

Natalia Molina, Ramon Gutiérrez, and Daniel HoSang, eds. 2019. *Relational Formations of Race: Theory, Method, and Practice*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Book review by

**Dalen C.B. Wakeley-Smith**

[dbutler@fas.harvard.edu](mailto:dbutler@fas.harvard.edu)

Postdoctoral research fellow, Harvard University

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1723-050X>

*Dalen Wakeley-Smith* obtained his PhD in Anthropology and History from the University of Michigan in 2022. Dalen is currently a postdoctoral research fellow at the Charles Warren Center for Studies in American History at Harvard University. Dalen's work focuses on the history of American Romani communities in New York City throughout the twentieth century and explores how concerns about race, immigration, and desirability all affected Roma and non-Roma throughout the city.



With worldwide outcry against racism and white supremacy now an everyday reality, it seems timely to have a new innovative collection that explores the racial and historical formations which influenced our current social and racial inequality. The edited volume *Relational Racial Formations of Race: Theory, Method, and Practice* establishes a new way of thinking about present and past racial formations. Renowned scholars of race, immigration, and American Studies, Natalia Molina, Daniel Martinez HoSang, and Ramón Gutiérrez refine ongoing discussions within the fields of History, American Studies, Sociology, and Anthropology to create a definitive volume regarding the history of racial formations and racial projects in the United States. However, the methods outlined in the book can easily be utilized in the European context, especially regarding the situation of many Romani communities across Europe. This is especially relevant as new migration and conflict in Europe have reinvigorated discourses around nationalism, race, and mobility which affects Roma and those deemed “others” in the European imaginary.

Building on the classic *Racial Formations in the United States* by Michael Omi and Howard Winant, the contributors to this new volume shows the messiness and tensions around race in everyday life. For the editors, “Race is not legible or significant outside of a relational context. From this perspective, race does not define the characteristics of a person; instead, it is better understood as the space and connections between people that structure and regulate their association” (Natalia Molina et al. 2019, 6–7). This framework provides a way for scholars working today to decenter whiteness and binary constructions of race about whiteness. At the same time, it is also a method that relies less on a singular focus of individual racial groups and more on their encounters with one another.

Starting with a roundtable discussion, the first section of the volume theorizes race relationally across the various regions of the United States. Chapter 1 takes a conversational tone with a transcription of a discussion from 2016, where scholars Lipsitz, Sanchez, and LytleHernández discuss the state of the field and the necessity of going beyond their areas of expertise to explore racial formations. Chapter 2 features scholar Natalia Molina re-examining Chicano/a history through a relational lens. Chapter 3 builds on Molina’s method, with scholar Alyosha Goldstein’s analysis of racial and colonial dispossession of property and wealth, drawing on the shared histories of settler colonialism and slavery in the United States, to show how reparation politics become enmeshed in ideologies of colonialism, whiteness, and property rights.

The second section of the volume builds on the theoretical insights of the first section and highlights the political potential for relational research. Chapter 4 begins with scholar Roderick Ferguson’s examination of antiracist formations across the twentieth century. Ferguson finds that, by utilizing a relational framework, nationalism can be set within larger intersectional and global struggles for racial equality, highlighting the “genealogical” approach of the activists using history as a tool to highlight their emancipatory struggles (Natalia Molina et al. 2019, 94). Chapter 5 further highlights the power of historical overlap and convergence between racialized peoples with Steven Salaita’s analysis of the political struggle of Palestinians and American Indians. Chapter 6 makes similar comparisons between African Americans and American Indian historiographies, with historian Tiya Miles’s essay “Uncle Tom Was an Indian: Tracing the Red in Black Slavery.” Mills examines how Indian and African American experiences with slavery have overlapped, diverged, and been retold. Finally, Chapter 7 focuses on the connection between African American slavery and immigrant rights activism, exploring what Saidya Hartman has called the “afterlife of slavery” in the discourse of immigration.

The third section of the piece focuses on the historical framework for relational racial formations foregrounding the events and forces which shape racial categories over time. Catherine Ramirez's chapter focuses on the Carlisle Indian School and the existence of Puerto Rican students at an "Indian" school, where Puerto Ricans attempted to align themselves with American Indians and be "assimilated" to avoid their colonial status. Chapter 9 explores the racialization of Japanese Americans in the Southern United States during the Second World War and their attempts to become "Hawaiian" to navigate the Jim Crow system and distance themselves from the anti-Japanese sentiment. Perla Guerrero focuses on Vietnamese refugees and Mexican immigrants in Arkansas, and Raoul Lievano analyzes the urban space of Stockton, California.

In the final section of the volume, the chapters deal with the policies which are informed by relational frameworks and explore how groups negotiate their power relationships and utilize race strategically. Laura Enriquez largely examines the tension within the category of "undocumented" on college campuses. Michaël Rodriguez-Muniz meanwhile illuminates the tensions between racial groups when discussing the redistribution of resources and shows how groups often use relational logic in advocating for equity. Finally, Julie Lee Merseeth focuses on the emergence and negotiation of a new racial category of Arab and Muslim post-9/11, utilizing the discourses of the period which explicitly compared African Americans and Asian Americans to Arabs and Muslims.

