

The Predicament of Illegality:
Undocumented Aliens in Contemporary American Immigration Fiction

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
in the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences

COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY

2013

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ABSTRACT

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This dissertation examines representations of undocumented aliens and explores the issue of illegality in contemporary American immigration fiction. It takes as a fundamental premise that in immigration, status matters. The importance of immigration status in the “real world” is evident not only in ongoing national debates but also in the daily experiences of immigrants, whose inclusion in or exclusion from America’s social, economic and political spheres is largely dependent on their status as documented or undocumented persons. This dissertation proposes that status likewise matters in literary representations of immigration.

As this project demonstrates, immigration narratives often rely on conventional structures, themes and tropes that privilege the legal immigrant subject. Indeed, the legality of protagonists is often taken for granted in many novels about immigration. Thus, by foregrounding fundamental questions concerning legal status in the study of immigration literature, this dissertation aims to show the ways in which status informs, influences and directly shapes immigration novels. While this project broadly proposes the concept of status as an analytical lens, I approach this literary inquiry primarily by critically examining the “illegal alien” as the subject of immigration novels. Focusing on three novels that feature an undocumented immigrant protagonist – Bharati Mukherjee’s *Jasmine*, Gish Jen’s *Typical American*, and Mario Bencastro’s *Odyssey to the North* –

this dissertation argues that, like its real-world counterpart who poses social, political and legal problems for the nation state, the figure of the illegal alien poses problems for the genre of immigration fiction, challenging its narrative conventions and calling into question the ideology of American exceptionalism that underpins it.

By exploring the relationship between law and literature, this dissertation seeks to bring insight into the ways in which stories about immigration participate in the broader political discourse on U.S. immigration. On the one hand, it demonstrates how conventional immigration narratives perform cultural labor for the dominant legal regime by reaffirming normative modes of inclusion into the nation. On the other, it shows how literature, by wrestling with the question of illegality, can serve as means to critique the exclusionary practices of American law and society.

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Acknowledgements

I am grateful first to Frances Negrón-Muntaner, my advisor, whose unwavering support and encouragement sustained me throughout my graduate studies at Columbia University and enabled me to complete this project. Many thanks to Rachel Adams for her guidance, especially during the latter stages of the dissertation. Thanks also to Marcellus Blount, John Gamber and Maja Horn for their helpful comments and feedback. I am grateful to Gary Okihiro, Donna Maeda, Monique Taylor and Leah Morrison, all of whom have made an impact on my intellectual development as an academic. A special thanks to Joy Hayton and Virginia Kay for helping me navigate Columbia's administrative maze.

For their invaluable friendship throughout graduate school and after, a heartfelt thank you to Hannah Gurman and Joe Alban, Karen Emmerich, Adela Ramos and Christian Gerzo, Ellen Ketels, Nathaniel Farrell, Alvan Ikoku, Elda Tsou, Richard So, Patricia Akhimie and Manu Chander, and Beth McArthur. For the encouragement they provided along the way, I am grateful to my friends in Los Angeles and New York: Johanna Sanchez, Luis Herrero, Theresa Hernandez, Juan Salazar, Monica Gomez, Ana Ibacache, Debbie Esparza, Esther Shin, Nate Mickelson, Kevin Koda, Christoph Marx, Ginny DeFrank, Susan Caldwell, and Stephen Perry.

Thanks to my brother, Kratos, for always keeping me grounded and sane. I dedicate this work to my parents, Bienvenido and Lolita Llobrera, who made incalculable sacrifices in their own lives so that their children could receive a good education. Thank you, Mom and Dad, for your support and love.

Introduction

“Legal, that is the word that saves.”
–Roberto Quesada, *Never through Miami*

In the opening chapter of Roberto Quesada’s *Never through Miami* (2002), Elías Sandoval, a Honduran sculptor who hopes to break into the arts scene of New York City, makes a necessary stop at the Miami International Airport to pass through customs and immigration. He waits in line for his documents to be examined by an immigration officer – “the final test” that would determine whether or not he is allowed through “the door [to] the United States.” He carefully assesses his situation, making sure he hasn’t done anything peculiar that would raise suspicion and jeopardize his entry. He has not brought with him “any avocados or chickens or dogs or butter or cardboard boxes or anything that is not allowed.” He has a clean record and a letter of invitation. He thinks to himself: “My documents are in order, my visa is valid, I look like the person in the photograph...Nothing is fake, everything is legal.” Yes, he meets “all the requirements of those who enter with their heads held high.”¹

When Elías reaches the immigration officer, she asks him how long he plans to stay in the United States. A simple yet crucial matter, he knows his response could determine his fate. Giving too long a time “might be cause to deport him.” On the other hand, to suggest a shorter length of stay would be no better, for “he would have to leave on that day or sink to the miserable status of an illegal, something he had never even

¹ Roberto Quesada, *Never through Miami*, trans. Patricia J. Duncan (Houston, TX: Arte Público Press, 2002), 1, 2.

considered.” To his dismay, he learns that no one on a limited visa can enter the United States without a return ticket, an important detail he has overlooked. Fulfilling Elias’ fear of being turned away, the immigration officer closes his passport “like a door through which the stamp he needed would never enter.”²

However, despite his travails at customs, Elias, in a fortunate twist of fate, is ultimately granted entry to the United States by another immigration officer who bends the rules for him. With his passport stamped, Elias continues his journey and makes it to New York, his final destination. Following the episode at customs and immigration, the book unfolds as a humorous yet revealing narrative about immigrant life in the United States, chronicling Elias’ experiences in the Big Apple as he navigates a new life in the city while attempting to maintain a long-distance relationship with his girlfriend in Honduras.

Although painted in a lighthearted and comedic tone, the opening scene of *Never through Miami* gestures to a critical and indeed highly controversial issue that impacts the political, economic and cultural discourses of American society: illegal immigration. While Quesada centers the scene on Elias’ legal passage to the United States, he simultaneously calls attention to an entirely opposite way of entering the country. In fact, he highlights the matter of Elias’ legal entry precisely by introducing the possibility of its inverse. If Elias strives to be among “those who enter with their heads held high,” it is because there are countless others who sneak in through American borders with their heads hung low in fear or shame. If he places great value on his valid visa and his

² Ibid., 3.

authentic documents, it is because there are others who either possess forged documents or have no documentation at all.

In the scene at customs and immigration, Quesada signals to readers that there are two ways of coming to the United States – legally and illegally. And relatedly, there are also two ways of being an immigrant in America – documented and undocumented. Far from a benign juridical designation, one's status influences practically every aspect of the immigrant experience, effecting significant consequences on one's political, economic and social participation in American society. Whereas legal immigrants can claim a sense of pride and are free to pursue opportunities tied to the American Dream, illegal aliens bear a status associated with shame and are relegated to a social station that makes them extremely vulnerable to economic exploitation.

While Quesada introduces two distinct immigration trajectories in the novel's exposition, he is also quick to point out an often-overlooked fact – namely, that the demarcation between legal and illegal is soft. As historian Mae Ngai asserts, “The line between legal and illegal can be crossed in both directions.”³ Even for Elias who enters legally, the specter of illegality already looms as a potential threat. Despite having valid papers, he fears “sink[ing] to the miserable status of an illegal” after his visa expires. Indeed, the prospect of Elias becoming illegal only increases as the story progresses, for he thinks less and less about returning to Honduras the longer he remains in New York. At the end of the novel, we see Elias thinking of a way to secure a green card, contemplating a marriage of convenience to an American-born Latina woman as his

³ Mae Ngai, *Impossible Subjects: Illegal Aliens and the Making of Modern America* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004), 6.

ticket to stay in the United States. Because status is a highly determining factor in the immigrant experience, Elias desperately wants to avoid becoming illegal. Mindful of a truth he has known since he landed in Miami, Elias knows that for the immigrant in America, “Legal, that is the word that saves.”⁴

I begin this dissertation with a discussion of the amusing but insightful opening scene of *Never through Miami* because it speaks to a fundamental premise of this project: in immigration, status matters. That status matters in “the real world” is evident not only in the ongoing national debates about immigration but also in the day to day experiences of immigrants, whose inclusion in or exclusion from America’s social, economic and political spheres is largely dependent on their status as documented or undocumented persons. However, this dissertation proposes that status matters in literary representations of immigration as well. As I will show, immigration narratives often rely on conventional structures, themes and tropes that privilege the legal immigrant subject. Curiously, authors of immigration stories rarely raise the question of status despite its significant impact on the American immigrant experience. More often than not, the legality of protagonists is taken for granted in many novels about immigration.

In the seemingly timeless and quintessential up-from-your-bootstraps American Dream immigrant success story, the legal status of the protagonist is almost always implicitly assumed. In order for the narrative to complete its arc and achieve the expected happy conclusion, the protagonist’s right to be present and remain in the United States must go unquestioned from the start. In other words, the only way the immigrant can achieve the American Dream is by giving her the opportunity to pursue it, and that

⁴ Quesada, 1.

means not getting deported. Needless to say, deportation would put an immediate end to the immigrant's American Dream.

Proceeding from the standpoint that status matters, this dissertation aims to shed light on the ways in which status informs, influences and directly shapes immigration narratives. While this project broadly proposes the concept of status as an analytical lens, I approach this literary inquiry primarily by taking a critical look at the "illegal alien" as the subject of immigration novels. This dissertation argues that, like its real-world counterpart who poses social, political and legal problems for the nation state, the figure of the illegal alien poses problems for the genre of immigration fiction, challenging its narrative conventions and calling into question the ideology of American exceptionalism that underpins it.

By foregrounding fundamental questions concerning legal status in the study of immigration literature, this dissertation explores the relationship between law and the construction of immigration novels, highlighting the ways in which a character's legal status influences not only the content, themes and motifs of a story, but also its overall narrative arc. Equally significant, this dissertation brings insight into the ways in which stories about immigration participate in the broader political discourse on U.S. immigration. On the one hand, I demonstrate how conventional immigration narratives perform cultural labor for the dominant legal regime by reaffirming normative modes of inclusion into the nation. On the other, I show how literature, by wrestling with the question of illegality, can serve as means to critique the exclusionary practices of American law and society.

Before moving forward, an explanation about terminology must be made. Throughout this dissertation, I use the terms “illegal,” “undocumented,” and “unauthorized” to describe the status of aliens and immigrants. In using these terms, I do not mean to denigrate the personhood of those individuals who might be categorized as such. Following the example of immigration scholars Mae Ngai and Lina Newton, I employ the terms purposely to highlight the fact that these status designations are constructed in and by the law.⁵ Moreover, as Ngai has shown, “illegal” and “undocumented” are historical terms whose origins can be traced to particular developments in U.S. immigration regulation and policy.⁶ Thus, while the terms have come to carry negative connotations, they are nonetheless instructive, for they help us keep in mind that the conditions (and subjects) they describe are products of history and the discourse of law.

From a thematic perspective, this dissertation centers on the undocumented alien and the issue of illegal immigration. At the same time, this project is equally interested in engaging existing critical scholarship on immigration literature. I have chosen to explore the topic through literature because, as critics have pointed out, not only do immigration novels directly address the experiences of immigrants, they also speak to the changes in America’s shifting social, cultural and political landscape. Immigration novels articulate “processes of formations of national identities.”⁷ They narrate and rewrite the story of

⁵ See Mae Ngai, *Impossible Subjects*; Lina Newton, *Illegal, Alien, or Immigrant: The Politics of Immigration Reform* (New York: New York University Press, 2008).

⁶ The historical origins of these two terms are discussed further in Chapter One of this dissertation.

⁷ Heike Paul, *Mapping Migration: Women’s Writing and the American Immigrant Experience from the 1950s to the 1990s* (Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag C. Winter, 1999), 1.

becoming American.⁸ They “erect new epics [and] national narratives,” transforming American mythologies in the process.⁹ As a medium through which authors can “reflect positively or negatively on the nation,” immigration novels serve as vehicles for praise and critique of American society, its institutions, and its way of life.¹⁰ Finally, immigration novels reimagine the nation, making a place for and insisting on the significance of immigrants in the story of America.

In order to pursue a more specific and direct line of inquiry vis-à-vis the genre of the immigration novel – a literary tradition that exhibits its own set of well-defined conventions, themes and narrative structures (to be discussed in detail in Chapter One) – I have set certain parameters with regard to the authors and texts I examine in this study. First, the three main novels I selected for this study – Bharati Mukherjee’s *Jasmine* (1989), Gish Jen’s *Typical American* (1991), and Mario Bencastro’s *Odyseeey to the North* (1998)¹¹ – all feature a protagonist who is an undocumented immigrant. Choosing texts that cast the illegal immigrant in a central role allows us to examine more fully how authors conceive and represent illegality and, more broadly, how they address the social and political questions raised by illegal immigration. Second, I chose stories that actually depict the process of immigration; in other words, the geographical movement from the immigrant’s country of origin to the United States. By highlighting the consequences of

⁸ Roberta Simone, “Introduction,” in *The Immigrant Experience in American Fiction: An Annotated Bibliography* (Lanham, MD: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 1995), xviii.

⁹ Gilbert Muller, *New Strangers in Paradise: The Immigrant Experience and Contemporary American Fiction* (Lexington, KY: The University Press of Kentucky), ix-x.

¹⁰ David Cowart, *Trailing Clouds: Immigrant Fiction in Contemporary America* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2006), 3.

¹¹ Bharati Mukherjee, *Jasmine* (New York: Grove Press, 1989); Gish Jen, *Typical American* (New York: Vintage Contemporaries, 1991); Mario Bencastro, *Odyseeey to the North*, trans. Susan Giersbach Rascón (Houston, TX: Arte Público Press, 1998).

legal and illegal entry, the literal act of immigration (departure, journey, and arrival) illustrates how status shapes the lives and experiences of immigrants from the very outset. Third, the books under consideration were published during the 1980s and '90s, a period characterized by a curious convergence of conflicting cultural and political ideas about immigration. As will be discussed in the opening chapter, these decades saw the rapid growth of and sustained interest in multicultural literature, leading to the publication of numerous immigration novels by immigrant and ethnic minority writers. Interestingly, this was also a period when anti-immigrant sentiment was on the rise, when the issue of unauthorized entry came to dominate U.S. immigration debate and policy. Lastly, I have chosen novels by authors who are immigrants themselves (as is the case with Bharati Mukherjee and Mario Bencastro) or is an immediate descendant of immigrants (as is the case with Gish Jen). For these authors, immigration is not only a political and personal issue they care deeply about; it is also a main source of inspiration for their art.

Illegal Immigration in Other Texts

To be sure, the topic of illegal immigration has been addressed by other authors whose works do not necessarily fall into the genre of immigrant fiction. For example, in *The Tortilla Curtain* (1995), T.C. Boyle explores the lives of Delaney and Kyra Mossbacher, a white, wealthy and privileged couple, and Candido and América Rincon, an undocumented couple from Mexico.¹² Set in Los Angeles, the novel opens with the collision of the two couples' separate worlds, when Delaney hits and injures Candido in a

¹² T.C. Boyle, *The Tortilla Curtain* (New York: Penguin Books, 1995).

car accident. Inspired by the social and racial tensions that gripped California in the 1990s, Boyle examines the hardships and marginalized existence of Candido and América as they navigate an unjust and exploitative society that relies on the labor of undocumented immigrants for its survival. He contrasts the unfortunate but sympathetic couple with the Mossbachers whom he depicts rather unfavorably as selfish, hypocritical liberal yuppies who care more about the environment, recycling and animals than their fellow human beings.

