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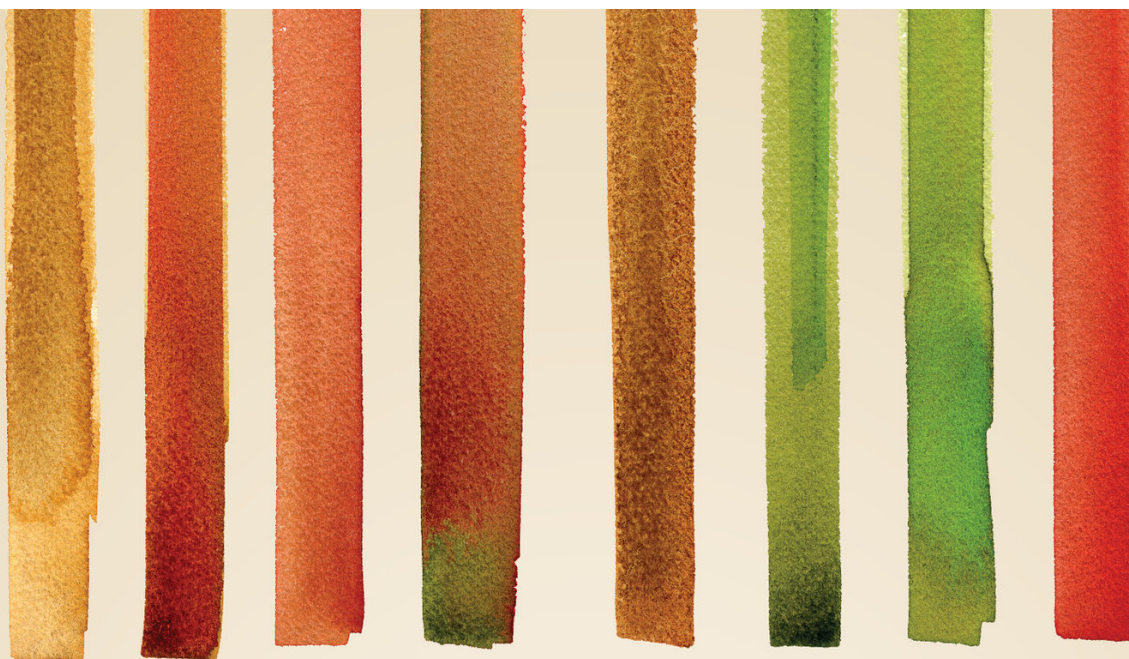


# Relational Formations of Race

*How Border Violence Builds on Over 100 Years of Racial Violence*

By Natalia Molina - Professor of American Studies & Ethnicity at the University of Southern California - July 19, 2019

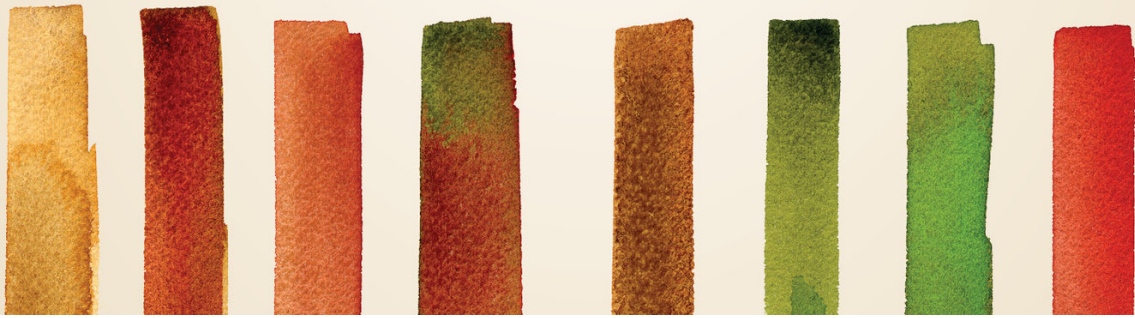
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**RELATIONAL  
FORMATIONS  
OF RACE**

# THEORY, METHOD, AND PRACTICE

Edited by NATALIA MOLINA,  
DANIEL MARTINEZ HOSANG,  
and RAMÓN A. GUTIÉRREZ



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On April 19, 2019, the *New York Times* reported that United Constitutional Patriots (UCP), a right-wing militia group, was detaining immigrants at the New Mexico-Mexico border. This was not in itself a new development; private militia have detained migrants at the border many times over the last decades. What made this most recent episode of border enforcement newsworthy was that the estimated 200 migrants detained at gunpoint planned to lawfully engage in the process of requesting asylum. Human rights groups and New Mexico's governor and attorney general all objected to the UCP's vigilantism and its use of threats and intimidation against families fleeing violence and oppression, but UCP's spokesperson insisted that they were simply trying "to support the Border Patrol and show the public the reality of the border."