All in all, the volume is an expansive look at the many ways in which race operates in the United States; each section is rich with detail and the authors painstakingly attempt to show that race is not as simple as a binary argument between whiteness and Blackness. Nonetheless, some of the material falls a bit short, with incomplete data or lacking historical specificity and comparativeness. For instance, Chapter 8's comparison of the Carlisle Indian School and Puerto Ricans fails to mention the Americanization campaigns, occurring simultaneously in urban spaces like New York City, which targeted similar populations. This added data would have shown how Puerto Ricans in Carlisle and other places also negotiated their status as non-whites in a world beyond the Native and Black framing. Likewise, studying urban spaces such as Stockton risks making an argument that is too specific to a particular Californian history, defined by settler colonial genocide as much as it is managed by property distribution and legal means. However, much of the material is still notable and useful as a methodology for future studies on race and ethnicity in the twenty-first century.

The utility of such an examination of relational racial formations in the European context is twofold. One is the method of foregrounding relationships between groups and privileging space instead of individual racial categories. Two is decentering the binary construction of race, even in the European context with "Europeans" versus "non-Europeans" or more recently "Immigrants" versus "Natives" and focusing more on the complicated histories of racial formations in Europe which intersect with ideas of nationalism, racism, and citizenship. For Romani Studies, this is especially useful as, often, the works tend to narrowly focus on "Roma" and less on the relationships between Roma and other racial categories in the same space. At the same time, even with more focus on antigypsyism, race remains a marginal category of analysis in Romani studies with much literature instead focusing on access and discrimination (Aidan McGarry 2017; Angéla Kóczé 2018; Huub van Baar 2018; Huub van Baar et al. 2019). With European countries diversifying rapidly and the limits of multiculturalism being tested,

now is the time to expand Romani Studies to explore the historical and social construction of racial categories relationally.

Roma were never simply racialized in a vacuum but were constructed in part through their relationship with others deemed “non-European”. However, literature still privileges the divide between *gazhe* (non-Roma) and Roma, instead of the connection between Roma and other groups sharing similar social statuses. Here is an opportunity to answer the call that the volume provokes and explore those histories and relationships deeper and fuller. A recent work that points us in that direction is Giovanni Picker’s 2017 book *Racial Cities: Governance and the Segregation of Romani People in Urban Europe*, where he explores how Roma occupy urban spaces and racial categories noting the particular positions that they fill within the racial order, while highlighting how Roma also act upon that order. At the same time Picker also explores how other racialized populations negotiate their status relationally to Romani populations. By privileging the idea of space and development Picker manages to dissolve some of the hardened conventions within Romani Studies and exposes how city planners and officials engaged with relational logic in their development plans and spaces.

Another recent work which uses the experience of Roma in a comparative, and at times, relational way is Minayo Nasiali’s 2016 book *Native to the Republic: Empire, Social Citizenship, and Everyday Life in Marseille since 1945*. Nasiali’s approach focuses on community reformers, politicians, and social scientists in postwar France and their ideas about urban space, citizenship rights, and race. Here, Roma appear alongside colonial subjects of the Empire as “foreigners” in their own right and are racialized as such through ideas of citizenship, fitness, and poverty. In doing such an analysis Nasiali manages to focus less on the oppression of the Roma on the part of the state but on how the spaces of Marseille were encounter points between racialized peoples and where racial projects were shot through with ideas of postwar development, French nationalism, and whiteness. Picker’s and Nasiali’s works, while from different disciplines and utilizing different methods to some extent, both show how the method of relational formations of race can be used to explore the realities of Romani people in Europe today. We can hope that future studies will embrace relational racial theory as a means to tell new histories of racial formations in Europe.

## References

- Kóczé, Angéla. 2018. "Race, Migration, and Neoliberalism: Distorted Notions of Romani Migration in European Public Discourses." *Social Identities* 24 (4): 459–473. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13504630.2017.1335827>
- McGarry, Aidan. 2017. *Romaphobia: The Last Acceptable Form of Racism*. London: Zed Books. <http://hdl.handle.net/2027>
- Molina, Natalia, Ramon Gutiérrez, and Daniel HoSang, eds. 2019. *Relational Formations of Race: Theory, Method, and Practice*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Nasiali, Minayo. 2016. *Native to the Republic: Empire, Social Citizenship, and Everyday Life in Marseille since 1945*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Picker, Giovanni. 2017. *Racial Cities: Governance and the Segregation of Romani People in Urban Europe*. London: Routledge.
- Van Baar, Huub. 2018. "Contained Mobility and the Racialization of Poverty in Europe: The Roma at the Development–Security Nexus." *Social Identities* 24 (4): 442–458. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13504630.2017.1335826>
- Van Baar, Huub, Ana Ivasiuc, and Regina Kreide. 2019. *The Securitization of the Roma in Europe*. Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan.