



TRANSCRIPT

Key Conversations with Phi Beta Kappa

How Natalia's Experience as a First-Gen Allows her to Connect to the Humanities—and her Students

Professor Natalia Molina was the first in her family, and her neighborhood, to go to college. Being a first-gen student, the 2020 MacArthur Fellow's higher education was shaped by curiosity and a being open to new opportunities—even when they brought her across the country for her graduate degree. As an expert of the humanities, Professor Natalia Molina emphasizes the importance of literature in understanding the experiences of those around us, how the conversation around immigration has evolved in her classrooms, and how as a historian, writing op-eds allow Professor Molina to explain the present through the past.

Fred Lawrence: This podcast episode was generously funded by two anonymous donors. If you would like to support the podcast in similar ways, please contact Hadley Kelly at hkelly@pbk.org. Thanks for listening. Hello and welcome to Key Conversations with Phi Beta Kappa. I'm Fred Lawrence, Secretary and CEO of the Phi Beta Kappa Society. Since 2018, we've welcomed leading thinkers, visionaries, and artists to our podcast. These individuals have shaped our collective understanding of some of today's most pressing and consequential matters, in addition to sharing stories with us about their scholarly and personal journeys. Many of our guests are Phi Beta Kappa Visiting Scholars, who travel the country to our Phi Beta Kappa chapters where they spend two days on campus and present free public lectures. We invite you to attend. For more information about Visiting Scholars' lectures, please visit pbk.org.

Today I'm delighted to welcome Professor Natalia Molina. Professor Molina is Distinguished Professor of American Studies and Ethnicity and Dean's Professor of American Studies and Ethnicity at the University of Southern California. Her research explores the interconnected histories of race, place, gender, culture, and citizenship. She is the author of three award-winning books, *How Race Is Made in America: Immigration, Citizenship and Historical Power of Racial Scripts*, *Fit to Be Citizens?: Public Health and Race in Los Angeles*, and most recently, the James Beard prize nominee, *A Place at the Nayarit: How a Mexican Restaurant Nourished a Community*, a book based on her grandmother's restaurant which Professor Molina calls "an urban anchor". She is at work on a new book, *The Silent Hands that Shaped the Huntington: A History of Its Mexican Workers*. She is a 2020 MacArthur Fellow. Welcome, professor.

Natalia Molina: Thank you for having me.

Fred Lawrence: Often in Key Conversations I begin with a guest's childhood, someone who was important to you, who I gather you never really had the chance to know. One of the great influences in my life is a great-grandmother for whom I'm named whom I never met. She was the first generation in our family to come to this country. She actually played a major role in settling many people from her part of the world in New York, and she played a major role in my life, but I never met her.

And I gather you never met your grandmother, but she played a major role in your life, so tell me a little bit about her and how she's influenced you.

Natalia Molina: My description of my grandmother would be very much like yours, Fred. She came to this country on her own from Mexico in 1921 at the age of 21. She had a dream of opening her own restaurant, but for her it was much more than a business. It was a way of immigrating family members. She used that restaurant to hire an attorney and that attorney would help write sponsorship letters so that it would be easier for people to obtain their visas, and she created a community from that restaurant.

These are people that are still in our lives today that I call aunt or uncle or that are related to us through fictive kin networks of being a godparent. I grew up with the advice that she gave people. People would say, "Your grandmother always said...." And she was this kind of person that was both formidable in terms of business and in terms of ethics and her moral code.

But she was just at the center of a community and one that not only was established here in Los Angeles, but that spanned across the border back to Mexico and connected people from her home state of Nayarit to those who had settled in Los Angeles from Nayarit. She was a transnational community maker.

Fred Lawrence: Did people from her home state in Mexico know in advance to get in touch with her? Was this part of the lore of if you can get yourself to Los Angeles, this is what you do?

