three explain the white supremacist discourse that was used to make Mexicans ineligible for U.S. citizenship after the signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in 1848. Molina uses archival documents such as editorials, court rulings, and reports from various nativist groups to show the racial order that placed Mexicans into the category of “nonwhite” (p. 44). Furthermore, racial scripts had enough power to override the provisions of the Treaty as well as federal court rulings that secured naturalization rights for Mexicans. In these chapters, Molina continues to emphasize the relational nature of U.S. immigration policies. She states:

Two important Supreme Court decisions, *Ozawa v. United States* (1922) and *United States v. Bhagat Singh Thind* (1923), contributed to the idea of a continuum of race by establishing a third category: nonwhite. These two cases involving Asians and South Asians, helped shape what it means to be Mexican, demonstrating that Mexicans are racialized in relation to other groups, in this case Asians, who were (are) seen as “nonwhite and foreign” (p. 49).

Molina closes Chapter 2 by examining the Andrade case and provides a historical example of how racial scripts as well as the political landscape of the 1930s presented opposition to U.S. citizenship for Mexicans. Ultimately, the Census Bureau and Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) classified Mexicans as White and eligible for naturalization. This chapter presents a strong conclusion and clearly affirms the volatile nature of citizenship in the United States by stating, “Such shifts serve as a reminder that, although citizenship may have been clearly defined in black and white terms, ‘black’ and ‘white’ and ‘Indian’ could be unstable categories” (p. 67).

In Chapter 3, Molina closes her analysis of birthright citizenship with what I feel should be her opening statement. She writes:

By understanding the power and longevity of racial scripts, we can uncover connections more than a century old, seeing how long-forgotten arguments in the Wong Kim Ark (1898) birthright citizenship case laid the foundation for the debates over “anchor babies” today. (p. 88)

Although Molina’s thorough discussion of the history of Mexicans’ access to U.S. citizenship leads readers to connect her proposed framework to debate regarding “anchor babies,” I think that this statement would be much more powerful if presented within the chapter’s introduction. The brief correlation to President Obama’s place of birth and Donald Trump’s questioning the authenticity of Obama’s certificate in some way lessens the importance of this section. Nevertheless, Molina’s in-depth analysis of historical documents is evident throughout this chapter. She examines the 1790 Naturalization Act, the Dred Scott decision, the 1870 Naturalization Act, and the Fourteenth Amendment in addition to other legislation, and this strengthens her relational approach to examining issues of immigration. This chapter also successfully shows how the policing of immigrants and their children confirms the intersectionality of immigration policies. Racial scripts show that the immigration regime of this period was influenced by intersectional systems of society such as race/ethnicity, gender, and class. For example, racial scripts targeted Mexican and Chinese women during the 1930s and gender and race/ethnicity biases merged to label this group as non-normative and a threat to American culture (p. 83).

The next two chapters address the deportation and deportability of Mexicans during the 1940s and 1950s. She begins her discussion by addressing the medical racial profiling and labeling of immigrants as “likely to become a public charge” (LPC) (p. 91). She traces the early implementation of this restriction to the Immigration Act of 1891 but most importantly, notes its connection to creating a culture of fear. She explains, “Disease intensifies the rhetoric of hatred, fear, and blame utilized against undesirables” and this provided “a rational basis for surveillance, control, and exclusion” (p. 92). It is this same discourse of fear that often surrounds the lives of immigrants in the United States today. Molina supplements her analysis of legislative, legal, and procedural restrictions, with a qualitative look at how such enforcement impacted people such as labor organizer Mike Gutiérrez. In March 1940 immigration inspectors declared Gutiérrez to be an “alien with a loathsome and dangerous contagious disease” after he utilized his public health card as proof of residence in the United States (p. 100). This section makes evident that medical racialization was utilized to deport activists also. Molina concludes, “Mexican men, even those who held U.S. citizenship, were constructed as unable to become full citizens. Disease was central to this construction” (p. 111). This chapter also reaffirms Molina’s framework of the prevalence of racial scripts and relational nature of immigration

restrictions. Such medical racialization and enforcement has marginalized other groups of color at different times.

The final chapter (Chapter 5) centers the discussion of deportability within the urban setting and examines the enforcement of Operation Wetback (1954) in Arizona and California. This bi-national initiative sought to control the migration of Mexican laborers to the United States. Border patrol agents were given the responsibility to locate, process, and deport Mexicans. Operation Wetback deported 33,307 people and marked the early stages of the militarization of the southern U.S. border (p. 114). Molina describes how this government initiative and the use of the term “wetback” to refer to Mexican immigrants “signaled the emergence of a new immigration regime of racialization and criminalization” (p. 113). She further explains, “this chapter takes a step back to broaden our view” (p. 112) and this is exactly what it does. It effectively shows how deportation politics reinforced racial scripts and citizenship provided no protection from racial profiling, raids, arrests, and detentions. Although short, the sections on community reactions, specifically from African American and Japanese communities in California, allows second generation citizens, such as myself, to better understand how racial scripts affect interethnic relations and create divides between people of color. Molina explains in her final paragraph, “The history of Operation Round-Up demonstrates the multiracial and multiethnic dimensions that existed not only across groups but within them as well. Operation Round-Up was launched by the Los Angeles branch of the INS and part of Operation Wetback. It permitted the detainment of Mexican Americans and Mexicans for the purpose of deportation. Institutional racism created divisions between communities and this is evident today (p. 138).

The Epilogue substantiates what I see in my teacher education courses each semester: young adults who do not want talk about racism, privilege, and power, and who genuinely believe we are living in a post-racial period. Consequently, selected readings from this manuscript would help in our discussions on deficit thinking, invisible privilege, and diversity in public schools. I definitely agree with Dr. Molina—the color-blind argument has gained ground in this country. In its final pages, the author, presents the most important question: What is the role of racial scripts in the new immigration regime? (p. 148). She states: Arpaio’s tactics rely on racial script that readily communicate that those in the camp have not only committed a crime but are deviant in other ways as well” (p. 149). Lastly, Molina acknowledges the countercscripts of resistance that have worked hard to denounce, disempower, and deconstruct racist and deficit notions of all communities. For example, Respect-Respeto, an advocacy organization in Arizona, created warning systems to alert the undocumented community about immigration raids. They also provide support for the children of detained or deported adults.

Overall, *How Race is Made in America: Immigration, Citizenship, and the Historical Power of Racial Scripts* crosses interdisciplinary borders to reframe the conversations around issues of immigration and citizenship. In addition, this text could be a tool for raising critical consciousness in any college classroom. As the back cover of the book notes, Dr. Natalia Molina is an Associate Professor of History and Urban Studies, the Associate Vice Chancellor for Faculty Diversity and Equity in the Vice Chancellor Office for Equity, Diversity and Inclusion at the University of California, San Diego. Her work often examines the intersections of race, gender, culture, and citizenship.

References

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Reviewer

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