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A PLACE AT THE NAYARIT: HOW A MEXICAN
RESTAURANT NOURISHED A COMMUNITY.

By Natalia Molina. Berkeley: University of California Press,
2022. 312 pp. ISBN 978-0520385481

After producing some of the most innovative and important scholarship over the study of race and ethnicity, historian Natalia Molina's new book brings her cutting-edge analysis to bear on a more personal subject. *A Place at the Nayarit* traces the history of Echo Park through the urban anchor of The Nayarit restaurant, owned and operated by the author's grandmother, Doña Natalia Barraza, in different iterations between 1943 and 1968. As a social history, *A Place at the Nayarit* is particularly interested in the translocal community of Nayaritas in L.A. that developed through the concerted efforts of individuals like Doña Barraza, who sponsored a number of immigrants and hired both documented and undocumented labor at the restaurant. Molina describes Barraza, her employees, and the diverse clientele of the Nayarit as placemakers, a term borrowed from geography that Molina uses to describe the racialized subjects who built life for themselves and their communities against a backdrop of anti-immigrant and racist sentiment, legislation, and segregation. Molina argues that the Nayarit, and restaurants like it, served as central nodes in the nexus of immigrant life for the multi-ethnic Echo Park, and especially for its translocal transplant population. As a representation of patria chica familiarity and a haven for Latinos, the Nayarit provided a safe space free from segregation. The restaurant also granted immigrants access to a social network, job training, and opportunities to accrue cultural capital through exposure to a diverse clientele that was unusual for Mexican restaurants at the time but made possible by The Nayarit's notoriety and its location outside of the city's historically segregated ethnic Mexican barrios.

Molina's book is a rich story of the underdocumented communities – as Molina refers to those whose lives left scant archival traces – who patronized, labored, and built community in the fronts and backs of house in her grandmother's restaurants, including documented and undocumented Mexican immigrants, working-class Latinos, and immigrant sin-

gle women and gay men. The book is also, in part, a history of Molina's grandmother. The first chapter traces Doña Barraza's arrival in the US in 1922 as a twenty-one-year-old divorcée and single mother settling in the diverse and progressive neighborhood of Echo Park, alongside the hostile racial and political landscape faced by ethnic Mexicans and immigrants at the time. Doña Barraza's opening of the restaurant relied on help from cultural brokers who assisted in furnishing the restaurant as well as the welcoming neighborhood devoid of violent racism faced by people of color in other parts of the city.

The second chapter develops the argument that the Nayarit served as an urban anchor, or a space of community for racialized peoples in urban settings, that offered Nayarita-style food and resisted catering to an Anglo palate. Given anti-Mexican ideas of food set in place by Progressive Era Americanization campaigns and upheld by such organizations as the Los Angeles County Health Department, many Mexican- and Anglo-owned restaurants opted to serve a homogenized and bland "Mexican" cuisine. The third chapter focuses on the fictive kinship networks and *compadrazgo* formed at the restaurant and Doña Barraza's sponsorship of immigrants, including gay men and single women. As a divorced and single mother who immigrated at a time when single women rarely migrated unaccompanied, Barraza supported and gave work to many gay Mexican immigrants. As a racialized and criminalized community, their archival traces outside of interactions with the state were dismal, and Molina does an excellent job of piecing together the experiences of the gay employees who worked for The Nayarit. Although the restaurant was not an openly gay space, operating under Barraza's "puede ser pero no ver" policy, she sponsored and employed a large number of gay men who built community for themselves among industry workers and in the city. She also served a relatively large gay clientele, typical of the gay-friendly Echo Park through the 1950s and 1960s. Molina's argument that The Nayarit helped workers build lives and full identities stands, given the six restaurants opened by former employees and the many families started in and communities nourished by the Echo Park staple.

Molina's study of restaurants focuses more on The Nayarit's relationship to its urban community, leaving the food in the background except to describe her grandmother's recipes or to argue for the restau-

rant as a place of culinary familiarity that resisted homogenization and assimilation. What was the restaurant's relationship to food sourcing, however? Given the ongoing farmworker's movement, Molina's work would have benefited from an analysis of power in relation to Barraza's food and sourcing, as well as a nod to the sort of relationship, if any, the restaurateur had with the ongoing movement. Nevertheless, Molina's book is a significant contribution to the historiography of a period in Chicana/o history that, as she notes, is dominated by accounts of the Bracero Program and the Chicana/o Movement.

A Place at the Nayarit is a notable and unique example of how historians can bring underdocumented communities into the historiography. Following Ana Minian's *Undocumented Lives*, Molina's book adds to the small but growing historiography of gay Mexican migration and queer Chicana/o history. Molina's accessible writing style and flowing prose keeps readers engaged with its beautiful story of resilience and solidarity but leaves them hanging with its short periodization. However, her unique approach centering on restaurants as urban anchors for communities of color is a promising methodology for the fields of history, Chicana/o and Latina/o studies, and urban studies. *A Place at the Nayarit* is an accessible and enjoyable read that would interest lay readers, scholars, and students at all levels interested in urban history, social history, immigration studies, food studies, and Chicana/o history.

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