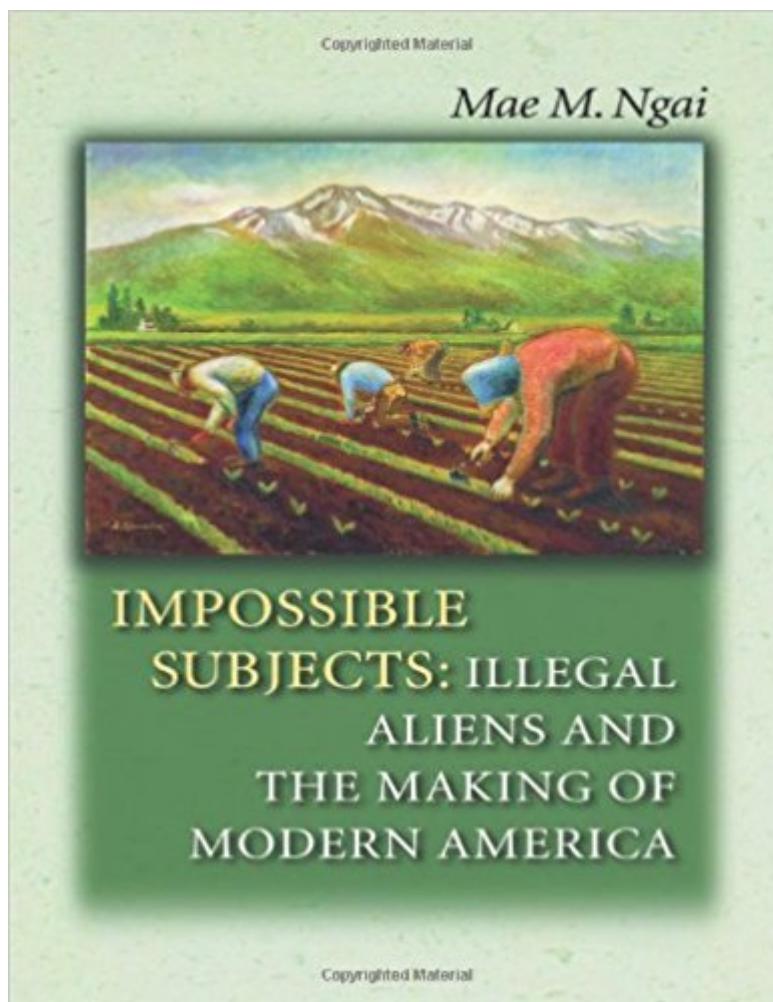


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# Impossible Subjects: Illegal Aliens And The Making Of Modern America (Politics And Society In Twentieth-Century America)



## Synopsis

This book traces the origins of the "illegal alien" in American law and society, explaining why and how illegal migration became the central problem in U.S. immigration policy--a process that profoundly shaped ideas and practices about citizenship, race, and state authority in the twentieth century. Mae Ngai offers a close reading of the legal regime of restriction that commenced in the 1920s--its statutory architecture, judicial genealogies, administrative enforcement, differential treatment of European and non-European migrants, and long-term effects. In well-drawn historical portraits, Ngai peoples her study with the Filipinos, Mexicans, Japanese, and Chinese who comprised, variously, illegal aliens, alien citizens, colonial subjects, and imported contract workers. She shows that immigration restriction, particularly national-origin and numerical quotas, re-mapped the nation both by creating new categories of racial difference and by emphasizing as never before the nation's contiguous land borders and their patrol. This yielded the "illegal alien," a new legal and political subject whose inclusion in the nation was a social reality but a legal impossibility--a subject without rights and excluded from citizenship. Questions of fundamental legal status created new challenges for liberal democratic society and have directly informed the politics of multiculturalism and national belonging in our time. Ngai's analysis is based on extensive archival research, including previously unstudied records of the U.S. Border Patrol and Immigration and Naturalization Service. Contributing to American history, legal history, and ethnic studies, *Impossible Subjects* is a major reconsideration of U.S. immigration in the twentieth century.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Winner of the 2005 Lora Romero First Book Publication Prize, American Studies Association