Also set in Los Angeles (with a few scenes in Mexico), Karen Tei Yamashita's *Tropic of Orange* (1997) explores illegal immigration in the context of a complex story with seven intersecting plots. In one of the storylines, Bobby Ngu – “Chinese from Singapore with a Vietnam [sic] name speaking like a Mexican living in Koreatown”¹³ – helps a young woman (who claims to be a cousin from China) cross the border from Tijuana to Los Angeles. In another plot, a mysterious character named Arcangel travels to Los Angeles to participate in a wrestling match. Taking on the persona of “El Gran Mojado” (the Great Wetback), he fights SUPERNAFTA in the Ultimate Wrestling Championship. In her novel, Yamashita demonstrates how illegal immigration is inextricably linked to the lives of Americans whether they know it or not. It can be a mundane occurrence (as represented in Bobby's story) or the consequence of clashing political and economic ideologies (as metaphorically figured in the wrestling match between El Gran Mojado and SUPERNAFTA).

Like Yamashita and Boyle, Gayle Jones treats the issue of illegal immigration in her work as well. In *Mosquito* (1999), a female black truck driver from Kentucky named

¹³ Karen Tei Yamashita, *Tropic of Orange* (Minneapolis, MN: Coffee House Press, 1997), 15.

Sojourner Nadine Jane Johnson (nicknamed Mosquito) gets involved in the Sanctuary movement after she inadvertently transports a stowaway, a pregnant Mexican woman, across the border from Mexico to Texas.¹⁴ Casting the Sanctuary movement as a kind of modern day underground railroad, the novel connects the plight of undocumented immigrants with that of slaves who sought to escape the South in search of freedom in the North.

Outside of literature, illegal immigration and undocumented aliens have also animated the imagination of filmmakers. Perhaps one of the most notable films about the subject is Gregory Nava's *El Norte* (1983), which traces the perilous northward journey of a pair of Guatemalan siblings who flee their country to escape political persecution. Instead of finding the better life they imagined, the siblings' story ends tragically with Rosa's death and Enrique's uncertain future as part of the undocumented labor force. Taking a more comedic approach, Cheech Marin's *Born in East L.A.* (1987) follows Mexican American Rudy Robles' repeated attempts to cross the border after he is deported to Mexico, having been mistaken for an illegal alien during an immigration raid in a factory in the United States.

Although illegal immigration is not the central plot of John Sayle's *Lonestar* (1996), it is nonetheless depicted as an ineluctable, if suppressed, part of a Texas bordertown's history. In the movie, a corrupt sheriff terrorizes the local Mexican community and murders a man who is caught transporting illegal aliens from Mexico. Years later, the mysterious death of the former sheriff leads to uncomfortable discoveries about the town's prominent community members. Moving from the local to the global,

¹⁴ Gayl Jones, *Mosquito* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1999).

Alejandro González Iñárritu's film *Babel* (2006) traces several interrelated stories that are set across multiple continents. One of the stories focuses on a woman's experience of crossing the U.S.-Mexico border. After attending her son's wedding in Mexico, Amelia, who works illegally as a nanny for a well-to-do family in San Diego, has an unfortunate encounter with border guards. At the end of the movie, she is arrested and deported, despite having lived in the United States for sixteen years.

In addition to those mentioned above, many other films have treated the subject of illegal immigration either directly or indirectly, including Joshua Marston's *Maria Full of Grace* (2004), Sergio Arau's *A Day Without a Mexican* (2004), Wayne Kramer's *Crossing Over* (2009), and Cary Fukunaga's *Sin Nombre* (2009). While not all are successfully able to offer new insights into the condition of undocumented aliens, the production of such films suggests that even in the realm of popular culture, attempts are being made to make sense of the complexities of illegal immigration.

Moving from the fictive realm to that of fact, the stories of undocumented immigrants have also been featured in documentaries and other narrative forms that are more journalistic or sociological in style. Recent documentaries like Dan DeVivo's *Crossing Arizona* (2006), Roy Germano's *The Other Side of Immigration* (2009), Carlos Sandoval and Catherine Tambini's *Farmingville* (2004), Kevin Knoblock's *Border War: The Battle Over Illegal Immigration* (2006), and Dennis M. Lynch's *They Come to America* (2012) explore illegal immigration and its consequences from a variety of perspectives. Altogether these films shed light not only on the experiences of immigrants who cross over but also those whose lives are affected by illegal immigration – border patrol agents, human rights activists, employers, local residents of American towns, and

families back home. Taking into consideration the social, economic and political dimensions of immigration, these documentaries reflect the conflicting views and ideologies that define the battle lines in the ongoing debates over immigration.

Relatedly, we have seen in the past few years a growing number of undocumented aliens come out of the shadows and take a public stand on immigration issues.

Encouraged earlier on by the introduction of the DREAM Act and now increasingly emboldened by the expansion of political influence engendered by demographic shifts (especially the growth of the U.S. Hispanic population), members of the “Dreamer” generation are sharing their personal stories and testifying to the struggles of being undocumented in America.¹⁵ These narratives have largely appeared in newspapers and other journalistic media, or have been collected in sociologically-oriented books. For instance, in *We ARE Americans: Undocumented Students Pursuing the American Dream* (2009), William Perez presents the stories of numerous students, ranging from high schoolers to college graduates.¹⁶ Based on interviews he personally conducted, the compiled narratives speak to the different challenges students face during specific stages in their educational career. Yet amidst the many voices, common themes emerge: the desire to have an equal chance to pursue the American dream, the constant fear of deportation, the uneasy feeling of being in limbo, the disconnect between their cultural identification as Americans and their citizenship status, and the eagerness to contribute to and be productive members of the community.

¹⁵ The DREAM Act, which stands for Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors, is discussed further in Chapter One of this dissertation.

¹⁶ William Perez, *We ARE Americans: Undocumented Students Pursuing the American Dream* (Sterling, VA: Stylus, 2009).

Likewise, in her book *Just Like Us: The True Story of Four Mexican Girls Coming of Age in America* (2009), journalist Helen Thorpe documents the experiences of four young friends, who, in her words, “inherited various standings: one was born a U.S. citizen, one became a legal resident, and two lacked documents.”¹⁷ In relating their stories, Thorpe shows how the girls’ different legal/immigration statuses affect their families’ lives, the paths they take after high school, and their relationship with one another.

Speaking from a much more personal perspective, Filipino journalist Jose Antonio Vargas recently wrote an essay in the *New York Times Magazine* in which he revealed his undocumented status. In “My Life as an Undocumented Immigrant,” he describes how, applying for a driver’s permit at the age of 16, he discovered that he possessed a fake green card. He explains that as an illegal immigrant, he “[lives] a different kind of reality” characterized by fear, distrust, pretense, and secrecy.¹⁸ Although as an established journalist he is potentially in a better position to benefit from more lenient treatment (given his employment and association with prominent news organizations), Vargas nonetheless speaks to the experiences of many undocumented individuals who are tired of hiding. Like others, he is coming forward to tell his story in the hope of initiating a critical conversation about immigration that could lead to changes

¹⁷ Helen Thorpe, *Just Like Us: The True Story of Four Mexican Girls Coming of Age in America* (New York: Scribner, 2009), 1. Aside from her work as a journalist, Helen Thorpe is also known as the wife of Colorado governor John Hickenlooper.

¹⁸ Jose Antonio Vargas, “My Life as an Undocumented Immigrant,” *New York Times Magazine*, 22 June 2011, <<http://www.nytimes.com/2011/06/26/magazine/my-life-as-an-undocumented-immigrant.html>> (10 December 2012).

in policy. And indeed, stories, when communicated effectively, have the potential to do just that.

Like the personal narratives of undocumented individuals, the immigration novels considered in this project seek to illuminate the immigrant experience, albeit in a different register – through the mode of fiction. More than just hold up a mirror to society, fiction allows authors to examine reality while simultaneously exploring new realms of possibility. As we shall see in the chapters that follow, Bharati Mukherjee, Gish Jen, and Mario Bencastro base their critiques on contemporary experiences of immigration even as they reimagine different possibilities for the inclusion and better treatment of undocumented aliens in American society.

Illegal Immigration and Chicano Literature

In American culture and politics, the problem of illegal immigration has been most closely associated with Mexicans because they have historically made up and continue to constitute the majority of the undocumented population in the U.S. But as will be discussed further in Chapter One, the association of illegality with Mexicans is rooted not just in “objective” numbers but also, and perhaps more importantly, in a long history of immigration restriction and enforcement policies that disproportionately affected migrant laborers from Mexico. Not insignificant, labor and legal status have become inextricably linked to the racial formation of Mexicans and Mexican Americans in the United States.

Consequently, readers of this dissertation might observe that no Chicano/a author is represented among the three main writers I examine in this project. To be sure, illegal

immigration is a topic about which many Chicano/a authors are concerned, for it is an issue that touches the lives of Mexican immigrants (both undocumented and documented) and Mexican Americans (citizens) in the United States. But as vocal as some writers have been in public conversations about illegal immigration, the undocumented immigrant, curiously, has not emerged as a central figure in Chicano literary and cultural production. To be clear, I am by no means suggesting that illegal aliens are absent from or disregarded in Chicano literature. In more than a few texts, Chicano/a authors gesture to the issue illegal immigration by referencing an instance of unlawful crossing or denouncing the cruelty of *la migra*. They may even include undocumented aliens in their story, but these characters rarely appear as protagonists. In surveying the Chicano literary canon, I have found that illegal immigrants play a smaller role in these texts than in the novels I have included in this study.

Beyond the question of illegality, however, immigration and migration in general are important themes in Chicano literature. And as critics have pointed out, any consideration of Mexican American writing in the context of a broader discussion about immigrant/immigration literature merits some qualification. In her contribution to the edited volume *New Immigrant Literatures in the United States*, Ada Savin writes: “Presenting Mexican-American literature as *one* of the immigrant literatures produced in the United States calls for a prompt caveat.”¹⁹ Because Mexicans have resided in the geographical territory of the United States for centuries, at least as long as those of Anglo-European descent, it would in fact be inaccurate to describe them or their

¹⁹ Ada Savin, “Mexican-American Literature,” in *New Immigrant Literatures in the United States: A Sourcebook to Our Multicultural Literary Heritage*, ed. Alpana Sharma Knippling (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1996), 341.

descendants as immigrants. Indeed, some Mexican Americans “do not consider themselves immigrants, claiming that not they, but rather the border, has migrated.”²⁰ And while the term is apt for more recent newcomers, it is a misleading (if not entirely inappropriate) label for Chicanos who are born in the United States and possess American citizenship.

Acknowledging such caveats, many critics nonetheless treat the works of authors such as Sandra Cisneros, Rudolfo Anaya, Rolando Hinojosa and Ana Castillo as immigrant literature.²¹ In contrast, literary historian and critic Nicolás Kanellos proposes a stricter demarcation between the writings of U.S.-born/raised authors and those of actual immigrants. In his book *Hispanic Immigrant Literature: El Sueño del Retorno*, Kanellos refers to the literary production of U.S.-born Hispanic authors as “native texts,” which he differentiates from immigrant and exilic literature.²² Included in this category of native texts is Chicano literature.

Looking at some of most the important works in Chicano literature, we see narratives that feature protagonists who are U.S.-born and –raised Mexican Americans. Such characters most commonly appear as the subject of the Chicano coming-of-age story. Often the children of immigrants, these protagonists must wrestle with the question of cultural identity, particularly with regard to maintaining one’s Mexican sense of self in the midst of pressures to assimilate or resist assimilation in the dominant

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ See Muller, *New Strangers in Paradise*; Paul, *Mapping Migration*; Dalia Kandiyoti, *Migrant Sites: America, Place, and Diaspora Literatures* (Hanover, NH: Dartmouth College Press, 2009); Katherine Payant, “Borderland Themes in Sandra Cisneros’s *Woman Hollering Creek*,” in *The Immigrant Experience in North American Literature*, eds. Katherine Payant and Toby Rose (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1999).

²² Nicolás Kanellos, *Hispanic Immigrant Literature: El Sueño del Retorno* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2011).

American culture. And while immigrants, too, have to contend with such pressures, American-born protagonists approach questions of identity not as aliens in a new land but rather as U.S. citizens who are part of a minority group. According to Kanellos, native literature – including Chicano literature – “develops themes around such issues as identity crisis, bilingualism and biculturalism, race, class, and gender discrimination, and the importance of community.”²³ Native texts feature cultural conflicts as well; often, these manifest as clashes between the minority and the dominant community or appear as generational struggles between immigrant parents and their Americanized children who represent the old and new worlds, respectively. These themes and features can be seen in varying degrees in José Antonio Villarreal’s *Pocho* (1959), Rudolfo Anaya’s *Bless Me, Ultima* (1972), Richard Rodriguez’s autobiography *Hunger for Memory* (1982), Cherrie Moraga’s *Loving in the War Years* (1983), and Sandra Cisneros’ *The House on Mango Street* (1985). At the center of these texts is the figure of the Chicano himself or the Chicana herself – an individual who straddles both Mexican and American worlds, embodying the practices, traditions, customs, and aspirations of both cultures.

Perhaps not surprisingly, the topic of illegal immigration is infrequently addressed in Chicano literature that focuses on the experiences of U.S.-born protagonists. In much the same way that illegality impacts the narratives of undocumented immigrants, citizenship and legal status shape the stories of Chicanos in the U.S. While authors often depict a protagonist’s encounter with discrimination and prejudice, the character’s right to be in the United States is never in question. As Kanellos observes, native texts “reveal

²³ Ibid., 31.

an identity with the geographic location in the United States.”²⁴ Unlike immigrant texts that bridge the old and the new country, native literature proceeds from the point of view that “this is the homeland.”²⁵ Such geographic identifications can be seen in Rudolfo Anaya’s links to New Mexico, Sandra Cisneros’ close association with her urban Chicago neighborhood, and Rolando Hinojosa’s connection to the Texas Rio Grande Valley. But as we shall see in *Jasmine*, *Typical American* and *Odyssey to the North*, narratives that center on undocumented immigrants do not exhibit this sense of identification. Rather, the texts reveal a relationship that is constantly being negotiated, not least of all because the illegal alien’s foothold in America is always uncertain.

Rooted in the United States and affirming their place in American society, Chicano authors have called upon their Constitutionally-guaranteed rights in order to speak against discrimination, marginalization and the dispossession of Mexican Americans in the U.S.²⁶ The heightened political awareness exhibited by Chicano literature, especially those works that came out of the “Chicano cultural renaissance” of the 1960s and 70s, reflect the concerns of the Chicano socio-political movement, which emphasized equal treatment and protection under the law. As Savin observes, “Some of the landmark literary works of the [Mexican American] community were rooted in direct contact with the [Chicano] movement’s commitment to affirmation of cultural pride [and] the struggle for civil and human rights.”²⁷ But as Kanellos points out, the ability to mobilize these rights is a privilege held by those who “do not suffer the threat of

²⁴ Ibid., 22.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid., 24.

²⁷ Savin, 348.

deportation if they protest inequities or injustices.”²⁸ In contrast to Chicano characters who are able to assert their rights, undocumented immigrants, as we shall see, have little recourse to legal protections; for they risk being found out the moment they decide to speak up.

More than the undocumented alien, one of the dominant figures that emerges in Chicano literature is the migrant laborer. This, of course, makes sense given the historical patterns of Mexican labor migration in the U.S. and the close connection between the Chicano cultural renaissance and the farmworkers’ political movement during the 1960s (most notably evident in the work of El Teatro Campesino, a troupe founded by Luis Valdez). In Villarreal’s *Pocho*, Tomás Rivera’s *...y no se lo tragó la tierra* (1971), Raymond Barrio’s *The Plum Plum Pickers* (1969), and Luis Valdez’s *Actos* (1965-), the migrant laborer stands as an emblematic figure for the (im)migrant experience of Mexicans in the United States. Although, as mentioned earlier, illegality has become closely linked to migrant labor, it is important to point out that the migrant workers in these texts are not depicted as undocumented aliens. In fact, some authors even make references to “wetbacks” to differentiate their main characters from those who are in the country illegally.