The extra-legal violence aimed at these asylum-seekers is rooted not just in attitudes towards migrants. It also reflects much broader patterns of racialized violence—including those that have unfolded at very different places and times in the history of the United States. Fully understanding this requires a relational understanding of race. My new edited volume *Relational Formations of Race: Theory, Method, and Practice*, co-authored with **Daniel Martinez HoSang** and **Ramón A. Gutiérrez**, presents a range of scholarship examining the racialization and formation of subordinated groups in relation to one another. By studying race relationally, and through a shared field of meaning and power, we can make visible the connections among subordinated groups and the logic that underpins the forms of inclusion and dispossession they face. Applying such a lens to the UCP case reveals that the violence they perpetrated at the border has been informed by practices directed at other communities of color.

For example, the UCP'S treatment of asylum seekers has deep roots in the subjection of African Americans in the years after the Civil War. The Ku Klux Klan first emerged in the South in the aftermath of Reconstruction in 1866, exacting terror and violence in order to help maintain white racial supremacy in the wake of the end of slavery. But over the decades since its founding the KKK's reach and the racial scripts it propagated extended far beyond African Americans in the former Confederacy. Later resurgences in the 1910s and 20s spread to different regions of the country, targeting immigrants (many of whom were Catholic or Jewish)—and ultimately anyone the KKK thought might threaten to destroy the racial and religious homogeneity of the nation.

It surfaced once again at the border in 1977, when in the midst of rising unemployment rates and inflation, Mexican immigrants were scapegoated as stealing Americans' jobs. In response, the KKK set up a border watch on the Southern California-Mexico border which included David Duke, the Grand Wizard of the KKK himself. A reported 237 KKK members joined the watch,

setting up a command post and patrolling the border with handmade “**Klan Border Patrol Watch**” signs affixed to their cars. While whites and the mainstream media generally characterized the border watch as a symbolic media stunt, given the KKK’s history of violence, its very presence threatened those who knew themselves to be the targets of its animus. Thus, we see how the practices and attitudes directed at one racialized group, African Americans, can be employed against others, Mexican immigrants.

The UCP case also reveals how people in power deploy a relational strategy of using fear of other groups to mobilize and intensify fear of Latinx immigrants. In October 2018, a caravan of migrants left the Central American countries, specifically Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador. The migrants reported that they were facing danger, fleeing gang violence, domestic violence, persecution, and poverty. But instead of showing stories of families seeking shelter, the White House encouraged news media to circulate false stories that the caravan included Middle Easterners, drawing on anti-Muslim stereotypes that would invoke images of terrorists. President Trump himself tweeted that “[c]riminals and unknown Middle Easterners are mixed in” the caravan. Soon, the media stories escalated to say that ISIS had infiltrated the caravans, though they offered no evidence supporting this claim. These stories had very real consequences, giving the **President cover to send 5,000 troops** to the US Border to deal with what he termed a “national emergency” and inspiring militia groups like the UCP to put “boots on the ground” to support the US troops mobilized at the border.

The relational logic flows both ways, spreading from the border to the rest of the nation as well as the other way around. Some who support the kind of vigilante policing practiced by the UCP argue that these groups are simply protecting the United States, just as any of us would if someone was trying to break into our home. By presenting the “threat” at the border as akin to a violent crime against a home, they turn the “home” (i.e. the interior of the

nation) into a space under threat that must likewise be protected by any means necessary. This analogy has had increasingly dire real-life consequences: since 2017 the largest increases in the policing of undocumented immigrants has taken place in the interior of the nation, not at its borders. After years of decline, the number of arrests made by U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) **climbed to a three-year high in fiscal 2017**—with the biggest percentage increases far from the Mexican border in Florida, northern Texas and Oklahoma.

And the UCP-style scripts that label black and brown people as “dangerous outsiders” who must be put down with violence extend beyond the realm of migrants. Florida, which boasts one of the greatest percentage increases in ICE arrests in recent years, is also the site where George Zimmerman shot and killed the unarmed 17-year old Trayvon Martin for simply walking through his neighborhood. To Zimmerman, a black youth in a hoodie in a gated community looked out of place and must be considered a threat. Zimmerman was **acquitted of charges under Florida’s “Stand Your Ground” law**, which allows for the “justifiable use of force” if one feels the “presumption of fear of death or great bodily harm.”

What happens at the border reflects ideas and structures and mechanisms that we think of as being far removed in time and space. And what happens at the border doesn’t just stay at the border. It is also happening in our neighborhoods and we need to recognize it for what it is if we are to have a hope of combatting it.

Natalia Molina is Professor of American Studies and Ethnicity at University of Southern California. She is the author of two award-winning books, *Fit to be Citizens? Public Health and Race in Los Angeles, 1879–1939* and *How Race Is Made in America: Immigration, Citizenship, and the Historical Power of Racial Scripts*, as well as the just released edited volume entitled *Relational Formations of Race: Theory, Method, and Practice*.

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