Winner of the 2005 Frederick Jackson Turner Award, Organization of American Historians

Honorable Mention for the 2005 Gustavus Myers Outstanding Book Award, Gustavus Myers Center for the Study of Bigotry and Human Rights

Co-Winner of the 2004 History Book Award, Association for Asian American Studies

Co-Winner of the 2004 First Book Prize, Berkshire Conference of Women Historians

Winner of the 2004 Littleton-Griswold Prize, American Historical Association

One of Choice's Outstanding Academic Titles for 2004

Winner of the 2004 Theodore Saloutos Book Award, Immigration and Ethnic History Society

"[A] deeply stimulating work. . . . Ngai's undeniable premise--as pertinent today as ever--is that the lawfully regulated part of our immigration system is only the tip of the iceberg. Even as we have allowed legal immigrants, mostly from Europe, through the front door, we have always permitted others, generally people of color, to slip in the back gate to do essential jobs."--Tamar Jacoby, Los Angeles Times Book Review

"Ngai pulls no punches, arguing that in most cases . . . illegal [immigrants] were stigmatized by negative racial stereotypes and branded as dangerous. . . . [I]t belongs in every library and should be referenced in every ethnic studies course."--Choice

"Ngai has produced a valuable reinterpretation of twentieth-century American immigration history, one that will push other scholars of race, immigration, and policy in new directions as well."--Charlotte Brooks, Journal of American History

"Ngai's book is a stunning piece of scholarship. . . . [F]or background reading of 'illegal immigration' that takes a broader view, this is an outstanding book."--David M. Reimers, International History Review

"May Impossible Subjects indeed lead to bold changes? Ngai creates that possibility, through altering our vision of immigration history, in showing us the constructed and contingent nature of its legal regulation. Impossible Subjects is essential reading."--Leti Volpp, Michigan Law Review

"Impossible Subjects offers an important contribution to U.S. histories of race, citizenship, and immigration. This stunning history of U.S. immigration policy dispels the liberal rhetoric that underlies popular notions of immigrant America, as it establishes the designation of Asians and Mexicans as perpetual racial others. Everyone in the field of race and immigration should read this thought provoking book."--Rhacel Salazar Parreñas, American Journal of Sociology

"This superb book by historian Mae Ngai addresses the emergence of the legal and social category of 'illegal immigrant' in the United States. . . . Ngai addresses the subject . . . in a variety of historical contexts and each casts a different light on their deeply ambiguous condition."--Linda Bosniak, Journal of

International Migration and Integration "Moving beyond the telos of immigrant settlement, assimilation, and citizenship and the myth of 'immigrant America,' Mae Ngai's *Impossible Subjects* conceptualizes immigration not as a site for assessing the acceptability of the immigrants, but as a site for understanding the racialized economic, cultural, and political foundations of the United States."--Yen Le Espiritu, *Western Historical Quarterly* "Mae Ngai's book . . . offers a fascinating reinterpretation and critique of the United States as a mythicized 'nation of immigrants.' Ngai demonstrates the critical role that colonialism, foreign policy considerations and racial politics played in shaping U.S. immigration and national identity. . . . Ngai's book is an extraordinary contribution to U.S. immigration history and a stimulating read."--Dr. Alison Pennington, *Planck Yearbook of United Nations Law*

Winner of the 2005 Lora Romero First Book Publication Prize, American Studies Association Winner of the 2005 Frederick Jackson Turner Award, Organization of American Historians Honorable Mention for the 2005 Gustavus Myers Outstanding Book Award, Gustavus Myers Center for the Study of Bigotry and Human Rights Co-winner of the 2004 History Book Award, Association for Asian American Studies Co-Winner of the 2004 Berkshire Conference First Book Prize, Berkshire Conference of Women Historians. Winner of the 2004 Littleton-Griswold Prize, American Historical Association. One of Choice's Outstanding Academic Titles for 2004. Winner of the 2004 Theodore Saloutos Book Award, Immigration and Ethnic History Society.