For example, in one of the vignettes in Rivera’s book, the young narrator notices that a certain “*mojadito*” would come to visit the house of Doña Bone and Don Laíto.²⁹ By referring to the man as a wetback, the narrator implies that his own status is different from that of the visitor. Although he is not privy to all that happens in the house, the

²⁸ Kanellos, 25.

²⁹ Tomás Rivera, *...y no se lo trago la tierra*, in *Tomás Rivera: The Complete Works*, ed. Julián Olivares (Houston, TX: Arte Público Press, 1992, 2008), 18, 78.

narrator knows that the wetback is not supposed to be there. Thus, even in this short episode, the wetback is cast as someone who transgresses space. Similarly, in the play “Quinta Temporada,” Valdez contrasts wetbacks with legal farmworkers.³⁰ In one scene, a Patron (land owner) is under pressure to sign a contract with the Union and the Farmworker. The Coyote (labor contractor) urges the Patron not to sign the document, telling him that he brought wetbacks to replace the farmworkers who are causing trouble by calling for improved working conditions and better pay. Here again, wetbacks are referenced as a contrast to the farm laborers who have legal permission to work in the U.S.

In the works of Villarreal, Rivera, Barrio, and Valdez, the migrant laborer is portrayed as a hardworking but exploited individual who must move from place to place in search of work. The migrant worker’s movement, however, differs from that of the undocumented alien who is forced to move in order to escape capture and deportation (as we shall see later in our discussion). In Chicano literature, the migrant – more than the immigrant – endures as a heroic figure who represents the Mexican community’s struggle to survive. As Teresa McKenna insightfully writes: “Whatever the class or generation, the primary metaphor for the [Chicano] experience is the migrant, who is at once the paradigmatic figure of displacement and oppression and the leading figure of persistence in the vicissitudes of change.”³¹

³⁰ Luis Valdez, “Quinta Temporada,” in *Early Works: Actos, Bernabe, Pensamiento Serpentino* (Houston, TX: Arte Público Press, 1990, 1994), 28-39.

³¹ Teresa McKenna, *Migrant Song: Politics and Process in Contemporary Chicano Literature* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1997), 9.

In Chicano literature, it is frequently the migrant laborer or the U.S.-born protagonist who comes of age in America that takes center stage. While not playing principal roles in full-length novels, the figure of the undocumented immigrant has been featured in other genres and cultural forms. For example, in the corrido, a tradition of narrative song or popular ballad, the “*mojado*” appears as a recurring character who makes the treacherous journey north in search of a better life in the United States. In corridos such as “Mojado de corazon,” “El mojado enamorado,” “Mojado power,” “El viajero ilegal,” “Mojado sin licencia,” “El que se fue,” “El Otro México,” and others, the undocumented immigrant (who is almost always a male figure) crosses the border to find work and, sometimes, to reunite with a loved-one.³² Leaving behind his family and his home, he comes with visions of making money and aspirations of success. But in the North, he learns that these are “pure illusions.” And yet he perseveres. In many songs, the undocumented immigrant encounters *la migra*, is caught, detained and deported. Although he is mistreated by immigration officers, he returns again and again because, as the narrator of “El mojado remojado” states, he lives to do honorable work. To the *mojado*, work is a source of pride, for work “does not denigrate” the individual.³³

In Pat Mora’s poem *La Migra* (1993), a confrontation occurs between a male Border Patrol agent and an undocumented Mexican woman.³⁴ Divided in two stanzas, the poem depicts a scenario told first from the point of view of the Border Patrol agent and second from the perspective of the undocumented woman. Mora stages the

³² Gustavo López Castro, ed., *El Río Bravo es charco: cancionero del migrante* (Mexico: El Colegio de Michoacán, 1995).

³³ *Ibid.*, 225, 224.

³⁴ Pat Mora, “La Migra,” in *Unsettling America: An Anthology of Contemporary Multicultural Poetry*, eds. Maria Mazziotti Gillan and Jennifer Gillan (New York: Penguin, 1994), 367-8.

encounter ironically as a game, beginning both stanzas with the line “Let’s play *La Migra*.” In the first stanza, the agent asserts his power over the “Mexican maid,” calling attention to his badge, his boots, his handcuffs and his gun. He presents himself as an authority figure to be feared. Believing he has the upper hand, he tells the woman that she can run and hide, but she will never get away because he has a jeep. In the poem, Mora explores the gendered nature of the encounter, referencing the physical and sexual violence the agent could potentially inflict on the woman. The imperious officer declares: “I can take you wherever I want...I can touch you wherever I want.” But he is deaf to her questions and complaints because “[he doesn’t] speak Spanish.” At the end of the stanza, the Border Patrol agent is eager to begin the game: “Get ready, get set, run.”

In the second part of the poem, the undocumented woman takes up the officer’s challenge. Refusing to be cast as a helpless “maid,” she asserts that she will play the role of a “Mexican *woman*” in the game.³⁵ She turns the tables on the officer and presents an alternate scenario in which the things that supposedly give him an advantage instead become burdens. The “jeep has a flat” and he is left to stand under the burning sun. His “hat, glasses, badge, shoes, [and] gun” are now a heavy load he must carry in the desert. Unlike the Border Patrol agent, the Mexican woman “know[s] this desert, where to rest, where to drink.” She tells him that she is not alone, navigating the desert with other travelers whose laughter and songs can be heard in the wind. They tell each other where to find water. He, on the other hand, is out of luck, since “[he] can’t speak Spanish...[and does] not understand.” At the end of the poem, she tells him to “Get ready.” But her statement reads more like a threat than an invitation to play.

³⁵ Emphasis added.

In the poem, Mora gestures to the potential victimization of the undocumented immigrant under the regime of U.S. immigration law. Unrestrained at the border, the authority and power of *la migra* result not in orderly enforcement of policy but rather in overt violence towards unauthorized immigrants. However, reimagining the scenario, Mora transforms the illegal alien from victim to knowledgeable survivalist, an expert navigator of the harsh desert terrain. Not unlike the poet herself, the undocumented immigrant uses language to undermine established power relations. In the poem, the unheard voices of undocumented immigrants become songs and laughter and life-saving words: “*Agua dulce brota aquí, aquí, aquí.*”

Compared to Mora’s empowered undocumented woman, the illegal immigrants in Helena Viramontes’ “The Cariboo Cafe” (1985) are much more vulnerable in the hostile environment of an urban American town. Viramontes signals from the outset that her short story is not about typical (legal) immigrants but rather those who “[arrive] in the secrecy of night, as displaced people often do, stopping over for a week, a month, eventually staying a lifetime.”³⁶ “The Cariboo Cafe” opens with two undocumented latchkey children who, having lost their key, are locked out of their apartment. Advised by their father never to trust the “polie” (police) who are just “La Migra in disguise,” the siblings search for a safe place to stay and get lost in the process. As children of immigrant parents who must work “until they saved enough to move into a finer future,” Sonya and Macky reveal a perspective on the immigrant experience that is rarely considered. Theirs is not a carefree childhood, but rather a cautious and fearful one.

³⁶ Helena Viramontes, “The Cariboo Cafe,” in *The Moths and Other Stories* (Houston: Arte Público Press, 1985), 61.

Often warned that the police take children and “send them to Tijuana,” Sonya knows that the state of the family is fragile.³⁷ However, after seeing the police take her friend’s father away, she realizes that it may not actually be the children who get sent to Tijuana but rather her parents, Popi or Mamá. Here, Viramontes shows the reader that for undocumented children, the prospect of family separation or, worse, orphanhood is all too real.

In the story, the children seek refuge at the “zero zero place,” representing the two O’s left of the fading sign for the Cariboo Cafe. In many ways, “zero zero place” is an apt name for the cafe, for the people there have very little going for them. As the owner states, double zero is the “story of my life.”³⁸ The owner is a racist figure who convinces himself that he’s an honest and decent man because he does not turn away the illegals, whores, drug addicts, and five-to-lifers who come to his place. But as we learn in the story, he, in fact, betrays the illegal immigrants who hide in his restaurant after immigration agents raid the garment factory next door. Through the cafe owner, Viramontes shows that illegal immigration is an issue that touches the lives of all Americans. As much as he would like to wish them away, the owner cannot escape the fact that undocumented immigrants live in his community, work in local factories, and eat at his cafe. Indeed, by patronizing his restaurant, they even keep his business alive.

At the “double zero cafe,” the two children encounter a Central American woman who mistakes Macky for her long-lost son. In her reading of the story, Sonia Saldivar-Hull suggests that the illegal Central American woman represents “a modern day *llorona*

³⁷ Ibid., 61, 63.

³⁸ Ibid., 64.

(the wailing woman of *mestizo* folklore) who has fled her country after her own child was murdered by the right-wing, U.S.-backed government.”³⁹ Suffering from delusions and perhaps even a touch of madness, the woman inadvertently kidnaps the children who have since been reported as missing. When the police arrive after the cafe owner informs them about the kidnapping, she fails to comprehend what she has done wrong. Unwilling to lose her son “Geraldo” (i.e., Macky) again, she resists arrest and is killed during her confrontation with the police.

In featuring an undocumented Central American refugee in her story, Viramontes expands the conversation about illegal immigration beyond the Mexican/Chicano community. In the vein of Chicana Third World feminism, she links the struggle of undocumented Latinos to common histories of colonialism and American economic and military intervention in countries south of the border. Displaced not just by war but also by poverty caused by the forces of global capitalism, undocumented immigrants come to the United States only to find equally brutal conditions marked by repression (from the police and *la migra*) and economic exploitation. As we shall see, illegal immigration cannot be simplified as a “Mexican problem.” Rather, it is a problem that cuts across all manners of national, ethnic, cultural, and political lines.

Organization of the Dissertation

Often deemed a controversial figure, the illegal alien stands as an unorthodox protagonist that presents a problem of representation for the immigration novel. One of

³⁹ Sonia Saldívar-Hull, “Feminism on the Border: From Gender Politics to Geopolitics,” in *Criticism in the Borderlands: Studies in Chicano Literature, Culture, and Ideology*, ed. Héctor Calderón and José David Saldívar (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1991), 219.

the principal interests of this project is to examine how authors narrate the illegal alien as the subject of immigration stories when narrative structures and tropes rely (implicitly) on the legality of the protagonist to rehearse the iconic myth of the American Dream and to depict the archetypal journey from immigrant to American. However, as we shall see throughout this project, the undocumented alien troubles the conventions of the genre, compelling authors to reimagine the immigration story in ways that take into consideration the predicament of illegality.

In Chapter One, I begin with a consideration of the broader literary and historical context that serves as the backdrop for my analysis of the three main novels considered in this dissertation. First, I outline a literary history of the immigration novel and the scholarship that has developed around it. I then discuss the ways in which immigration narratives privilege the legal alien as the iconic subject of the immigrant novel. I demonstrate how certain tropes simultaneously assume and depend on the legality of the protagonist in order to be effective. Using the novels of other authors as examples, I show how legal status underpins and makes possible the archetypal plots and storylines associated with the genre. Second, as a complement to the literary discussion, I explore the historical and political narrative that has developed around illegal immigration and illegal aliens in the United States. I examine the ways in which this narrative has converged with and, more importantly, diverged from the larger national narrative of “immigrant America.”

Chapter Two focuses on Bharati Mukherjee’s *Jasmine*, a novel that attempts to work through one of the primary questions posed by this dissertation: Does illegality preclude one from achieving American identity? Based on her novel, Mukherjee’s

answer is an emphatic “no.” In *Jasmine*, being illegal is deemed inconsequential to the eponymous heroine’s path toward becoming American. For although Jasmine, an illegal immigrant from India, remains undocumented even at the close of the story, she nonetheless claims herself to be an American. Yet if being illegal does not prevent Jasmine from realizing an American identity, it is because the novel envisions being American strictly in cultural terms. As I will show, the novel downplays the law’s significance in the construction of American identity by valuing cultural assimilation above all else. Consequently, the novel imagines the immigrant as a depoliticized subject, who, having achieved cultural assimilation, is content to remain legally and politically excluded from the nation. Unlike critics who read the novel as creating a new American, I argue that *Jasmine* exhibits a textual incongruity that produces a paradoxical subject: the “illegal American” – an American who neither has rights nor can make claims to the nation that she calls her own.

In Chapter Three, I consider how illegality threatens to thwart the narrative trajectory of Gish Jen’s *Typical American*, specifically when Ralph, the Chinese immigrant protagonist, falls into undocumented status. I argue that in order to plot Ralph’s Americanization successfully, Jen is forced to “solve” the problem of illegality, conveniently making him the beneficiary of a federal amnesty program that enables him to gain legal status and remain in the United States. Unlike *Jasmine*, *Typical American* reflects some degree of recognition that status matters in the immigrant’s formation of his American identity. In this chapter, I also examine the implications of Jen’s use of amnesty to stage the illegal alien’s status adjustment and facilitate his formal/legal inclusion into American society. As I demonstrate, the novel analogizes the illegal

alien's incorporation to the U.S. to the process of adoption, whereby the undocumented immigrant (likened to an irresponsible, undeserving child) is adopted by the benevolent nation (the kind adoptive parent). I suggest that the novel's resolution privileges an exceptionalist conception of the U.S. as an inclusive nation, obscuring America's history of hostility towards undocumented immigrants.

In contrast to Mukherjee and Jen, who for the most part retrace the conventional narrative arc of the immigrant's transformation into an American, Mario Bencastro, in *Odyssey to the North*, plots out quite a different trajectory for his immigrant characters. Rather than culminate in assimilation, the intertwining plots of his novel result in immigrants' exclusion from American society and deportation from the country. In Chapter Four, I focus on the individual storylines of two Salvadoran immigrants in Bencastro's novel: Calixto's illegal entry to the United States and Theresa's deportation process. Analyzing the novel's deployment of narrative prose, dramatic script, courtroom transcripts, letters, and newspaper articles, I show how the novel uses various modes of narration and representation to explore the personal, legal, political and social dimensions of illegal immigration. I suggest that *Odyssey to the North* represents a shift from the traditional paradigm of the immigration novel in that it radically departs from the archetypal Americanization plot. In depicting illegality and deportation as endings to the story of immigration, the novel not only sheds light on the ways in which illegality is constructed; it also exposes the violent consequences of the exclusionary forces of immigration law.

By way of conclusion, I return to Roberto Quesada's *Never through Miami* and consider the novel's provocative proposition that humans have an "inherent right to

mobility and relocation.” In the Epilogue, I explore some of the implications and consequences of conceiving mobility or migration as a human right. For instance, how might the concept of mobility as an inherent right change our understanding of national sovereignty and the function of territorial borders? In terms of immigration, would the categories “legal” and “illegal” even exist if every individual has the right to migrate and relocate wherever they choose?

Chapter One

Legal and Illegal Immigrants in Literature and in Historical Context

In her introduction to *The Immigrant Experience in North American Literature*, published in 1999, Katherine Payant writes, “Despite such positive support, the fact is that literature about immigration has had a long struggle to be accepted as worthy of scholarly study, and it is still seldom taught as an integral part of the canon of American literature.”¹ Taking stock of the then-current state of literary criticism on immigration literature, she notes that although numerous essays, books and anthologies dealing with ethnic and immigrant literature have been published, many other aspects of the immigrant experience remain largely overlooked. “To fill a gap” and add a contribution to the growing scholarship on immigrant literature, Payant and co-editor Toby Rose present in their book a collection of critical essays that focus “specifically on the experience of immigration.”² Unlike other critics who concern themselves primarily with questions of cultural conflict, artistic formation and other theoretical issues, Payant and Rose are interested in looking at “how immigrant authors have portrayed their experiences coming to America or in the cases of second- or third-generation writers, those of their parents and grandparents.”³ In their collection, Payant and Rose are also interested in broadening the historical and cultural scope of the scholarship on immigration literature, taking care

¹ Katherine Payant, “Introduction: Stories of the Uprooted” in *The Immigrant Experience in North American Literature*, eds. Katherine Payant and Toby Rose (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1999), xiii.

² *Ibid.*, xv.

³ *Ibid.*

to include essays that treat the experiences of non-European and non-white immigrants who came to the United States since 1965.

Much has changed since the initial publication of Payant and Rose's edited volume, and scholars of immigration literature (including perhaps Payant herself) would only be pleased to note that her assessment of the field no longer holds true. Today, authors who depict immigrant experiences in their work have made significant inroads into the canon of American literature. For example, the works of Anzia Yeziarska, Maxine Hong Kingston, Bharati Mukherjee, Junot Diaz and Sandra Cisneros are now commonly taught in American literature courses, alongside books by Ernest Hemingway, William Faulkner, Ralph Ellison and Toni Morrison. Indeed, as can be observed in their consistent appearance in American Studies and Ethnic Studies courses, some immigration texts are even solidifying their place within what we might call an emerging multicultural literary canon.

Furthermore, the status of immigration literature as a legitimate field of study is no longer in question, as evidenced by the continued production of scholarly criticism on immigration texts. Since 1999, critics seem to have responded overwhelmingly to Payant and Rose's challenge to pay more attention to literary representations of "the experience of immigration." Approaching the immigrant experience from a variety of angles, scholars have explored and continue to probe the ways in which race, ethnicity, class, sex and gender shape the lives of immigrants. Critics have also gained much insight by analyzing the experience of immigration through the lenses of postcolonial theory, transnationalism, globalization, hybridity, and borderlands studies.

To be sure, the study of immigrant literature has seen significant developments since the 1950s and '60s when critics first began to take scholarly interest in late 19th and early 20th century fiction that depicted Jewish immigrants in the United States. As Thomas Ferraro observes, immigrant texts were dismissed as “regional writing” and deemed lacking in artistic value by critics such as Leslie Fielder and Irving Howe.⁴ Both viewed immigrant fiction as parochial, defensive, and limited in scope, representing the narrow interests of groups that have been excluded from the American mainstream.⁵ To break free of this parochialism, Daniel Aaron suggested in 1964 that the immigrant writer must “dehyphenate” himself and move out “from behind the minority barricade,” thereby allowing him to enter not just the “larger United States” but also the universal world of letters.⁶

Interest in immigrant and ethnic literature increased in the 1970s, fueled in part by the ethno-cultural movements that grew out of the civil rights movement of the preceding decade. Not insignificant, it was during this time that Rudolfo Anaya’s *Bless Me, Ultima* (1974) and Maxine Hong Kingston’s *Woman Warrior* (1976) were published, two books that would play a significant part in the development of Chicano and Asian American literature, respectively. For their part, critics called attention to the marginalization of ethnic literature from the canon and sought ways to correct it. Taking the first step by undertaking the task of literary recovery, editors Jeffrey Paul Chan, Frank Chin, Lawson Fusao Inada and Shawn Wong, for example, published *Aiiieeeee!: An Anthology of*

⁴ Thomas J. Ferraro, *Ethnic Passages: Literary Immigrants in Twentieth-Century America* (Chicago: The University of Chicago, Press, 1993), 2.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Daniel Aaron, “The Hyphenate Writer and American Letters,” *Smith Alumnae Quarterly* (July 1964): 215.

Asian-American Writers (1974), which featured the works of Filipino, Chinese and Japanese American authors like Carlos Bulosan (*America Is in the Heart*, 1946), Louis Chu (*Eat a Bowl of Tea*, 1961), John Okada (*No-No Boy*, 1957) and Hisaye Yamamoto (“Yoneko’s Earthquake,” 1951).⁷

Founded in 1973, *MELUS*, the Journal of the Society for the Multi-Ethnic Literature of the United States, became an important forum for scholarly criticism of African American, Native American, Chicano and Hispanic, Asian American and immigrant literatures of the United States. During this period, much of the scholarship revolved around the concept of ethnicity and focused on discrete groups, leading to the publication of works such as *Chicano Authors: Inquiry by Interview*, *Irish-American Fiction: Essays in Criticism*, *Jewish-American Literature: An Anthology*, and *The Italian-American Novel*.⁸

Taking a more comprehensive approach, Werner Sollors, in *Beyond Ethnicity* (1986) and *The Invention of Ethnicity* (1989), theorized that ethnicity is not a biological or heritable trait but rather an invented concept of identity, one that immigrants negotiate and “consent” to when they arrive in the United States.⁹ In *Through a Glass Darkly* (1987), William Boelhower took a similar anti-essentialist stance and argued that

⁷ Although the editors were later criticized for some of the stances they took, particularly in promoting an essentialist notion of “true” Asian American identity, the anthology was instrumental in bringing new life to texts that had been forgotten or had long been out of print.

⁸ Cited in Ferraro, 199. Juan Bruce-Novoa, *Chicano Authors: Inquiry by Interview* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1980); Daniel J. Casey and Robert E. Rhodes, eds., *Irish-American Fiction: Essays in Criticism* (New York: AMS, 1979); Abraham Chapman, ed., *Jewish-American Literature: An Anthology of Fiction, Poetry, Autobiography, and Criticism* (New York: New American Library, 1974); Rose Basile Green, *The Italian-American Novel: A Document of the Interaction of Two Cultures* (Rutherford, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1974).

⁹ Werner Sollors, *Beyond Ethnicity: Consent and Descent in American Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986); Werner Sollors, ed., *The Invention of Ethnicity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989).

ethnicity is not fixed or stable but rather constantly in flux.¹⁰ While tackling many of the same questions, Mary V. Dearborn's *Pocahontas's Daughters* (1986) is noteworthy for integrating gender into her analysis of ethnic literature.¹¹ Discerning a shared impulse to connect ethnic texts to established American literary traditions, Ferraro points out that all three critics "unveil common, often centuries-old rhetorical and narrative structures, including Puritan typologies, the Pocahontas myth, and Eurocentric mappings."¹²

Although early studies of ethnic literature certainly covered immigrant texts, the dominant emphasis that many critics placed on ethnicity compelled other scholars who were interested specifically in immigration to define and differentiate their object of study. A useful but rather broad category, the term "ethnic literature" tended to lump immigrant writing indiscriminately with African American, Native American and Chicano texts. And while immigrant and ethnic literature may exhibit overlapping themes and concerns, many scholars agree that the former is distinct from the latter in that it is guided by a central theme – the act of immigration. In other words, the fact of geographic relocation – leaving one's home country to come to the United States – is what distinguishes immigrant literature from other ethnic texts that depict the experiences of groups that, in contrast, have a long-established (if not native) historical presence in the United States.

Over the past few decades, literary critics have sought to refine the definition of immigrant/immigration literature, suggesting various formal features or thematic

¹⁰ William Boelhower, *Through a Glass Darkly: Ethnic Semiosis in American Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987).

¹¹ Mary V. Dearborn, *Pocahontas's Daughters: Gender and Ethnicity in American Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986).

¹² Ferraro, 5.

elements as necessary criteria for a work's inclusion into the literary category. In a 1981 essay published in *MELUS*, William Boelhower asserted that "defining the immigrant genre is an important critical task," one that has consequences for our understanding not just of literary texts but also of literary history.¹³ Noting how the genre "has been diffused under other kinds of novels" (i.e., the pastoral novel, the farm novel, the city novel), he proposed that the immigrant novel must be seen as a distinct genre of its own.¹⁴ According to Boelhower, the topic of immigration serves as the paradigmatic theme for the immigrant novel and determines which texts are to be included in or excluded from the genre. In his study, he outlines several conventions that structure the immigrant narrative: the journey, folklore, religion, memory, speech, customs, contact, acquisition and loss, etc. Boelhower observes that the particular manifestations of these conventions vary from text to text. Moreover, authors use and combine them in different ways. Despite such variations, Boelhower suggests that the genre does in fact have some essential elements, namely, protagonists must be foreign born and their reasons for immigrating must be expressed in the novel.¹⁵ Succinctly, he offers the following schematic framework for the immigrant novel: "An immigrant protagonist(s) [sic], representing an ethnic world view, comes to America with great expectations, and through a series of trials is led to reconsider them in terms of his final status."¹⁶

In addition to the work Boelhower has done, scholars of immigration fiction have noted other features that characterize the genre. They point out that although the corpus

¹³ William Boelhower, "The Immigrant Novel as Genre," *MELUS* 8.1 (1981): 3.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 3.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 6.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 5.

of U.S. immigration literature reflects a diversity of cultural and ethnic perspectives, the various works are linked together by their consideration of an enduring myth and their engagement of certain perennial tropes. Whether they regard it with an optimistic faith or a skeptical eye, novels about immigration invariably confront and grapple with the mythology of the American Dream. Relatedly, immigration novels almost always contend with the question of identity, often rehearsing the trope of immigrant cultural rebirth vis-à-vis the ritual of Americanization or the transformation from alien to American. Moreover, immigration narratives construct different forms of “symbolic kinship” as a means for conceptualizing the immigrant’s relationship to the nation or the national family.¹⁷

Beyond the formal and thematic considerations, however, the question of authorship inevitably arises in the process of defining the genre. In theorizing the immigrant novel, Boelhower examines works such as Henry Roth’s *Call It Sleep* (1934), Abraham Cahan’s *The Rise of David Levinsky* (1917), Willa Cather’s *O Pioneers* (1913) and *My Ántonia* (1917), Ole Rølvaag’s *Giants in the Earth* (1927), Upton Sinclair’s *The Jungle* (1906), and Pietro Di Donato’s *Christ in Concrete* (1939), among others. Because the topic of immigration serves as the principal basis for his definition of the genre, Boelhower does not deem it necessary to differentiate the writings of first-generation immigrant authors (Roth, Cahan and Rølvaag) from those of second- or later-generation

¹⁷ On the subject of Americanization as rebirth and the myth of the American Dream in immigration narratives, see: Thomas Ferraro, *Ethnic Passages*; Werner Sollors, *Beyond Ethnicity*; Gilbert H. Muller, *New Strangers in Paradise: The Immigrant Experience in Contemporary American Fiction* (Lexington, KY: The University Press of Kentucky, 1999); David Cowart, *Trailing Clouds: Immigrant Fiction in Contemporary America* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2006). I borrow the term “symbolic kinship” from Sollors (*Beyond Ethnicity*, 7).

US-born authors (Cather, Sinclair and Di Donato).¹⁸ Like Boelhower, many critics have embraced this broad conception of immigrant literature, allowing for the works of both immigrants and their descendants to be included in the genre. In one of the earlier studies of fiction dealing with urban immigrant life, David Fine, in 1977, looked at the literary production of immigrant and native-born authors during “the peak ghetto years” (1880-1920), when South and Eastern European immigrants flooded American cities.¹⁹

Included in his study are Abraham Cahan, Elias Tobenkin, Ezra Brudno, Mary Antin and Sydney Nyburg. In *Ethnic Passages: Literary Immigrants in Twentieth-Century America* (1993), Thomas Ferraro analyzes the works of Anzia Yezierska, Henry Roth, Henry Miller, Mario Puzo, and Maxine Hong Kingston, referring to all five as “immigrant writers” despite the fact that the last three were born in the United States.

The downplaying of the distinction between immigrant and native-born writers and between works written *by* immigrants and those written *about* immigrants is evident in many monographs and edited volumes dedicated to the study of immigrant literature. For example, Sari Grossman and Joan Schur’s *In a New Land: An Anthology of Immigrant Literature* (1994), Roberta Simone’s annotated bibliography *The Immigrant Experience in American Fiction* (1995), Alpana Sharma Knippling’s edited reference sourcebook *New Immigrant Literatures in the United States* (1996), Katherine Payant and Toby Rose’s edited collection of critical essays *The Immigrant Experience in North*

¹⁸ Critics have inconsistently applied the term “first-generation” to refer to both foreign-born immigrants and their US-born children. For the purposes of this dissertation, I use “first-generation” strictly to describe foreign-born individuals who actually immigrate to the United States. I consider US-born children of immigrants as belonging to the second generation; because they are born American citizens, I do not refer to them as immigrants.

¹⁹ David Fine, *The City, The Immigrant and American Fiction, 1880-1920* (Metuchen, NJ: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 1977), vi.

American Literature (1999), and Gilbert H. Muller's *New Strangers in Paradise* (1999) all demonstrate a broad and inclusive definition of immigrant literature.²⁰ Because they are interested in either recovering lost and forgotten writings or expanding the canon to include immigrant texts, the critics and editors tend to de-emphasize the generational differences between authors who actually emigrated from other countries and those who were born and grew up in the United States. For Simone, immigrant fiction at heart “tells the story of becoming American,” whether it is told by the first or fourth generation.²¹ Similarly, Muller, Knippling, Grossman and Schur, Payant and Rose do not disqualify the writings of later generations from the genre of immigrant literature, finding value in an author's representation of his or her forebears' experiences as strangers in a new land. In these critics' collections, Amy Tan is discussed in the same section as Louis Chu, an article on Paule Marshall appears alongside one about Jamaica Kincaid, and thematic threads in the works of Sandra Cisneros and Judith Ortiz Cofer are brought together.

Although many critics today continue to define immigrant literature on a thematic basis, some, like David Cowart and Nicolás Kanellos, are calling attention to and stressing the significance of generational perspective. In *Trailing Clouds: Immigrant Fiction in Contemporary America* (2006), Cowart focuses on what he calls “the new immigrant writing” by authors “who in recent years have come to this country, embraced

²⁰ Sari Grossman and Joan Brodsky Schur, eds., *In a New Land: An Anthology of Immigrant Literature* (Lincolnwood, IL: National Textbook Company, 1994); Roberta Simone, *The Immigrant Experience in American Fiction: An Annotated Bibliography* (Lanham, MD: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 1995); Alpana Sharma Knippling, ed., *New Immigrant Literatures in the United States: A Sourcebook to Our Multicultural Literary Heritage* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1996); Katherine Payant and Toby Rose, eds., *The Immigrant Experience in North American Literature*; Gilbert H. Muller, *New Strangers in Paradise*.

²¹ Simone, xvii, xx-xxi.

its culture, and penned substantial literary work in English.”²² In his study, he outlines some general features and motifs of immigrant fiction, some of which are similar to those earlier identified by Boelhower: fragmented narration, use of folktales, difficulties at school and with learning English, the immigrant’s struggle with psychological and cultural doubleness, the exploitation of immigrants by other immigrants, homesickness, eating disorders (especially in stories written by women), cultural and generational conflict between immigrant parents and US-born children, and the immigrant’s development and embrace of a new American identity.²³

Aside from these elements, however, Cowart sees immigrant fiction as the literary product specifically of the immigrant author. Unlike Ferraro who uses the term loosely, he reserves the designation of “immigrant writer” for those who actually immigrated to the United States. For him, the age at which an author arrived in the U.S. seems to matter little as long as he or she was born elsewhere. Included in his list of new immigrant writers are Julia Alvarez, Bharati Mukherjee, Ursula Hegi, Cristina Garcia, Chang-rae Lee, Edwidge Danticat, Jamaica Kincaid, Lan Cao, Mylène Dressler, Wendy Law-Yone and Junot Diaz.²⁴ Cowart separates these new immigrant authors from earlier arrivals like Yeziarska, Roth and Bulosan, who wrote during a very different cultural, social and historical moment. He also differentiates them from expatriates or exiles who

²² Cowart, 2.

²³ *Ibid.*, 7.

²⁴ Julia Alvarez was actually born in New York but lived in the Dominican Republic for the first ten years of her life before her family officially immigrated to the U.S. Bharati Mukherjee and Mylène Dressler immigrated as adults. Although Jamaica Kincaid continues to identify as an Antiguan citizen, choosing not to naturalize, she came to the U.S. at the age of 16 and has, for the most part, resided here ever since. The following indicates the author’s name and the age at which s/he immigrated to the America: Cristina Garcia, 2; Chang-rae Lee, 3; Edwidge Danticat, 12; Lan Cao, 13; Junot Diaz, ~6; Ursula Hegi, 19; Wendy Law-Yone, ~20s.

deliberately choose not to naturalize (e.g., Salman Rushdie and Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn). But more importantly, he wants to set them apart from US-born children of immigrants – writers like David Henry Hwang, Paule Marshall, Amy Tan and Maxine Hong Kingston, who have received much attention from critics and scholars in recent decades. While he praises the artistic accomplishments of these authors, he suggests that their representation of “the old country” is done “second hand.”²⁵ Unlike their (real) immigrant counterparts, US-born authors “must construct pre-diasporic settings through the myth-making memories of their immigrant parents.”²⁶ In delimiting the boundaries of “new immigrant writing,” Cowart seems at best to fall victim to the cult of authenticity or at worst to endorse it. Indeed, unless one believes that a writer who came to the United States at the age of two or three can conjure first-hand memories of the old country, it is hard to imagine that such a big difference could exist between native-born authors and those who immigrated at a very young age (e.g., Chang-rae Lee and Cristina Garcia). Nevertheless, Cowart seems to suggest that immigrant writers have special access to knowledge or insight that is otherwise out of reach for the American-born, stating, “Perhaps...we shall find the perceptions of immigrant writers ever so slightly more pristine than those of writers always already American.”²⁷

The suspicion that US-born authors’ imagination and depiction of immigration are somehow tainted is echoed by the writer Bharati Mukherjee, who herself immigrated as an adult and became a naturalized citizen at the age of forty-seven. For her, even those

²⁵ Cowart, 2.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

writers born in Asia but raised in the U.S. are already too far removed from the old world about which they write. Mukherjee laments that their stories are “too often hokey concoctions composed of family memory and brief visits to ancestral villages.”²⁸ Nicolás Kanellos would likely agree with this assessment. But taking an even more extreme position than Mukherjee and Cowart, Kanellos proposes that an author’s American upbringing in fact disqualifies his or her work from the category of immigrant writing. In *Hispanic Immigrant Literature: El Sueño del Retorno* (2011), Kanellos, like Mukherjee, casts a critical eye on “stories re-created from inherited family sagas or remembered from the time the authors themselves came to the United States as young children and became acculturated in the Metropolis.”²⁹ Composed by children of immigrants, these stories are deemed to be inadequate representations, lacking the “historical authenticity” of the Spanish-language novels written by those whom Kanellos considers “true Hispanic immigrants.”³⁰ In contrast to the inclusive view taken by most critics, his definition of immigrant literature is very narrow, encompassing only “literature written by immigrants in their native language.”³¹

In his book, Kanellos explains that immigrant literature “is neither a literature about immigrants written by native American writers nor the literature written by the children of immigrants, that is, writers who were born or socialized in the United States and write in English, regardless of their representation of family memories and

²⁸ Mukherjee, “Immigrant Writing: Give Us Your Maximalists!” *The New York Times*, 28 August 1988, BR29.

²⁹ Nicolás Kanellos, *Hispanic Immigrant Literature: El Sueño del Retorno* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2011), 3.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 3, 11.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 9.

experiences or even their firsthand accounts of coming to the United States as young children.”³² Like Cowart, Kanellos considers generational status an important factor in an individual’s designation as an immigrant writer. However, the two diverge on the issue of language. Whereas Cowart accepts English as the primary vehicle for “new immigrant writing,” Kanellos sees an author’s native (non-English) language as the defining criteria for determining what constitutes immigrant literature. As he puts it, “The choice of writing in a language other than English is in most cases the most important literary and ideological choice an immigrant author can make,” for language defines not only national identity but also a specific reader/audience.³³ Although Kanellos (citing Homi Bhabha) sees the use of native language as an oppositional stance that could challenge hegemonic discourses and deconstruct national myths,³⁴ his narrow and exclusive definition of immigrant literature suggests that immigrant writing cannot but exist except in a closed, self-contained world. Rarely addressing people outside of the community, Kanellos’ immigrant literature is literature written by immigrants, for immigrants.

Included in Kanellos’ study are texts such as *El sol de Texas* by Conrado Espinosa, *La factoría* by Gustavo Alemán Bolaños, *La carreta* by René Marqués, *Nunca entres por Miami* by Roberto Quesada, and *Odisea del Norte* by Mario Bencastro. And given his strict criteria for the genre, he dismisses the works of Julia Alvarez, Sandra Cisneros, Cristina Garcia, Oscar Hijuelos, Esmeralda Santiago, Junot Diaz and others

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid., 11.

³⁴ Ibid., 12.

whom he sees as “native Hispanic authors,” in other words, U.S.-born and American-raised English-language writers. Ironically, these are the very same authors that many other critics have identified as notable voices of late twentieth-century and contemporary immigrant fiction. Indeed, these Latino writers, along with their Asian American and Caribbean American counterparts, have come to stand for the “new immigrant literatures” of the United States. Set apart by their non-European/non-white ethnic and racial identification, they also represent a generation of writers who came of age during a new era of immigration in the U.S.

Whether linked to the geographical dislocation of peoples brought about by the Second World War or tied to the liberalization of immigration policy effected by the 1965 Hart-Celler Act, the new era has seen the flourishing of new immigrant writing which has caught the critical attention of scholars.³⁵ In contrast to earlier studies that concentrated on the literary output of European immigrants who came to the U.S. in the late 1800s and early 1900s (e.g., Italians, Jews, Irish, etc.), scholarship from the mid-1990s onward has tended to focus on the works of authors who represent groups that have been racially marginalized and deemed perpetually foreign or “other,” unable to be fully assimilated into mainstream (white) America. This is, in many ways, a direct result of the late 20th-century ethnic writers boom that changed the landscape of American fiction. A literary phenomenon that began in the 1980s and continued well into the late 1990s, the “boom” launched the careers of authors like Amy Tan, Gish Jen, Jessica

³⁵ In terms of historical delineation, Alpana Sharma Knippling, for example, uses World War II as the historical marker for her edited volume. Gilbert Muller begins his study with postwar fiction but also stresses the significance of the Immigration Act of 1965 in the history of immigrant literary production. In their study, Katherine Payant and Toby Rose highlight the demographic differences of the pre- and post-1965 immigration waves.

Hagedorn, Chang-rae Lee, Sandra Cisneros, Julia Alvarez, Cristina Garcia, Junot Diaz and Edwidge Danticat, among others. The increased presence of these new voices was largely the result of the publishing industry's response to the multicultural movement that was gaining ground in U.S. culture and society. Calling for political and cultural recognition and inclusion of ethnic minorities in all levels of public discourse, multiculturalism sought to re-imagine, if not remake, the United States into a nation where differences are tolerated and diversity is celebrated. Moreover, the powerful emergence of female authors during this period triggered significant interest in women's experiences of immigration. Surveying the field in 1999, Payant wrote, "today it appears that of the immigrant writers currently being studied, women authors outnumber the men."³⁶ Similarly, Heike Paul observes, "women's immigrant writing has re-invigorated the genre of immigrant literature."³⁷

The diverse experiences of Asian, Hispanic, Caribbean and (more generally) Third World immigrants, coupled with the complex cultural, historical and political realities they face have challenged critics to take more nuanced approaches to their study of new immigrant literatures. Armed with a host of critical tools and analytical concepts drawn from race and ethnic studies, postcolonial theory, gender studies, feminist and queer theory and other fields, literary scholars are examining how race, class and gender, along with the forces of colonialism, diaspora and globalization have shaped the contours of immigrant life in twentieth- and twenty-first century America, as depicted by contemporary immigrant authors and their US-born/raised counterparts. In addition to

³⁶ Payant, "Introduction," xvi.

³⁷ Heike Paul, *Mapping Migration: Women's Writing and the American Immigrant Experience from the 1950s to the 1990s* (Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag C. Winter, 1999), 1.

the studies already referenced above, the following books and articles represent a further sampling of the scholarship critics have produced during the past two decades: *Mapping Migration: Women's Writing and the American Immigrant Experience from the 1950s to the 1990s* (1999) by Heike Paul; "Upward Mobility in the Postcolonial Era: Kincaid, Mukherjee, and the Cosmopolitan *Au Pair*" (1994) by Bruce Robbins; "Outside in: Latino/a un-bordering in US fiction" (2008) by A. Robert Lee; *Transcultural Women of Late-Twentieth-Century U.S. American Literature: First-Generation Migrants from Islands and Peninsulas* (2005) by Pauline T. Newton; *Migrant Sites: America, Place, and Diaspora Literatures* (2009) by Dalia Kandiyoti.³⁸

Interestingly, the more current theories and critical approaches critics have used to analyze new immigrant writing are now also being applied to earlier immigrant texts, bringing new insight into these works. For example, Jessica G. Rabin uses the concept of "multiple subject positioning" (an idea similar to the theory of intersectionality) in her book *Surviving the Crossing: (Im)migration, Ethnicity, and Gender in Willa Cather, Gertrude Stein, and Nella Larsen* (2004). In *The Literature of Immigration and Racial Formation: Becoming White, Becoming Other, Becoming American in the Late Progressive Era* (2004), Linda Joyce Brown draws from critical race theory and critical

³⁸ Heike Paul, *Mapping Migration*; Bruce Robbins, "Upward Mobility in the Postcolonial Era: Kincaid, Mukherjee, and the Cosmopolitan *Au Pair*," *Modernism/Modernity* 1.2 (1994): 133-151; A. Robert Lee, "Outside in: Latino/a un-bordering in US fiction" in *American Fiction of the 1990s*, ed. Jay Prosser (London: Routledge, 2008), 17-30; Pauline T. Newton, *Transcultural Women of Late-Twentieth-Century U.S. American Literature: First-Generation Migrants from Islands and Peninsulas* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2005); Dalia Kandiyoti, *Migrant Sites: America, Place, and Diaspora Literatures* (Hanover, NH: Dartmouth College Press, 2009).

whiteness studies to interrogate constructions of identity in the works of Mary Antin, Willa Cather and Sui Sin Far.³⁹

Even as the corpus of criticism on U.S. immigrant literature continues to grow and demonstrate different and multi-faceted approaches, the depth, richness and complexities of immigration lay the field open to further exploration. One aspect of the immigrant experience that has been largely overlooked by literary critics is immigration status. Inspired in many ways by Mae Ngai's historical study of the illegal alien and illegal immigration in the United States, the present dissertation expands the scholarship on immigration literature by examining the ways in which authors treat the question of status, particularly illegality, in their representation of the immigrant experience.

Subjects of Possibility: Legal Aliens in Immigration Fiction

The three novels examined in this dissertation – *Jasmine*, *Typical American* and *Odyssey to the North* – share a characteristic that sets them apart from a great majority of other U.S. immigration fiction. Unlike most immigration stories, each of these novels features an illegal alien as the central character of the work. Whereas the eponymous heroine of *Jasmine* and the protagonist of *Odyssey to the North* are undocumented from beginning to end, the main character of *Typical American* enters the country legally but falls out of status in the early chapters of the book. That Bharati Mukherjee, Mario Bencastro and Gish Jen would each cast the illegal alien as the hero of her or his novel is

³⁹ Jessica G. Rabin, *Surviving the Crossing: (Im)migration, Ethnicity, and Gender in Willa Cather, Gertrude Stein, and Nella Larsen* (New York: Routledge, 2004); Linda Joyce Brown, *The Literature of Immigration and Racial Formation: Becoming White, Becoming Other, Becoming American in the Late Progressive Era* (New York: Routledge, 2004).

rather remarkable, especially given the stigma attached to undocumented immigrants and the controversy surrounding illegal immigration in the United States.

Since their publication, *Jasmine* and *Typical American* have both received considerable attention from literary scholars. Yet in each case, critics rarely address the question of illegality that the book raises, let alone acknowledge or even notice the illegal status of its protagonist. Written by an author less well-known in the American mainstream, *Odyssey to the North* has garnered little scholarly attention. Ironically, however, reviewers and the few critics who have written about the book generally call attention to the hero's illegality and the hardships he goes through as an undocumented immigrant. To be sure, the racial dimensions of illegal immigration – a topic I will discuss later in this chapter – help to explain the different response to Bencastro's work as compared to Mukherjee's and Jen's. For while Asians continue to be perceived as perpetual foreigners in U.S. society, Latinos have become the group perniciously stereotyped as illegal immigrants from the mid-twentieth century onwards.

If literary critics have largely ignored the issue of status in immigration fiction, what might account for such disregard? On the surface, we might view this simply as scholarly oversight. However, if we look closer, we might see that the problem may in fact lie at the source. That is, legal status seems like a non-issue because most immigration stories take the legality of their characters for granted. Put another way, if immigration narratives do not raise the question of status because their protagonists are presumed to be legal, then critics are also less likely to take note of and address the issue when discussing the texts. Thus, this dissertation aims to accomplish a dual intervention. On the one hand, it calls attention to the assumptions about legal status that underlie

immigration novels. On the other hand, by initiating a conversation about status, this study attempts to address what I perceive is a gap in the existing literary criticism on immigration fiction.

From an historical perspective, authors of immigration fiction may not feel the need to specify the status of their characters because the problem of illegality would not have been part of the immigrant experience with which they are familiar and about which they write. This is especially true for early 20th-century Western Europeans whose national origins not only made them “desirable” immigrants but also accorded them legal status. But even the “less-desirable” immigrants from Southern and Eastern Europe who were relegated to ethnic ghettos upon their arrival in the U.S. eventually found themselves embraced as members of American society.⁴⁰ Because they were not as subject to deportation as non-white immigrants, it is understandable that writers from these communities did not address such issues in their work. For their part, immigrant authors of the post-1965 era also have reasonable cause for featuring only legal characters in their stories. Although unauthorized entry had become a central problem in U.S. immigration in the late 20th-century, many immigrants from the third world, in fact, came legally. As such, their works might not necessarily explore the experience of being undocumented either.

We can also read immigrant writers’ inclination to feature legal as opposed to undocumented protagonists from another standpoint. According to Thomas Ferraro, a primary purpose of immigration narratives is to facilitate an author’s “movement out of

⁴⁰ I discuss this issue further later in this chapter.

immigrant confines into the larger world of letters.”⁴¹ To accomplish this, writers have portrayed the immigrant experience in ways that are accessible to mainstream American readers. Language, of course, plays a crucial part in this process. As Kanellos has shown in the context of Hispanic literature, immigrant authors who write in Spanish imagine their ethnic enclaves and communities as their primary readers.⁴² In contrast, Sanford Sternlicht points out that for early Jewish writers whose primary language was not English, “choosing to write in the language of their adopted home” demonstrated their attempt “to reach out to a wider public.”⁴³

Although some critics have suggested that the desire to break into the mainstream has tended to produce stories with strong assimilationist drives, Doris Sommer reminds us that “minority” authors are not always out to please readers, nor are they willing to divulge all their “secrets.” Withholding information and employing “strategic refusals,” they impose “limits of intimacy” between the author and the reader.⁴⁴ Immigrant authors, too, might deploy such tactics in their representation of immigrant experiences. Thus, while the question of assimilation invariably gets raised in immigration narratives, each author deals with it in his or her way – some embrace it, others reject it, still others express ambivalence towards it. But regardless of how one feels about assimilation, many of the immigration novels that have gained canonical status are those that feature

⁴¹ Ferraro, 8.

⁴² Kanellos, 8.

⁴³ Sanford Sternlicht, *The Tenement Saga: The Lower East Side and Early Jewish American Writers* (Madison, WI: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2004), 61.

⁴⁴ Doris Sommer, *Proceed with Caution, When Engaged by Minority Writing in the Americas* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), xv, x.

legal immigrants, perhaps because they depict a familiar experience that speaks to the widest audience.

In the case of authors who seek to reach a broader public, their immigration narratives often bear the characteristics of what Mary Louise Pratt calls “autoethnography” or “autoethnographic expression.”⁴⁵ Autoethnography is a product of the “contact zone,” which Pratt defines as “the space of colonial encounters, the space in which peoples geographically and historically separated come into contact with each other and establish ongoing relations, usually involving coercion, radical inequality, and intractable conflict.”⁴⁶ The relations established and negotiated in immigration are clearly different from those of a colonial or imperial enterprise. But Pratt’s notion of “contact zone” is relevant to immigration in that the presence of immigrants in the United States necessarily transforms the country, for all intents and purposes, into a kind of contact zone. The United States is a contact zone in that it becomes a space where peoples from different cultures and backgrounds come into contact with one another. Thus, it is useful to think of immigration literature as a product of “encounter” in which an immigrant comes into contact with American culture and society.

Immigration narratives, then, may be read as a kind of autoethnographic text that emerges from the contact zone that is the United States. In the context of her study of travel writing, Pratt describes autoethnographic expression as “instances in which colonized subjects undertake to represent themselves in ways that engage with the colonizer’s own terms.” She notes that “autoethnography involves partial collaboration

⁴⁵ Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 7.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 6.

with and appropriation of the idioms of the conqueror.” It is important to remember here that engagement, collaboration and appropriation do not mean capitulation. Similar to Ferraro’s assertion that immigration narratives help authors move into the larger world of letters, Pratt argues that autoethnographic texts often “constitute a group’s point of entry into metropolitan literate culture.”⁴⁷ Autoethnography, in other words, is a strategic tool used by writers in the periphery to make inroads into the core.

To be entirely clear, I am by no means saying that all immigration literature is autoethnographic. However, many immigration texts do exhibit a kind of autoethnographic impulse whereby the immigrant writer attempts to represent her experiences and her ethnic community in ways such that they can be more easily understood by mainstream American readers. After all, notwithstanding the limits of intimacy they might impose, the primary goal of writers is still to communicate. To that end, some authors take great care to explain certain cultural practices that would be unfamiliar to readers coming from a different culture. When authors include phrases and expressions in a language other than English, translations of these phrases and words are often included in the text. Some even include lengthy glossaries at the back of the book; these glossaries serve as a kind of reference dictionary that gives English translations or definitions of non-English words used in the book.

From a practical standpoint, immigration narratives allow authors to provide readers a glimpse into the culture and experiences of an alien group. Again, the picture is never entirely complete. And if the goal is in part to achieve entry and acceptance into mainstream American culture and society, then it stands to reason that authors would

⁴⁷ Ibid., 7, 9.

favor immigrant characters that would not trigger any sort of anti-immigrant response from the reader. This means featuring sympathetic immigrants whose legality is so unquestioned that their status does not even warrant mentioning. Indeed, for post-1965 authors writing during the 1980s and '90s, a time when public outcry over illegal immigration was on the rise, it seems an especially judicious act not to stir up controversy by heroizing undocumented aliens. In a way, we can read such a move as clever and calculated. For it shows that immigrant authors have learned, if not mastered, the rules of the game such that they are now active players in it.

Moreover, even as immigration fiction introduces mainstream readers to “ethnic” cultures and communities, it can simultaneously perform political work by counteracting negative images and serve as a potential corrective to misconceptions. In their artistic endeavors, immigrant authors, of course, are tasked with the difficult job of representing the immigrant experience without reinforcing existing stereotypes. For no other group does this hold truest than Mexican American writers who have to combat the predominant image of the Mexican immigrant as an illegal alien. One can speculate whether or not individual Chicano writers purposely avoid depicting Mexicans as illegals in order to counter stereotypes. However, one need only survey the most popular works by authors like Rudolfo Anaya, Rolando Hinojosa, Sandra Cisneros and Ana Castillo to see that illegal immigration has not been a predominant theme in the stories of Chicano writers. As discussed in the introduction, the dominant figures that emerge in Chicano literature are the migrant laborer and the U.S.-born protagonist of the Mexican American coming-of-age story.

Even taking into account the broader corpus of immigration fiction, one would be hard-pressed to come up with an extensive list of stories, let alone full-length novels, that revolve around illegal immigrants. In my own study of immigration literature, it was precisely the fact that *Jasmine*, *Typical American* and *Odyssey to the North* seemed like anomalies that prompted me to take a closer look at them and eventually led me to write the present dissertation exploring illegal aliens in immigration fiction. Indeed, examining illegal immigrants as figures in literature compelled me to read immigration narratives in an entirely different light. For it raised broader questions about the ways in which legal status influences and shapes the various features of immigration stories.

That immigrant protagonists have *legal* status proves to be critical in immigration novels, even though it rarely gets acknowledged. This is evident with regard to the most basic feature of the genre – the immigrant’s coming to America.⁴⁸ The journey to the United States may be difficult or uneventful, a perilous voyage full of twists and turns or a simple direct flight to an American city. It is sometimes presented at the beginning of the story and at other times recalled in flashback sequences. But more often than not, authors treat the immigrant’s arrival with little more than a perfunctory description. In some cases, the protagonist simply steps off a boat or a plane and goes on her merry way. Although in the greater scheme of things the arrival might seem like a minor detail, it offers an important clue with regard to the immigrant’s status. In immigration narratives, an easy entry typically suggests that the protagonist is a legal alien, for one must have valid documents in order to pass through. But as we shall see later in our discussion of

⁴⁸ Boelhower, “The Immigrant Novel as Genre,” 5-6.

Jasmine and *Odyssey to the North*, this is hardly the case for Jasmine and Calixto who must sneak their way into the U.S.

The uncomplicated arrival is evident, for example, in Edwidge Danticat's *Breath, Eyes, Memory*. In the novel, the young Sophie Caco boards an airplane in Port-au-Prince, Haiti, falls asleep during the flight and awakens in New York. Accompanied by an airline attendant, she steps off the plane, "[walks] down a long passageway," rushes past "different lines without stopping" and meets her mother at the airport's arrival lobby.⁴⁹ Riding in a taxi headed for Brooklyn, she begins her new life in the United States. While Danticat's novel is far from a happy American Dream story, filled as it is with physical and psychological trauma, the ease with which Sophie passes through the airport betrays the unacknowledged fact that this immigrant, at the very least, need not worry about getting deported.

Indeed, similar scenes of uncomplicated arrivals can be found in novels that feature protagonists who have legal status. In these cases, if the reader assumes that the immigrant is legal because the text does not indicate otherwise, the novel usually proves that the assumption is in fact true. In the opening of Jamaica Kincaid's *Lucy*, we see the eponymous heroine on her first night in America riding in a car, on her way to New York City from the airport.⁵⁰ Her arrival is so commonplace that we are not in the slightest bit led to wonder about her status. In Cristina Garcia's *Dreaming in Cuban*, the narrator likewise recounts Lourdes' journey in a very straightforward manner.⁵¹ She leaves Cuba

⁴⁹ Edwidge Danticat, *Breath, Eyes, Memory* (New York: Soho Press, 1994), 39.

⁵⁰ Jamaica Kincaid, *Lucy* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1990), 3.

⁵¹ Cristina Garcia, *Dreaming in Cuban* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1992), 69.

and simply arrives in Miami where she meets her husband. From there Lourdes begins her life in the United States, ultimately settling in Buffalo, New York. Unlike Lucy and Lourdes, Mai, the protagonist in Lan Cao's *Monkey Bridge*, stops over several cities before she reaches America. Taking "the usual charted course, the course for tourists, the course for business people," she boards a Pan Am flight from Vietnam and makes her way through Manila, Guam, Honolulu, and Dallas before finally reaching her destination in Hartford, Connecticut, where she starts her American life.⁵²

To be sure, the lives of Lucy (a domestic worker from Antigua), Lourdes (a Cuban political exile) and Mai (a Vietnamese refugee) all take different turns once they are in the United States. And while their experiences are ineluctably shaped by their political, economic and personal histories, they all nonetheless share a common ground. They all come to America as immigrants with legal status, a status that unburdens them of the threat of immediate expulsion. As legal aliens, they have the freedom to forge new paths and explore more freely the possibilities available to them by their recently adopted country.

What happens after the arrival, of course, is another matter. For that is the moment when the immigrant truly comes face to face with America, when her expectations inevitably collide with her lived experiences. Authors of immigration fiction routinely depict life in America – particularly the early years – as difficult and trying times. It is not uncommon, for instance, for immigrant protagonists to feel homesick as a result of being in an unfamiliar culture. Forced to deal with discrimination and prejudice, they feel alienated from American society and become nostalgic for the

⁵² Lan Cao, *Monkey Bridge* (New York: Viking Penguin, 1997), 94.

country they left behind. But that nostalgia tends to be countered by a hope and belief in a world of new possibilities. Indeed, it is precisely during moments of struggle that immigrants put the myth of the American Dream to the test.

As literary scholars point out, the American Dream is an enduring, if inescapable theme in immigration novels. In the long tradition of immigration fiction, the myth has been both affirmed and questioned by authors who have sought to portray the promise and the perils of American life. And while more recent works have come to reflect a more ambivalent attitude towards the American Dream, the quintessential immigrant success story extolling the myth remains perhaps the most culturally and politically potent because it affirms for readers the belief that the United States is still a place where anyone can “make it.”

For protagonists in immigration novels, fulfillment of the American Dream or “making it” often means achieving upward social mobility. Published in 1925, Anzia Yeziarska’s *Bread Givers* provides an illustrative example of the immigrant success story. Told from the first-person point of view, the novel traces the coming-of-age of Sara Smolinsky, a young girl raised in the Jewish immigrant community in the Lower East Side of New York. Although the book does not depict scenes of the family’s relocation, the force of immigration is very much present in the novel, shaping Sara’s early life. In the opening chapter, we see the family struggling to make ends meet and facing the threat of eviction. The landlord calls them “dirty immigrants,” frustrated that the Smolinkys, once again, are unable to pay rent.⁵³

⁵³ Anzia Yeziarska, *Bread Givers* (New York: Persea Books, 1925), 17.

Sara feels oppressed by her family's poverty, a condition that brings her "burning shame."⁵⁴ Desiring independence and a way out of the family's miserable situation, she frees herself from the patriarchal control of her father's hand. She refuses to accept the same fate that befell her sisters, whose loveless marriages were arranged by their father for financial gain. Instead, Sara leaves her family and community to attend college and pursue her dream of becoming a teacher. While in school, Sara works hard at her studies and takes a job ironing clothes. Her hard work pays off. She finishes college and achieves her dream of becoming a teacher. Like other immigration novels, *Bread Givers* shows that gains often come with losses. For Sara, becoming an independent, educated woman comes at a high price. It means losing one's family and giving up on romantic love. For Sara, however, the rewards seem to outweigh the sacrifices.

Sara's rise from poverty to middle class is emblematic of the immigrant's American Dream. Linking the concept of full personhood to economic and educational success, she finally sees herself "changed into a person" when returns to New York, a college graduate ready to begin her teaching career.⁵⁵ Indeed, her new life stands in sharp relief against her humble beginnings characterized by destitution, hunger and want. In a rather telling scene toward the end of the novel, Sara walks down Fifth Avenue clutching a checkbook with a thousand dollars in her account. She thinks to herself: "I could buy anything now. Anything. I could begin my career as a teacher as well dressed as any of them. The dark night of poverty was over. I had fought my way up into the

⁵⁴ Ibid., 2.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 237.

sunshine of plenty.”⁵⁶ Consistent with the ideology of the American Dream, Sara measures her success in material terms. Her confidence flows from knowing that she can buy anything she wants. She sees herself fitting in with the other teachers, looking the part and being well dressed as they are.

For Sara whose life is an indisputable immigrant success story, poverty is now relegated to the past. What she sees is a bright and sunny future for herself, a future where she can climb even higher heights. Testifying to the myth of the American Dream, she makes the following declaration: “I, Sara Smolinsky, had done what I had set out to do. I was now a teacher in the public schools. And this was but the first step in the ladder of my new life. I was only at the beginning of things. The world outside was so big and vast. Now I’ll have the leisure and the quiet to go on and on, higher and higher.”⁵⁷

Deployed as a common trope in immigration novels, the myth of the American Dream and its promise of upward social mobility suggests an image of American society that is both democratic and meritocratic. For the basic premise of the myth is that anyone, regardless of one’s background or modest beginnings, can achieve one’s goals and become successful through persistence and hard work. Inspiring as it may be, the individualistic, up-from-your-bootstraps narrative tends, however, to obscure the role that others play in one’s success. In his book *Upward Mobility and the Common Good*, Bruce Robbins demonstrates that the rags-to-riches hero never truly “makes it” on his own, for

⁵⁶ Ibid., 238.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 241.

his success is often only achieved with the help of others.⁵⁸ But the upward mobility story hides more than just the generous external helping hand. In a narrative tradition where success is measured in proportion to the distance traversed between one's humble origins and one's accomplishments, pre-existing privileges tend also to be downplayed or concealed.

Where upward mobility figures into the immigration narrative, legal status is an unacknowledged privilege that enables some immigrant characters to get closer to attaining the American Dream. By calling attention to the advantages of having legal status, I do not mean to play into the game of “one-downsmanship” or a “race to the bottom,” where illegal aliens end up the biggest “winners” because they have a steeper mountain to climb. To be sure, legal status does not guarantee success. In fact, even citizens with full rights can be shut out of the American Dream. But in terms of the immigration novel, I suggest that legal status opens up the narrative possibility for upward mobility for the immigrant protagonist. Put more broadly, legal status affects the direction that an immigration novel can take. Like Sara Smolinsky, legal immigrants in fiction are able to pursue educational opportunities and obtain better paying jobs that facilitate social mobility. As I will show in my discussion of Gish Jen's *Typical American*, Ralph's socio-economic prospects take a significant turn for the better when he regains his legal status. In contrast, Calixto's social status in Mario Bencastro's *Odyssey to the North* remains interminably stagnant, stuck as he is in the few low-wage jobs he can get as an undocumented immigrant.

⁵⁸ Bruce Robbins, *Upward Mobility and the Common Good* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007).

In the same way that legal status can influence the trajectory of an immigration narrative vis-à-vis a protagonist's social mobility and attainment of the American Dream, it also impacts her transformation into and self-conception as an American. As literary critics point out, the question of American identity is a recurrent motif in immigration fiction.⁵⁹ Whether they embrace the transformation wholeheartedly or approach it reluctantly, immigrant characters are often compelled to negotiate what it means to be American and to navigate the process by which one becomes American. In immigration novels, the question of American identity is predominantly cast in cultural terms. This typically plays out in the immigrant's desire for or resistance to assimilation. In stories that feature characters across a generational divide, older immigrants tend to cling more to their "old world" values while their younger descendants are more likely to adopt American ways. These conventions can be observed in Anzia Yezierska's *Bread Givers*, Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club* and Edwidge Datincat's *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, which incorporate generational conflict and portray competing attitudes towards assimilation in their plot.