Natalia Molina: She actually sent out that message quite explicitly. There was a hometown newspaper called El Echo and people in Los Angeles would subscribe to it. And so she would put in advertisements in that newspaper, and they would specifically say, "If you visit Los Angeles, come to my restaurant. You will be treated with the utmost respect. You will be spoken to in your own language. You will be attended to by your fellow country men and country women." And so that was the most obvious example of how she could reach a broad network, but she would also go visit her family in Mexico.

She stayed in touch with that fictive kin network that she had as well, and she would go to the heads of the family and say, and it was always about daughters, "If you let your daughter come to Los Angeles, I will make sure that she has a place to live. She will still be chaperoned and she can work at my restaurant so that she has a job and I will send her to school so that she will learn English." So it wasn't just about getting employees at her restaurant, it was very much about giving people cultural capital as well and giving them opportunities should they wish to not always work at the restaurant.

There were people that came, spent some time at the restaurant and then went on to either open their own business or go and find employment elsewhere. But now they had all the skills of speaking English as well as understanding American customs and practices and knowing a little bit more about Los Angeles so that they could navigate the city.

Fred Lawrence: I know with my great-grandmother, I was told that when she was asked about what she was doing, because she played a very similar role in the Lower East Side, she would always downplay what she was doing and that there was in fact a whole network of these people. She would reach back to the people from her small village, but other people were doing something similar.

Was your grandmother part of a network, informal or formal like that, of people, whether it was restaurants or other kinds of businesses or places for bringing people in, as you say, not just giving them a first place but really launching them in their new country?

Natalia Molina: It's so funny you mentioned that specific example, Fred, because I was just on the Lower East Side yesterday in New York, and I was sitting outside of Russ and Daughters, established in 1912, and I was looking at the tenement buildings or what would've been the tenement buildings a hundred years ago, and thinking of all the people that used to live there and what that street must have looked like, and I pictured people leaning out the window and yelling, "Time for dinner" and kids running home or not running home because they were in the middle of a stickball game.

But my grandmother set up in Los Angeles, a different space. Los Angeles is known as a sprawling metropolis and Sunset Boulevard runs through Echo Park, and she set up her second restaurant called The Nayarit on Sunset. And I think about that restaurant as

what I call as an urban study scholar, an urban anchor, and that became kind of a focal point around which the community grew, and so she was part of a network and it was very much one that she created.

Fred Lawrence: You grew up in that Echo Park neighborhood in Los Angeles, right? What was that like growing up there?

Natalia Molina: Echo Park in the 1970s was an ethnically and racially diverse neighborhood. In the fifties and sixties especially, there were communists and socialists and union workers, and so you saw the legacy of people that were eager to start a co-op or offer law services to disenfranchised groups, so a lot of change makers. That meant that the immigrant population that settled there felt accepted. They didn't feel like they were always on the margins.

So there were Latino immigrants, mainly Mexican immigrants because it wasn't until the eighties that Los Angeles population begins to receive more Central Americans. Vietnamese refugees, Filipino nationals, Chinese - very few African-Americans, however - and so this was a group that was working class and a little bit more on the margins, and people felt like they really had things in common, and so people really had a sense of community and felt like they really knew each other.

It's one of the things ironically that makes Echo Park an area that has now been gentrified for the last 20 years. People feel it's walkable, they like the community aspect, they move in. And if it's people with a higher income, which it has been in the last 20 years, it also means that they're eventually displacing the longtime residents as well as the longtime merchants.

Fred Lawrence: You went off to UCLA, were you in fact the first in your family to go to college or were there others before you who had made that move?

Natalia Molina: I was not only the first in my family, I was the first in the neighborhood to go to college. I was always that kid that loved going to the library. I had a calendar since I was eight years old, and pretty much all I would mark was when my library books were due and it meant that I could go and get more library books, and so at some point I realized that I wanted to go to a college prep school, and I was very fortunate that I went to an all girls school that really valued community and friendship and women in leadership and helping the community.

It had a social service kind of bent to it. It was Immaculate Heart in Hollywood, and from there I had the skills that I needed to get to UCLA.

Fred Lawrence: What did you expect to study there when you arrived and what did you actually study and are they the same?

Natalia Molina: Many people I know in ethnic studies have this story, which is you went in to be a doctor or a lawyer, and for me it was a doctor and I got weeded out very quickly in one of those weeder courses.

Fred Lawrence: Sounds like organic chemistry happened to you.

Natalia Molina: Absolutely. Which is also one of the reasons that I'm so committed to first gen programs now because I don't think any course should be considered a weeding out course because if you give people the proper support, study groups and mentoring and just how to get a hang of college, especially your first year, your first term, and in the UC system, your first quarter, where if you don't hit the ground running, the ground is going to hit you pretty fast. Yes, I went to UCLA.

Luckily I was also taking a Latin American history course at that time by the legendary Brad Burns, a Latin Americanist who could lecture with his eyes closed literally as he walked up and down the aisle, and I really enjoyed that course. And I also began women's studies courses with an anthropologist, Sandra Hale, and with that course, I felt like she gave me the vocabulary that I had always been missing when I looked around the world and saw structural inequality.

When I looked around my world and saw that certain values, certain ways of being were valued more, and I couldn't really understand why or how that was so, and so she really helped me sharpen my critical thinking skills as well as gave me a vocabulary for thinking about cultural studies, ethnic studies, power structures in history, change over time, why that happens. It just kind of opened up a whole new world to me.

Fred Lawrence: First in your neighborhood, first in your family to go off to university, so UCLA, that's a great national class institution, but it is in fact at least nearby, and then the jump to graduate school for a PhD at University of Michigan. What was the path that led to that? That's a big statement that says who you are and what you're going to be.

Natalia Molina: I think if you look at my CV, it seems very linear, right? I went to college as soon as I finished high school. I went to grad school a year after I graduated college. But in fact, there were so many moments where my life could have gone in a different direction. I bumped into a friend one day and said, "Do you want to have lunch at UCLA?" And he said, "I'm actually going to this interview to teach first gen students how to apply to grad school. Do you want to come with me?"

And it led down the path to participating in a summer research program sponsored by the Ford Foundation and Mellon, and I got paired with a professor. I learned how to do a research project. I got paired with a graduate student, a very conscientious graduate student, his name was Jonathan Holloway. He now happens to be the president at Rutgers.

Fred Lawrence: The great Jonathan Holloway, president of Rutgers, former provost at Northwestern, former dean at Yale College, and I'm proud to say a proud Phi Beta Kappa member and a member of our Visiting Scholar committee.

Natalia Molina: That is actually what we should have done, or what we can still do is I can list all the people that helped me out, and I bet you a lot of them are PBK members. And so yes, Jonathan was a grad student at the time, and you would've thought that he was the president of the Mellon Foundation in terms of making sure that we took advantage of every aspect of that program. So I came out of that program with an understanding of how one applies to grad school, gets letters of rec, and I was prepared to apply to graduate school.

George Sanchez, my colleague now at USC, was my mentor as an undergraduate, and he ended up going to Michigan and I went to the University of Michigan and just fell in love with the community there, and I always tell students when they apply to USC and they get into the grad program, I say, "Don't tell me where you want to go. Just tell me what you're looking for, and I'm not even going to try to recruit you to USC. I'm just going to tell you what we have that you're looking for. And I'm going to tell you what I know of the other grad programs and what they have." And whenever they say they don't want to go to Northwestern or Michigan because it's cold, I give them a packing list of what they would need. Because Michigan was such a great place for me in terms of the graduate community, the professors there, and you're inside most of the time when you're a grad student anyway, whether it's sunny or it's snowing.

Fred Lawrence: You're either at the library or Zingerman's or someplace else, but you're inside. How did this idea of going to graduate school far away, play at home? Are they proud of you, puzzled, confused, supportive? All of the above?

Natalia Molina: All of the above, but definitely confused because what we have to remember is that I didn't even know what graduate school was. When I first started going to office hours, I didn't know what office hours were, but I was that kid that sat at the front of the lecture hall and then the professors would say, "You should come to office hours." I didn't know to question it. And I went and I didn't even go with questions. I never went with an agenda. I just said, "Hi, I'm Natalia."