This book betrays its origin as a doctoral dissertation with its slightly ponderous introduction establishing the historiography of the subject and occasional attention to theory. So it lacks the literary sparkle of Ngai's second book, *The Lucky Ones*. Nevertheless, this is a fascinating book about the history of U.S. immigration policy, its racists premises, and the fateful construction of the illegal alien category that poisons our immigration policy today. Highly recommended to anyone who wants to understand how we got to where we are today.

Very concise read on illegal aliens. So much we read on illegal aliens are about our folks to the south of the USA border. Also economies need cheap labor so it is a love and hate relationship with the business owner and the individual seeking a manner it a way to feed themselves and their families. It is the reality of our time of use of illegal workers. Will it ever cease?

I purchased this for my class. We were studying Illegal Aliens. In the class, lots of discuss this issue

and this textbook offered lots of points to talk about.

It is a tough read, but really good when it comes to presenting the info with good sources.

Textbook.

In *Impossible Subjects: Illegal Aliens and the Making of Modern America*, Maw M. Ngai argues that illegal immigration is not anomalous but inherent to the regime of immigration restriction. Nor is it a side channel to the main stream of the nation's history as a nation of immigrants. (pg. xxv) Ngai organizes her book into four sections: the quota system and paper legality; immigration at the margins of law and nation; war, nationalism, and citizenship; and postwar immigration reform. Her subjects broadly alternate between Asian immigrants from Japan and China, with a section on the Philippines, and immigrants from Mexico. Further, Ngai employs a transnational approach, situating her work within recent borderlands scholarship. In discussing restriction, Ngai writes, "Restriction not only marked a new regime in the nation's immigration policy; [she] argue[s] that it was also deeply implicated in the development of twentieth-century American ideas and practices about citizenship, race, and the nation-state." (pg. 3) According to Ngai, the quota system reconstructed a white American race, in which persons of European descent shared a common whiteness distinct from those deemed to be not white. In the construction of that whiteness, the legal boundaries of both white and nonwhite acquired sharper definition. (pg. 25) Discussing early twentieth century Americans' fears over Filipino immigration, which they equated with a threat to job opportunities, Ngai writes, "The perception of widespread job competition was, in fact, fueled by longstanding racial animus towards Asiatics. The central element of this hostility was the ideology of white entitlement to the resources of the West." (pg. 109) Discussing migrant Mexican labor, Ngai argues that immigration law and practices were central in shaping the modern political economy of the Southwest, one based on commercial agriculture, migratory farm labor, and the exclusion of Mexican migrants and Mexican Americans from the mainstream of American society. (pg. 128) Further, Ngai argues that this transnational Mexican labor force...constituted a kind of "imported colonialism" that was a legacy of the nineteenth-century American conquest of Mexico's northern territories. (pg. 129). Ngai's discussion of Japanese internment demonstrates the clash between the federal and state governments' belief in immigrants' duty to assimilate and

Japanese-Americans' desire to blend their culture with that of the United States. (pg. 180) Their uncertain legal status further compounded this. While the United States relaxed its immigration restrictions on China during World War II, Cold War politics and the sensationalized investigations against fraud reproduced racialized perceptions that all Chinese immigrants were illegal and dangerous. Confession legalized Chinese paper immigrants, but it did not necessarily bring them social legitimacy. (pg. 223) In her final section, Ngai argues that the thinking that impelled immigration reform in the decades following World War II developed along a trajectory that combined liberal pluralism and nationalism. (pg. 230) She also examines the unforeseen consequences of those policies, such as the intellectual brain drain of the Third World. Ngai draws upon the intellectual and editorial interventions of Gary Gerstle, author of "American Crucible: Race and Nation in the Twentieth Century". (pg. xvii) This links her to other historians, such as John Dower, who argued in "War Without Mercy: Race & Power in the Pacific War", that World War II was a race war, and to Lawrence Goldstone's "Inherently Unequal: The Betrayal of Equal Rights by the Supreme Court, 1865-1903", which, like Ngai's examples, examined the court cases that stripped non-white Americans of their rights or citizenship.

This is a solid scholarly book, not the most readable but worth reading and every serious library should have a copy. The author is likely to have an excellent academic career. Midwest Independent Research, educational websites. Immigration, mwir-immigration.blogspot. There is a book list here.

Mostly subjective drivel. Some good history in there, too.

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