But regardless of his or her generation, the immigrant who is able to fashion an American self is usually the one who finds contentment. In fact, as David Cowart observes, American identity eventually becomes a source of empowerment for the immigrant protagonist.⁶⁰ Adopting a new identity and acculturating to American society can mean the difference between survival and demise. The immigrant couple in Cristina Garcia's *Dreaming in Cuban* illustrates this idea very well. Moving to the United States,

⁵⁹ See Werner Sollors, *Beyond Ethnicity*; David Cowart, *Trailing Clouds*; Gilbert H. Muller, *New Strangers in Paradise*.

⁶⁰ Cowart, 7.

Rufino fails to adapt to the American way of life and feels lost in New York. As his wife observes, Rufino “could not be transplanted.” Consequently, he leads a “diminished” life in America. Miserable in the present, he “only looks alive when he talks about the past, about Cuba.” Lourdes, on the other hand, embraces all that is American. She dresses patriotically in red, white and blue and even names her business the Yankee Doodle Bakery. She sees immigration as a positive force in her life, for it has “redefined her.” Lourdes “welcomes her adopted language” of English because it offers her “possibilities for reinvention.”⁶¹

While the forging of an American identity does go hand-in-hand with assimilation, the heavy emphasis that authors place on the immigrant’s cultural transformation has the potential to overshadow the legal and political dimensions of what it means to be an American. If conventional immigration fiction rehearses a trajectory that begins with “immigrant” and ends with “American,” it implicitly privileges a subject who, at least in principle, can actually become a member of American society. In this way, immigration novels mirror the normative process of naturalization, which makes possible the metamorphosis from immigrant to citizen and accomplishes the alien’s legal and political inclusion into the nation. The iconic immigrant in both the assimilation story and the citizenship narrative is the legal alien.

By featuring stories of assimilation, immigration novels perform cultural work in the service of American exceptionalism. On one level, the immigrant’s desire to assimilate reaffirms the notion that the United States is choice-worthy, a nation that many want to be part of. It also supports the belief that America, as a liberal democracy, is a

⁶¹ Garcia, 144, 73, 129, 138.

consent-based regime; in other words, those who live in the United States are people who intentionally choose to come here.⁶² On another level, the immigrant's successful assimilation lends force to the idea that America is "a nation of immigrants," a country that welcomes and accepts people from all over the world. But as will be shown throughout this dissertation, exceptionalist political culture favors the legal alien who has a legitimate path to citizenship and who can claim not only a cultural but also a legal and a political identity as an American. For in contrast to the assimilated legal immigrant who bolsters American exceptionalism, the illegal alien represents an unsettling force that poses a threat to the principle of consent and casts doubt on the inclusiveness of immigrant America.

If authors devote significantly more time exploring the cultural rather than the legal/political aspects of the immigrant's transformation into an American, it is because their characters, as legal immigrants, experience a relatively uncomplicated process of naturalization. For example, in *How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents*, Julia Alvarez takes just two paragraphs to describe how the family gains their American citizenship.

For three-going-on-four years Mami and Papi were on green cards, and the four of us shifted from foot to foot, waiting to go home. Then Papi went down for a trial visit, and a revolution broke out, a minor one, but still.

He came back to New York reciting the Pledge of Allegiance, and saying, "I am given up, Mami! It is no hope for the Island. I will become *un dominican-york*." So, Papi raised his right hand and swore to defend the Constitution of the United States, and we were here to stay.⁶³

⁶² Bonnie Honig, *Democracy and the Foreigner* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 75.

⁶³ Julia Alvarez, *How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents* (New York: Plume, 1992), 107.

In this scene, told from the point of view of the children, the Garcia family goes from green card holders to naturalized citizens in a quick and seemingly effortless fashion. One minute they are shifting from foot to foot, still straddling the line between the Dominican Republic and the United States. The next minute, they are “here to stay,” feet firmly planted on American soil. Even in its brevity, the scene encapsulates and reinscribes the ideology of American exceptionalism. Fed up with the volatile situation back home and having lost hope for his fatherland, Papi deliberately chooses the United States over the Dominican Republic. In a reenactment of the ritual of consent, he participates in the naturalization ceremony and pledges allegiance to his newly adopted country, swearing to defend its laws and its democratic ideals.

If the Garcias have little trouble becoming full-fledged Americans, it is due to the fact that naturalization and citizenship are readily available to them as documented immigrants. Later in the novel, we learn that a fellowship was arranged for Mr. Garcia, who is a doctor. This sponsorship not only allows the family to escape the political turmoil in the Dominican Republic; more importantly, it enables them to come to the United States as legal immigrants.⁶⁴ As permanent residents with green cards, they have security in knowing that they cannot be deported while they wait out the trouble back home, which they do for four years. But having decided to remain in the United States, their legal status in effect also becomes their ticket to American citizenship.

That Mr. Garcia is able to visit the Dominican Republic and return to the United States without any trouble speaks to an often taken-for-granted privilege that is enjoyed

⁶⁴ The fellowship is arranged by Mr. Fanning, an American doctor and friend of the family. When viewed in light of Bruce Robbins’ work on upward mobility, we might read Dr. Fanning as a kind of benefactor who makes possible this immigrant story.

only by legal immigrants and citizens. In the past couple of decades, more and more immigration novels have taken into account the transnational dynamics of immigration patterns in a globalized world. In these stories, the geographical mobility that legal status affords goes unacknowledged even though it plays a critical part in the lives of immigrant characters who shuttle back and forth between the United States and their country of origin. In fact, unencumbered movement across borders is essential to a recurring narrative trope in late 20th and early 21st century immigration novels – the immigrant’s return to the homeland.

Authors such as Julia Alvarez, Cristina Garcia and Edwidge Danticat all have used the trope of the return as a means for the immigrant protagonist to rediscover her heritage, to confront a trauma from the past, or to work through her cultural doubleness and make sense of her identity. In Alvarez’s *Garcia Girls*, for example, Yolanda returns to the Dominican Republic hoping to find out if the country she left twenty-nine years earlier can provide an end to her search for home, a place where she belongs. An alter ego for the author, Yolanda is herself a writer. Aptly nicknamed “Yoyo,” she struggles with cultural duality, oscillating between her Dominican and American selves. As David Cowart suggests, Yolanda “yearn[s] for a return to the natal shore, an end to the furcation of identity.”⁶⁵ Yolanda’s 1989 visit, which opens the novel, however, is not her first time back. Later in the book we learn that she and her sisters were sent back to “the Island” every summer, supposedly so that they “wouldn’t lose touch with *la familia*” but in reality so that they would marry “homeland boys” and not be “lost” to America.⁶⁶ But

⁶⁵ Cowart, 45.

⁶⁶ Alvarez, 109.

this latest trip is different from her previous visits, for this time “Yolanda is not sure she’ll be going back.”⁶⁷ Hoping to find a resolution, an end to her desultory wandering that has included “too many stops on the road,” she wishes the Island will “turn out to be my home.”⁶⁸

For Yolanda, the return to the Island means a return to the site of trauma. Moving in reverse chronology, the end of the book takes us back to the beginning of Yolanda’s story, before the family immigrated to the United States. She recalls an incident in which she, as a young girl, takes a helpless kitten from its mother. The figure of the black mother cat haunts her even in her adult life, reminding her of her cruel deed. But the irony of the story is that Yolanda herself becomes like the kitten she abused. In the same way she takes the little cat from its mother, “she herself will be taken from the motherland.”⁶⁹ In the novel, then, immigration creates a psychic wound for Yolanda, “the violation that lies at the center of [her] art.”⁷⁰ Like the kitten yearning to return to its mother, she goes back to the Dominican Republic hoping to find closure to the psychological trauma brought on by her initial separation from her homeland.

The immigrant’s return to confront demons of the past also figures powerfully in Edwidge Danticat’s *Breath, Eyes, Memory*. After growing up in Haiti in the care of her aunt, Sophie moves to New York as an adolescent to reunite with her mother. Over the course of the story, we learn that Martine, Sophie’s mother, immigrated to the United States in order to escape a painful past. As a teenager, Martine had been raped, and

⁶⁷ Ibid., 7.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 11.

⁶⁹ Cowart, 45.

⁷⁰ Alvarez, 290.

Sophie was the result of that violent act. Like her mother, Sophie is also a victim of sexual violation, but not from rape. In the United States, the legacy of sexual trauma in her family continues in the form of the virginity test, an oppressive manifestation of “our mothers’ obsession with keeping us pure and chaste.”⁷¹ All the women in her family have suffered it: her mother Martine, her aunt Atie, her grandmother Ife, and Sophie herself. Later in the novel, both Sophie and Martine return to Haiti, where they both confront the source of their traumas.

The novel concludes by presenting two drastically different ways of dealing with one’s damaged personal history. In a tragic turn, Martine commits suicide, which is the only way she could free herself from the nightmare of her past. Sophie’s path is more hopeful. Instead of running away from Haiti to escape the source of trauma, she returns there to make peace with her mother’s rape and the family’s legacy of sexual oppression. In the end, it is Sophie’s determination to break the cycle of oppression with her own daughter Brigitte that offers a glimmer of hope for the future. In a ritual meant to free herself from the hold of her abuser, she writes her mother’s name on a piece of paper which she then burns. Resolved to put an end to the family’s history of abuse, Sophie concludes: “It was up to me to avoid my turn in the fire. It was up to me to make sure that my daughter never slept with ghosts, never lived with nightmares, and never had *her* name burnt in the flames.”⁷²

While Sophie’s return to Haiti facilitates the healing of a psychological wound, Pilar wants to go back to Cuba to make sense of her identity. Part of the youngest

⁷¹ Danticat, 154.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 203.

generation of the del Pino family at the center of Cristina Garcia's *Dreaming in Cuban*, she arrives in the United States at the very young age of two and returns as a teenager. To her mother Lourdes, Pilar seems unquestionably American. But as Gilbert Muller suggests, "Pilar is a second-generation hybrid, an uneasy amalgam of alien traits, separated from mainstream American life but ignorant also of Cuba."⁷³ Like so many others in what scholars have referred to as the 1.5 or one-and-a-half generation, Pilar is "a figure in quest of a usable legacy."⁷⁴ Early in the novel, she expresses a desire to return to Cuba because despite the fact that she has been "living in Brooklyn all [her] life, it doesn't feel like home to [her]." Honest about her uncertainty, she confesses, "I'm not sure Cuba is [home], but I want to find out."⁷⁵

In Cuba, Pilar experiences a transformation, "like something inside me is changing, something chemical and irreversible."⁷⁶ She "responds instinctively" to her new surroundings, falling in love with Havana, from the sea and the beautiful flora to the city's noise and its decay. Signaling a profound psychological change, she even starts dreaming in Spanish. Yet for all the affinity she feels for Cuba, she realizes that she must return to New York. Her time in Cuba helps her to arrive at an epiphany: "I know now where I belong – not *instead* of here, but *more* than here."⁷⁷ Realizing that embracing America does not have to mean the complete erasure of her Cuban heritage, Pilar learns and accepts what it means to have a hyphenated identity.

⁷³ Muller, 112.

⁷⁴ Ibid. On the concept of the "1.5 generation," see Gustavo Perez Firmat, *Life on the Hyphen: The Cuban-American Way* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1994).

⁷⁵ Garcia, 58.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 235.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 236.

As illustrated in the novels of Garcia, Danticat and Alvarez, the immigrant's return to the homeland represents a significant moment in the life of the immigrant protagonist. The return, in fact, is a critical feature of the plot, not only shaping the arc of the story but also facilitating the resolution of certain conflicts. Given its effectiveness as a narrative device, it is important to acknowledge that the trope of the return relies heavily on the assumption that the protagonist can easily move across borders and, equally important, will not be refused re-entry when she returns to the United States. Thus, we might say that whatever cultural epiphanies or psychological insights the return to the homeland may offer, the opportunity to attain them is availed only to legal immigrants.

As I have attempted to show above, legal status is a critical yet unacknowledged feature of the immigration novel. Legal status influences the narrative conventions of the genre, from the immigrant's journey to and arrival in the United States to her pursuit and attainment of the American Dream. It plays a critical role in immigration fiction's favored tropes such as the return to the homeland, a motif that enables the protagonist to work through the psychological and cultural conflicts she experiences. Finally, legal status impacts a central theme at the heart of immigration fiction – what it means to be American. Regardless of whether a novel imagines the immigrant's transformation in cultural or political terms, legal status facilitates and makes possible the narrative reenactment of the ritual of becoming American.

Illegal Immigrants in Historical Context

Because the legal immigrant has been the iconic protagonist of the conventional immigration novel, it is not surprising that the illegal alien, by contrast, has been largely absent from the literature. However, to better understand the illegal alien as a figure in immigration fiction, it would be instructive to look at illegal immigration and the rise of undocumented immigrants in historical context. In the discussion that follows, my aim is not to provide a comprehensive summary of U.S. immigration history. Rather, drawing from the work of Roger Daniels, Michael C. Lemay, Bill Ong Hing, Aristide R. Zolberg, Lina Newton, Susan F. Martin, Erika Lee, Mae Ngai and other scholars, I examine immigration history and policy in order to trace the contours of the political and cultural narrative that has developed around illegal immigrants in America.⁷⁸

Today it is commonplace to describe the United States as “a nation of immigrants.” While the concept itself is a twentieth century invention – one that, according to historian Mae Ngai, finds its roots in the theories of cultural pluralism developed and espoused by early twentieth century thinkers such as Horace Kallen, Franz Boas, Randolph Bourne and Louis Brandeis⁷⁹ – it does point to the incontrovertible fact that immigration and immigrants have played a fundamental role in the making of

⁷⁸ See Roger Daniels, *Coming to America: A History of Immigration and Ethnicity in American Life*, 2nd edition (New York: Harper Collins, 2002); Michael C. LeMay, *Guarding the Gates: Immigration and National Security* (Westport, CT: Praeger Security International, 2006); Daniel Tichenor, *Dividing Lines: The Politics of Immigration Control in America* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002); Bill Ong Hing, *Defining America through Immigration Policy* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2004); Aristide R. Zolberg, *A Nation by Design: Immigration Policy in the Fashioning of America* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2006); Lina Newton, *Illegal, Alien, or Immigrant: The Politics of Immigration Reform* (New York: New York University Press, 2008); Susan F. Martin, *A Nation of Immigrants* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

⁷⁹ Mae Ngai, “‘A Nation of Immigrants’: The Cold War and Civil Rights Origins of Illegal Immigration,” Unpublished manuscript, Occasional Papers of the School of Social Science (2010); www.sss.ias.edu/files/papers/paper38.pdf (18 September 2012).

America. Perhaps a fitting motto for the increasingly diverse America of the twentieth century, the phrase became iconic through the posthumous republication, in 1964, of John F. Kennedy's *A Nation of Immigrants*, a short historical treatise on U.S. immigration written in defense of more liberal immigration policy.⁸⁰

Although “embraced by the mainstream only after World War II,” the idea of the United States as a nation of immigrants is invoked in our day and age as though it were a timeless truth.⁸¹ In political and cultural discourse, the myth of immigrant America is frequently cited to bolster the image of the country as a place hospitable to and desired by alien newcomers. This, in turn, serves to reinforce the national narrative of American exceptionalism in which the United States is figured as a “city on a hill,” a land of liberty and democracy, and the home of the American dream.