And luckily I had great professors that would ask me questions and then we'd start to maybe talk about the reading and professors would say, "You should go to graduate school." And I'd say, "What's that?" And so that's when I first started learning about what it was, and I just thought if I don't like it, I can leave. Because luckily I went to the University of Michigan and there was funding for first gen students. It would have fallen under the umbrella of affirmative action funding, and I think that's one thing that we overlook.

It's not just about getting into school, it's being willing to take a risk, and I felt like I could do this risk-free and that I wouldn't be in an overwhelming amount of debt if I left. Because at this point with my graduate stipend, I was making more than my mom. So I was not that kid that could ever imagine having that much debt.

Fred Lawrence: Over the past decade or so, and especially the recent part of it, issues of citizenship of immigration generally across our southern border in particular, the status of immigrants, of refugees, of asylum seekers has become hyperpolarized, hyper politicized. I wonder how that affects teaching of these subjects and talking to students who are concerned about these subjects in your experience.

Natalia Molina: For the most part, I've been very fortunate that I teach in California, and so students are familiar, if not have firsthand experience, about being an immigrant, whether it's through their own family, through a neighbor, a best friend, a roommate that they met in college, or even if their family is very wealthy, people that they've hired and that they've understood their experiences. I've had students come up and talk to me about all of their experiences that relate to those different categories.

And so I haven't had the hostility and fear that some of my colleagues who are in other states and are worried about, am I even going to be able to teach this? Am I going to get tenure? Is tenure even going to be available to me? So at that level, even when the political climate is different, if anything, it really motivates students to learn more. And so that is the gift of teaching in ethnic studies in California. But also some of the classes, when you really get into it, it's the gift of also being able to teach these things in a smaller class so that you can really talk to students and that you can do assignments in which they're able to interview people.

As much as the landscape may have changed in terms of where we think there are moments that are more intense now around immigration, there are other things that have freed up. I have students talk to me about being undocumented now. I have students talk to me about their parents being undocumented. This was not the case when I started. And if anything, when I was a graduate student, one of the jobs that I had was as a long-term substitute teacher through LA Unified, and I worked with the high school students that were getting ready to go off to college and wow, being there with them when they found out that they got into college and their parents finally have to tell them, "You're actually not going to be able to go because we can't afford it, and you won't be able to get financial aid because you're not a citizen. You don't remember this because we brought you as a baby or as a small child, but now is the moment where we have to tell you this."

Fred Lawrence: One of the things that you do in a compelling way in so much of your writing is blend the scholarly with the personal. The personal makes it evocative, but doesn't lose the power of the analysis. But I'm thinking of your scholarly work. I'm also thinking of some of your op-eds. You have this wonderful, intriguing, thought-provoking, but

problematic op-ed during the COVID period of being the anger translator for your family. You want to talk about that a little bit?

Natalia Molina: I think op-eds are something that we're not trained to do, but they're such a gift if we are able to. So for example, for me, I went through the op-ed project and learned how to do an op-ed, because like any other piece of writing, it has its structure. At my campus now at USC, we have the conversation, and I think a lot of us when we're training graduate students understand that public scholarship is much more valued and even expected now and are starting to train our students on how to do this.

For me personally as a historian, what's wonderful about op-eds is I can take everything that I've been researching and show you why it's relevant now, that history is not a precursor to a moment that you're in, but that history helps you explain the dynamics of why we're in this situation. So the anger translator piece was about my mother getting COVID, and it traces all the ways in which I see structural inequalities in the services provided in a city, how they can vary by zip code, and how this was the case a hundred years ago when I wrote my first book on how public health structures inequality in Los Angeles, and how public health informs our ideas about race. And so you're able to connect the moment in which people are like, "How can we change this?" It's like, well, first you have to understand how we got here, and I can do that through a book, and I can also do that through an op-ed because I know not everybody's going to read a book.

