Maria del Carmen Baerga

Negociaciones de sangre: Dinámicas racializantes en el Puerto Rico decimonónico.

Madrid: Iberoamericana, 2015. 317 pp. (Paper US\$ 28.00)

In *Negociaciones de sangre*, historian María del Carmen Baerga carefully examines the institution of marriage in nineteenth-century Puerto Rico to unearth the complex production of racialized difference before narrow concepts of biology (phenotype, heredity, and genes) gained primacy in the conceptualizing of race during the late modern period. Instead of employing a modern optic to read the past (which sees race as a transmittable but contained essence), Baerga advocates for the contextualization of race making, which in these pages emerges as a dynamic, everyday, and multisited process. She masterfully illustrates how divergent attributes—occupation, behavior (integrity), color, sexuality, dress forms, education, demeanor, wealth, religiosity, piety, lineage, and reputation—were assessed together by common folk as well as people in authority to determine the racialized classification of families and individuals. Such assessments, and consequently racial classifications, could shift in the course of a few generations or in the lifespan of an individual given that the state of each attribute and their assembling together could also change. In sum, there was no one single, systematic way of categorizing race, which thus took on a mutable and flexible character.

Baerga's entry point is the close reading of 138 civil court cases of individuals in Puerto Rico seeking the Spanish authorities' consent to marry and thus the overruling of their relatives' opposition to the liaisons, opposition argued on the basis of the unequal social condition—specifically racialized difference—between partners. She also studies Catholic Church records (mostly baptism and marriage registers as well as petitions to amend them), requests for the recognition of out-of-wedlock offspring as legitimate, proofs of *limpieza de sangre* (purity of blood [lineage]), marriage dispensations, wills, and pastoral visits. These procedures led to extensive investigations and produced rich materials from and about peoples from all walks of life, which provide us with glimpses of the cultural logics and daily practices guiding the convoluted processes of racial classification.

In the first chapters, Baerga offers a theoretically sound and well-informed analysis of the political conflicts, religious cultures, and colonial legal edifice that made necessary the production and maintenance of racialized difference in the Iberian-Atlantic world. The Christian Reconquista of the Iberian Peninsula and its corollary struggle for supremacy against Jews and Moors, the conquest and colonization of the Americas, the subordination of indigenous peoples, and the development of the African slave trade fueled the need for

both marking difference to maintain Christian, Spanish, white dominance and finding ways to assimilate the “enemies from within,” the racialized Others. Baerga identifies marriage as a key mechanism in negotiating, at the microlevel, the paradoxical governance demands at re-imagining difference and designing means of assimilation. Through marriage, a wide array of peoples was often brought into the affective matrix of families (transcending biological reproduction), which opened the possibility of altering positively or negatively their socioracial classification. As such, these liaisons demanded scrutiny of the families’ histories and contemporary behaviors of the couple in question, an endeavor sometimes undertaken by the authorities.

In the final two chapters, Baerga disentangles the intersections between gender, sexuality, and race to uncover the workings of white, Spanish, masculine privilege. In general, women’s honor (and racial classification) depended on the men they engaged with. Distinguished Spanish men could protect the racial status of—or transfer their whiteness to—ostensibly “questionable” partners by recognizing their illegitimate children or confirming their intention to marry at the time of an illicit sexual entanglement, among other actions. In contrast, women classified as white could not transfer their whiteness to their unequal male partners. In fact, they could descend quickly into the lowest socioracial classes (*castas ínfimas*) if their male relatives did not properly care for them or did not employ available legal recourses to protect them from socially compromising situations. Women of color, generally regarded as dishonorable because of their connection to the slave condition, were the most vulnerable of all. Women of color whose socioracial classification changed to white because of their partner were thought to remain in a subordinate position within the relationship. And unlike white women, a woman of color could lower the racial classification of her partner if he was white but not sufficiently distinguished.

This book is a treat for anyone interested in the convoluted world of race making in the Americas. Race may be a slippery social category of difference but one of utmost importance, calibrated by a multitude of actors at different times and sites. Instead of focusing on scientific racism as a moment of rupture, we should see it as a shift in emphasis, which highlights the capaciousness of the category, at times narrow and material while also coexisting with relational and metaphorical notions. Over the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, our vocabulary and practices of race making seem only to have expanded.

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