Ngai, Mae M. *Impossible Subjects: Illegal Aliens and the Making of Modern America*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 2004. Print.

Enduring cultural symbols, such as the statue of liberty or the golden door, belie a much darker reality of racism and exclusion that undergird the record of US immigration policy. It is precisely this disconnect that contemporary historian Mae Ngai has sought to document in her book *Impossible Subjects: Illegal Aliens and the Making of Modern America*. Ngai explores the origins of "illegal alien" as a legal status, social category and political subject, focusing on the largely neglected period of strict immigration quotas between the 1924 Johnson-Reed Act and the Immigration Act of 1965, and arguing that these policies both curtailed and produced certain kinds of immigration. On the one hand, Johnson-Reed enacted strict immigration quotas and ended a long history of relatively free movement between nations, but on the other, the very act of defining legal forms of immigration gave rise to illegal immigration both as a phenomenon and as a conceptual category. Through Ngai's trenchant analysis the boundary between alien and citizen deteriorates as we begin to see labels such as "alien," "undocumented" and "naturalized" as discursive juridical constructions.

Ngai's analysis reveals that restrictive immigration policy simultaneously enacted a hierarchy of racial desirability and created the category of "illegal alien." When Congress passed a series of highly restrictive immigration laws between 1917 and 1924, people who had historically entered the country freely and without inspection or documentation were suddenly transformed into "lawbreakers" and "criminals." Furthermore, Ngai reveals that the "illegal alien" was not a result of the restrictionist laws themselves, but rather emerged with the racialization of "aliens" (Asians and Mexicans) and the deracialization of European immigrants that resulted from the decision to classify "whites" by country of origin and "nonwhites" by race. Even though this system created a hierarchy among Europeans by enacting quotas that favored Western and Northern Europeans, it placed them all together under the larger rubric of "white" with the effect of transforming "the cultural nationalism of the late nineteenth century…into a nationalism based on race" (24). Ngai asserts that with the construction of the "white American race" firmly in place, the "illegal alien" assumed a racially marked connotation that referred almost exclusively to non-European immigrants and their descendants. These restrictive policies required new forms of surveillance and policing, such as the Immigration and Naturalization Service, transforming national boundaries once considered permeable into the zones of border patrol and deportation that are now viewed as potent symbols of nationhood and state power. At the same time that physical borders became more rigid, the logic of racial difference turned "the border" into an ideology, so that even if migrants could cross the territorial border, they nonetheless faced additional legal and cultural barriers to inclusion once within the United States. In this way, Ngai suggests, territorial borders are at once physical and abstract, territorial and cultural.

If Ngai transcends the fixity of territorial borders, she similarly stretches the traditional limits of terms such as immigrant and migrant. Her analysis not only includes the experience of immigrants and migrants, but also American-born or naturalized non-white citizens (Japanese Nisei and Mexican-Americans), contracted foreign labor (Mexican *braceros*) and non-citizen subjects (Filipinos). She attempts to unite this heterogeneous group through the concept of "impossible subjects," that she defines as people who "cannot be and a problem that cannot be solved" (5). While acknowledging their differences, she argues that these "impossible subjects" share a common liminal status "that existed outside the normative teleology of immigration"

(13). While the "illegal alien" of Ngai's subtitle is the primary category tackled in her book, it is by no means the only concept up for discussion. Her "impossible subjects" also include what she terms "alien citizens" and "imported colonial subjects." Alien citizens are "persons who are American citizens by virtue of their birth in the United States but who are presumed to be foreign by the mainstream American culture and, at times, by the state" (2). Citizens could quite literally become "foreign" as well, as for example, when many American-born Nisei renounced their citizenship during WWII, partly on account of widespread confusion over what the government meant by "renunciation" and "denaturalization." Subsequent to renunciation, these Nisei found lost their own national status; denaturalized Nisei became a logical impossibility and a linguistic contradiction – an alien citizen and an impossible subject.

Filipino migrants and Mexican *braceros* illustrate the paradox of exclusionary status that emerges through the practice of "imported colonialism." As colonial subjects, Filipinos were free to enter the United States but were not eligible for citizenship. Contracted *bracero* laborers were similarly legal residents, but without any prospect for inclusion. In these examples, she provocatively reverses the logic of imperialism. While empire is traditionally understood as the nation's attempt to expand its territorial borders, she suggests that U.S. immigration policy created colonial subjects within its own borders as a way to shore up, rather than expand, territorial boundaries.

Ngai's book forwards a challenging critique of the liberal ideology that informed post-WWII immigration reform campaigns by highlighting that "liberal" reformers of the 1960's accepted the basic assumption of restrictionists far more than they realized. While "liberals objected to many principles espoused by old-line restrictionists…'restriction' wasn't one of them" (248). She also points out that by imposing controls on immigration from the Western Hemisphere for the first time in history, the so-called "liberal" 1965 Immigration Act yielded an exclusionary effect at least as salient as the inclusionary impact for which it is so often lauded. She further contends that even in the neoliberal discourse of the twenty-first century, the notion of unfettered movements across national boundaries remains unthinkable, despite the fact that this was the status quo for much of the nation's history.

As a conceptual framework, the idea of an impossible subject refocuses the study of immigration policy to the sites of slippage, rupture – even absurdity – of juridical status. By pointing to the ways in which aliens could be "made" and "unmade," she reveals the contradictions and inconsistencies of immigration policy and pushes the reader to the very limits of "citizenship." My only quibble with this conceptually brilliant book is that it is unduly dense. Ngai attempts to describe many distinct groups of people and many developments in racialized thinking and legal discourse. I came away with a sense of Ngai's overall argument, but found it difficult to appreciate all of the connections she made. For example, she sporadically compares Mexican, Filipino or other cases to African Americans' and Native Americans' ambiguous citizenship status in the nineteenth century. Although there are certainly important connections here, they are largely made by implication.

While Ngai's attempt to include a range of experiences under her rubric of "impossible subjects" is ambitious, the very groups she chooses to discuss is also problematic. Her decision to focus exclusively on Asians and Mexicans carries the danger of reinforcing the stereotype that all or most illegal aliens (or "impossible subjects") are non-European. Since Ngai's interest is in the racial dimensions of illegal immigration, more discussion of illegal Europeans would have added a valuable comparative dimension to her work while usefully troubling the racial stereotypes that so often inform conceptions of illegal status. Nevertheless, *Impossible Subjects*

makes significant historiographical, methodological and conceptual contributions. Her work fills in important gaps in the historical record and offers a series of new conceptual schema with which to bridge the experiences of distinct immigrant groups. Ultimately, Ngai offers a new way of thinking about citizenship and state power and her trenchant analysis reveals the racist undercurrent of immigration policy that has remained long-obscured by cultural mythology. If any reader still subscribes to the exceptionalist myth of "immigrant America" this book would certainly disabuse them of that notion, and also, perhaps, the tendency to pander to categories so easily elected and so brutally abusive.

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