Fred Lawrence: Let me ask you about another op-ed that you wrote, which is a very Phi Beta Kappa adjacent piece about the role of the humanities for veterans. Do you want to tell us a little bit about what prompted that and how did you see that not obvious connection?

Natalia Molina: Well, first I'll say that the other thing I'm really good at is telling other people when they should write an op-ed, because we're not trained to write op-eds. What happens is I'll be talking to somebody and they'll say something and I'm like, that is so interesting. I didn't know that and I haven't read anything on that. And that's what happened with that op-ed piece. So I was living in San Diego at the time, it has a large military presence including veteran presence, and I went to a dinner party and I started talking to this veteran.

It was in 2016 in the wake of the election of Donald Trump, and I was bemoaning that it looks like they're going to try to cut funding to the humanities. And this veteran was lauding Donald Trump because he said, "Well, it looks like our military budget is going to increase." And so we started talking about what funding means for the humanities, what funding means for veterans, and I was just curious about his experience in the military. And as he was talking, I would chime in and say, "Oh, yes, I understand this about your experience, or I understand this about the war."

And he said, "How do you know these things? Some of these things are top secrets." I said, "I read, I was on the board of California Humanities and we read books by veterans." And so you start to see how if you want people to understand your experience, you need to share it more than just one-on-one ways, but also through our scholarships we're writing. And he started to understand, "Oh, wait a minute. If I want people to understand about the experience of the military war, veterans ending of wars, we need to sponsor the humanities."

Fred Lawrence: One of my favorite questions to ask guests on Key Conversations is to build our reading list. This is Phi Beta Kappa, after all, and our members are big readers. So I wonder if you have a couple of suggestions of books for those with some background in your fields and areas who would like to go further and learn more, and for those who've been with us on today's episode, but frankly are new to this field and are looking to really break in an intellectual way.

Natalia Molina: How much time do you have, Fred?

Fred Lawrence: I'll take a couple, but if you have more suggestions later, I'll be happy to upload them on our website.

Natalia Molina: Wonderful. Well, as you mentioned in terms of immigration, people always want to know about this specific moment, this contemporary moment, and so the book I recommend is *The Hispanic Republican* by Gerry Cadava because it tells us the role of Latinos in politics, past and present. We know that the Latino population has long been considered a sleeping giant. Once it starts to vote more actively, it can change elections, and we're already seeing that to some degree. So definitely a book that helps inform our present. I also like a book that helps us reshift what we think we already know.

And so in this case, I would recommend Kelly Lytle Hernández's *Bad Mexicans*, where she's talking about the United States, but more as an empire, and she's placing the Mexican Revolution at the heart of US history. So really kind of reorientates our idea of what borders are, the US's relationship to Mexico. And then the last book for those that are interested in a local read, and the way that small histories actually tell big stories is George Sanchez's recent book *Boyle Heights*. Like Echo Park, it's a multiracial, multi-ethnic neighborhood and teaches us a lot about people migrating to the US, how people find connection across racial and ethnic bounds, and then how a neighborhood completely changes.

Fred Lawrence: Your work has influenced people through your writing, through your teaching, through your op-eds, as you say, which give you a kind of gift to explore beyond that. Well, we'd like to think that we've added to that list of opportunities by having you as a Phi Beta Kappa Visiting Scholar. We're honored to have you among us this year and looking

forward to what you will bring to our campuses, and I'm so grateful that you found some time to sit down with us today on Key Conversations. Thanks for joining me.

Natalia Molina: This was so much fun. Thank you.

Fred Lawrence: This podcast is produced by LWC. Kojin Tashiro is the lead producer. Paulina Velasco is managing producer. Hadley Kelly is the Phi Beta Kappa producer on the show. Our theme song is Back to Back by Yan Purchit. To learn more about the work of the Phi Beta Kappa Society and our Visiting Scholar program, please visit pbk.org. Thanks for listening. I'm Fred Lawrence. Until next time.

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