

covenants succeeded in the achievement of their goals. In countless other ways, they failed. Ultimately, in many cases, elegant houses fell to decay, commercial uses encroached, and change came whether it was wanted or not. Indeed, it is in the very datedness of many of the old covenants that their failure is most clear. Yet, faced with this evidence, we persist in this desire. We still attempt to guard our homes, our lots, our communities, and our lives from the danger of change that lurks outside our doors. Now as then, we refuse to accept the evidence—indeed, the living proof—that the human desire for permanence and protection through property is, in the end, simply a mirage that we all seek.

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Mae M. Ngai, *Impossible Subjects: Illegal Aliens and the Making of Modern America*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004. Pp. 377. \$49.95 cloth (ISBN 0-691-07471-2); \$19.95 paper (ISBN 0-691-12429-9).

Mae Ngai's thoroughly researched and beautifully written book, *Impossible Subjects: Illegal Aliens and the Making of Modern America*, shows how the restrictions on immigration dating from 1924 created the category of the "illegal alien," someone whose inclusion within the nation was "simultaneously a social reality and a legal impossibility." Using a variety of sources, including census reports, INS reports and internal memoranda, case law, legal briefs, and legislative history, Ngai reconstructs the legal history of United States immigration from 1924, when the Johnson-Reed Act first enacted national origins quotas, to 1965, when the quota system was abolished by the Hart-Cellar Act. Ngai's book fills a gap in immigration history scholarship, which has been more commonly concerned with early immigration, especially the era of Chinese Exclusion, and immigration since 1965. More importantly, Ngai's book does the work of showing how the quota system worked and how it has shaped a racialized image of illegal immigrants in ways that remain with us today.

Ngai's book covers a broad sweep of immigration policy by focusing on the way in which immigration policy constructed and attempted to contain groups of racial "outsiders," through policies such as the repatriation of Filipinos during the 1930s, the internment of the Japanese during World War II, and INS raids on Chinatowns in the 1950s. Each chapter is meticulously researched and lucidly written and could stand on its own as an analysis of the effect of immigration law on a particular group of immigrants. But the book works as a whole because it is uniquely focused, unlike most immigration history, not on the effect of immigration on legal immigrants but instead on how the legal regulation of immigration creates the category of "illegal alien."

Perhaps most interesting from the standpoint of the current national debate over undocumented migration is Ngai's explanation of how a quota system that exempted Mexicans from quotas could result in Mexicans being seen as the pro-

totypical “illegal alien.” Since there were no quotas for Mexican immigration, Mexicans theoretically should have been the least likely group to be considered “illegal.” But a constellation of factors led to this construction, including geographic proximity, repatriation policy, and the *bracero* guest worker program. During the 1920s, the United States began to police the U.S./Mexico border aggressively, though invasive and humiliating inspections procedures that included bathing, delousing, medical inspection and interrogation, and through the formation of the Border Patrol, which envisioned its job as the pursuit and apprehension of criminals. The repatriation of Mexicans during the 1930s created a labor shortage that the United States attempted to reverse in the 1940s through a “guest worker” program known as the *bracero* program. Ngai argues that the *braceros* filled the same need in the mid-twentieth century that slaves, coolies, and convicts had served in earlier colonial times, with the main difference being that the *braceros* were theoretically “free.” Free labor, however, created the ability to quit. As *braceros* became frustrated with their working conditions, they began to leave their jobs. By leaving, they became “illegal aliens.” Mexican Americans became indelibly marked with the taint of the illegal alien, regardless of their individual status as undocumented, lawful resident, or American citizen.

When the *bracero* program was officially ended in 1964, the United States had an opportunity to reform immigration practices once and for all, by changing the labor standards for agricultural work. But instead of taking on this challenge, lawmakers passed in 1965 the Hart-Cellar Act, which for the first time imposed quotas on Mexican immigration. Ngai refutes the conventional wisdom that the Hart-Cellar Act was unambiguously progressive because it ended the national quota system by demonstrating that by “equalizing” the quotas for each country, it actually discriminated against those countries—such as Mexico—whose people were most likely to benefit from immigration to the United States. Hart-Cellar further marked Mexicans as “illegal,” and we still live with this legacy today.

As I write this review, Congress is debating what could be the most significant immigration bill of the quarter-century. Various versions of the bill have included an amnesty program for undocumented immigrants, making illegal presence in this country a felony, an extensive “guest worker” program, and dramatically increased border security. The perceived crisis animating each of these proposals is what should be done with “illegal aliens,” whose presence here is contrary to the law on the books but desired by agricultural companies as a source of cheap and disposable labor. Ngai’s book is the most thorough explanation we have of how and why this crisis came about.

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