A quintessential symbol of democracy, hope and opportunity to citizens and immigrants alike, the Statue of Liberty conjures up a powerful idea about the United States, a promise captured by the words of Emma Lazarus which are inscribed on the base of the sculpture itself:

Give me your tired, your poor,
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me,
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!⁸²

⁸⁰ John F. Kennedy, *A Nation of Immigrants* (New York: Harper and Row, 1964). The book was first published in pamphlet form in 1958. Kennedy, still a senator at the time, wrote it with the encouragement of the Anti-Defamation League, which was campaigning to reform immigration policy. See Ngai, “A Nation of Immigrants,” 1, 5, 7.

⁸¹ Ngai, “A Nation of Immigrants,” 1.

⁸² Emma Lazarus, “The New Colossus” (1883). Full text:

Not like the brazen giant of Greek fame
With conquering limbs astride from land to land;
Here at our sea-washed, sunset gates shall stand
A mighty woman with a torch, whose flame

Liberty, represented as the “Mother of Exiles” in Lazarus’ poem, holds a “torch” that “glows” with “world-wide welcome,” guiding the tired, poor, and homeless of the world to America’s golden door. Yet, as welcoming as this image is, it obscures the fact that America’s doors have at times been closed to immigrants who sought to enter it.

In their assessment of immigration history, scholars have called attention to the conflicting forces that animate U.S. immigration policy. Often framed in dichotomous terms, immigration has been cast as a struggle between inclusion and exclusion, liberalization and restriction, hope and fear, xenophilia and xenophobia, hospitality and hostility.⁸³ And while history has shown that immigration is a complex and far messier matter (one that cannot be adequately explained through simple binaries), these terms nonetheless provide us with useful language and frameworks with which to describe, examine and understand the evolution of immigration policy. The competing and contradictory forces – of inclusion and exclusion, hostility and hospitality, fear and hope, etc. – are significant to the extent that they have dramatically shaped and continue to influence U.S. immigration policy; for in doing so, they help construct and mold the very make up of the country. As Aristide Goldberg writes in *A Nation by Design*, his

Is the imprisoned lightning, and her name
 Mother of Exiles. From her beacon-hand
 Glows world-wide welcome; her mild eyes command
 The air-bridged harbor that twin cities frame,
 "Keep, ancient lands, your storied pomp!" cries she
 With silent lips. "Give me your tired, your poor,
 Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,
 The wretched refuse of your teeming shore,
 Send these, the homeless, tempest-tossed to me,
 I lift my lamp beside the golden door!"

⁸³ Cf. Ali Behdad, *A Forgetful Nation: On Immigration and Cultural Identity in the United States* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005); Vanessa Beasley, ed., *Who Belongs in America? Presidents, Rhetoric, and Immigration* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2006); Erika Lee, *At America’s Gates: Chinese Immigration During the Exclusion Era, 1882-1943* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2003); Ngai, *Impossible Subjects*; Zolberg, *A Nation by Design*.

sweeping study of immigration from colonial times through the early years of the twenty-first century, “Immigration policy...emerged from the outset as a major instrument of nation-building.”⁸⁴ He argues rather compellingly that the United States is “a nation by design,” whose composition was deliberately and carefully crafted through the implementation of immigration laws and regulations. Pointing to America’s practice of selective inclusion and exclusion of immigrants, along with the extermination of native dwellers and the importation and exploitation of slaves, Zolberg observes, “the self-constituted American nation not only set conditions for political membership, but also decided quite literally who would inhabit its land.”⁸⁵

If America today is a veritable nation of nations, a pluralistic society teeming with diversity, it is largely because immigration policy made it so. But inasmuch as the United States is “a nation of immigrants,” we might ask: Who exactly are the immigrants in this conception of the nation? Does the illegal alien have a place in immigrant America? Can the undocumented immigrant be part of this nation of immigrants?

In her groundbreaking work *Impossible Subjects: Illegal Aliens and the Making of Modern America*, Mae Ngai “chart[s] the historical origins of the ‘illegal alien’ in American law and society and the emergence of illegal immigration as the central problem in U.S. immigration policy in the twentieth century.”⁸⁶ According to Ngai, “Immigration restriction produced the illegal alien as a *new legal and political subject*,

⁸⁴ Zolberg, 1. In his book, Zolberg uses a broad conception of immigration policy, including not only immigration laws proper that regulate entry into the nation but also the “related processes that affect the nation’s composition” (e.g., colonialism/elimination of native Americans, the importation of slaves, etc.).

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 1.

⁸⁶ Ngai, “Impossible Subjects,” 3.

whose inclusion within the nation was simultaneously a social reality and a legal impossibility – a subject barred from citizenship and without rights.”⁸⁷

In broad theoretical terms, the concept of the illegal alien as a new and distinct category of legal and political personhood arises at the intersection of the discourses of law, human migration and national sovereignty. Laws that govern the authorized and unauthorized movement of people in and out of a nation’s sovereign space produce a variety of legal categories including immigrants, guest workers, refugees, visitors and tourists. In the sphere of immigration in particular, laws that restrict entry, coupled with unauthorized ingress into and the subsequent violation of a nation’s sovereign territory create the juridical subject known as the illegal alien.

In contemporary parlance, the term “illegal alien” is often used interchangeably with “undocumented immigrant.” And while the latter term generally describes someone who does not have proper documentation or appropriate paperwork, Ngai reminds us that the undocumented immigrant, too, is a legal construct, whose origins can be traced to a particular historical moment. Pointing to a significant shift in the U.S. immigration system, she notes that in the 1920s formal status came to be privileged above all else. With immigration quotas in place and an increased emphasis on having appropriate documents, most specifically “the proper visa,” “[l]egal and illegal became, in effect, abstract constructions, having less to do with experience than with numbers and paper.”⁸⁸ Thus, the resulting immigration system, now governed by a regime of numbers and

⁸⁷ Ibid., 4.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 61.

papers and preoccupied with formal status, gave rise to what we know today as the “undocumented immigrant.”⁸⁹

At the most basic level, then, the illegal alien or undocumented immigrant is a person who is not authorized to be present in the sovereign territory of the United States. However, the simplicity of this definition belies the fact that there are, in actuality, many different ways one becomes an illegal alien. The person who illegally and surreptitiously crosses into U.S. borders without authorization and proper documentation is perhaps the most common, if not stereotypical, image of the illegal alien. But an illegal alien can also be a person who enters the country with forged documents that go undetected. Moreover, because legal status is not fixed but rather contingent and unstable, someone who enters the country legally with appropriate papers nonetheless has the potential to become illegal. For instance, tourists, students and guest workers who hold a valid but temporary visa become illegal aliens if they remain in the country after their visa expires.⁹⁰ Visa overstayers, as political scientist Michael C. LeMay refers to this group of migrants, join the ranks of the undocumented by going underground, relying on the often exploitative informal economy for their livelihood and trying to live inconspicuously in order to avoid deportation.⁹¹ Finally, legal immigrants or permanent residents can become illegal if they violate certain laws or commit a crime. Although these immigrants are often subject to

⁸⁹ Ibid., 61.

⁹⁰ As we shall see later in our discussion of Gish Jen’s *Typical American*, Ralph, the protagonist, becomes illegal because he fails to renew his student visa.

⁹¹ Michael C. LeMay, *Illegal Immigration: A Reference Handbook* (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2007), 2.

expulsion, they may fail to leave, remaining instead in the country as unauthorized aliens.⁹²

In the American immigration system, restriction and deportation are the complementary constitutive forces that gave rise to the illegal alien. Although limits on who are allowed to enter the country and policies for the removal of unwanted immigrants have existed since colonial times, it was during the 1920s that restriction and deportation truly “came of age.”⁹³ According to Ngai, the 1924 Johnson-Reed Immigration Act represented “the nation’s first *comprehensive* restriction law,” establishing “for the first time *numerical limits* on immigration and a *global* racial and national hierarchy that favored some immigrants over others.”⁹⁴ The Act inaugurated a new era in U.S. immigration which lasted until 1965, when the national origins quota system was lifted under the Hart-Cellar Act. It was during the period described by many scholars as the “era of restriction” that deportation was also systematized and made more efficient.⁹⁵ Thus, in a way, we might say that it was then that the narrative of the illegal alien truly began to take shape.

The era of restriction is noteworthy in that it stands in contrast to other periods characterized by more open immigration policy. And while the era of restriction signals an important shift toward limited immigration, it is also situated at a critical historical juncture, demonstrating “continuity with earlier periods and hint[ing] at reform

⁹² Ibid., 2; Ngai, *Impossible Subjects*, 6.

⁹³ Ngai, *Impossible Subjects*, 58.

⁹⁴ Ibid., 3.

⁹⁵ Cf. Ngai, *Impossible Subjects*; LeMay, *From Open Door to Dutch Door: An Analysis of U.S. Immigration Policy Since 1820* (New York: Prager, 1987); William S. Bernard, “Immigration: History of U.S. Policy,” in *The Immigration Reader*, ed. David Jacobson (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 1998).

characteristic of the post-1965 period.”⁹⁶ Sociologist William S. Bernard offers a useful timeline that organizes the history of American immigration policy into five distinct periods: The Colonial Era (1609-1775), the Open Door Era (1776-1881), the Era of Regulation (1882-1916), the Era of Restriction (1917-1964), and the Era of Liberalization (1965-present; 1998, at the time of his work’s publication).⁹⁷ Because Bernard’s timeline was conceived before the events of September 11, it does not account for the significant changes in immigration law that the 2001 terrorist attacks precipitated. Thus, to his periodization I will add a sixth: the Post-9/11 Era (2001-present). Although the eras outlined by Bernard are demarcated by significant moments in American history, they are far from hard-and-fast dates and provide only general time frames. Nonetheless, these six periods correspond more or less, with slight variation, to how other historians and scholars have delineated the various phases of immigration in the United States.⁹⁸

Although immigration restriction and deportation came of age during the Era of Restriction, rules that regulate and limit who would be welcomed into the expanding American colonial territory were established and put in effect long before the United States gained its independence, before a national policy for immigration was instituted. But rather than illegal or undocumented aliens – a juridical category that was not yet in existence – the target of the laws were immigrants deemed to be undesirable or unfit to be members of the nascent American society. In view of the history of illegal immigration,

⁹⁶ Erika Lee, “A Nation of Immigrants and a Gatekeeping Nation: American Immigration Law and Policy” in *A Companion to American Immigration*, ed. Reed Ueda (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), 14.

⁹⁷ Bernard, 48-71.

⁹⁸ Cf. LeMay, *Guarding the Gates*; Lee, “A Nation of Immigrants”; Reed Ueda, “Historical Patterns of Immigrant Status and Incorporation in the United States” in *E Pluribus Unum? Contemporary and Historical Perspectives on Immigrant Political Incorporation*, eds. Gary Gerstle and John Mollenkopf (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2001), 292-330.

however, we shall see that later policies aimed at undocumented aliens indeed have deep roots.

During the Colonial Era (1609-1775), immigration policy, established by the developing colonial governments, set the recruitment of labor as its primary objective. Undergirded by the conviction that the American continent had to be populated and its supposedly “empty” lands properly cultivated and made productive, the colonies sought ways to attract immigrants to America, recruiting first from England and later increasingly from continental Europe as well. The colonies advertised employment opportunities and subsidies for the purchase of land, paid for prospective settlers’ trans-Atlantic journey, and guaranteed political rights and religious freedoms to potential newcomers.⁹⁹

From a broad perspective, the generous policies of the early colonial governments helped to nurture the idea that America was not only a place of opportunity and prosperity but also a society of religious tolerance. But as several scholars point out, specific practices of the colonies exhibited an underlying impulse of restriction that sometimes manifested itself in overt ways. The New England Puritans, for example, preferred to recruit religious members of the English gentry, yeoman, artisan, and tradesman classes; with religious orthodoxy guiding their selection process, “they excluded or expelled itinerants, adventurers, Quakers, and members of other religious sects of which they did not approve,” and reserved full political and civil rights only for members of their church.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁹ Bernard, 49.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 50.

In the other colonies, where religion did not drive the recruitment of settlers, restriction efforts were directed at convicts and felons, along with the poor, lame, sickly, and weak members of the lower classes. Whereas the former immigrants were deemed undesirable because they represented a corrupting force, the latter were unwanted because they were seen as a burden to society, who, unable or unwilling to provide for themselves, would have to be supported by the hard-working, productive and able-bodied individuals of the community. Thus, even in its early stages, immigration policy already looked suspiciously upon, if not actively discriminated against, supposedly unproductive members of society and would-be dependents of the state.¹⁰¹ As we shall see later, the link between immigrants and dependency would persist, rearing its ugly head rather fiercely in the late twentieth century with the passage of Proposition 187 in California and similar laws in other states.

Following the American Revolution and the establishment of a newly independent nation, the United States entered the Open Door Era (1776-1881) of U.S. immigration policy. The need to increase the country's population and the project of western expansion encouraged much of the open immigration policy of the time, for immigrants were expected to play a significant role in the growth of the young nation. While authority over immigration continued to be exercised mainly by state governments until after the Civil War (1861-65), Congress did pass in 1790 the first federal law concerning the naturalization of aliens. The Naturalization Act stated that any "free white person" "of good character" who has resided "within the limits and under the jurisdiction of the

¹⁰¹ Zolberg, 42-43.

United States” for two years could acquire American citizenship.¹⁰² Moreover, the law facilitated the naturalization process by stipulating that immigrants could apply for citizenship in “any common law court of record” in any of the States.¹⁰³ According to Bernard, “These generous terms for citizenship and open immigration laid the basis for the massive growth of population that was to follow in the next century.”¹⁰⁴ But even in its “generosity,” the national policy on naturalization was predicated as much on exclusion as it was on inclusion.

By virtue of their race and their condition of permanent servitude, enslaved Africans – who were unwilling or unwitting immigrants of sorts – were inherently ineligible to become citizens under the law. However, the racial provision of the Naturalization Act not only affected black slaves; it also permitted the exclusion of Native Americans, Asians and “non-white” Europeans from citizenship. White indentured servants were denied citizenship as well, if only temporarily, until they completed their time of servitude and became free. Yet even some free whites were not guaranteed citizenship because, as Zolberg points out, “[t]he very poor...were unlikely to

¹⁰² In 1795, the residency requirement was amended and increased to five years, protracting the naturalization process and, in a way, making it harder for more recent immigrants to attain citizenship.

¹⁰³ The full text is as follows:

Be it enacted by the Senate and House of Representatives of the United States of America, in Congress assembled, That any Alien being a free white person, who shall have resided within the limits and under the jurisdiction of the United States for the term of two years, may be admitted to become a citizen thereof on application to any common law Court of record in any one of the States wherein he shall have resided for the term of one year at least, and making proof to the satisfaction of such Court that he is a person of good character, and taking the oath or affirmation prescribed by law to support the Constitution of the United States, which Oath or Affirmation such Court shall administer, and the Clerk of such Court shall record such Application, and the proceedings thereon; and thereupon such person shall be considered as a Citizen of the United States.

<http://rs6.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=llsl&fileName=001/llsl001.db&recNum=226>;
<http://rs6.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=llsl&fileName=001/llsl001.db&recNum=227> (18 September 2012).

¹⁰⁴ Bernard, 53.

muster the court fees that naturalization entailed.”¹⁰⁵ Finally, by requiring applicants to be “of good character,” the law continued the long-standing practice of preventing the undesirables (convicts, felons, paupers) from becoming citizens and gaining access to civil and political rights. Ambiguous and subjective as it may be, the condition that one be “of good character” would later be required not just of legal aliens seeking naturalization. In the twenty-first century, the requirement of possessing “good *moral* character” would be used as a key criterion for the status adjustment of illegal immigrant youth under the DREAM Act.

The decades of the Open Door Era, during which aggressive recruitment occurred and liberal policies were in place, saw a steady influx and exponential increase of immigrants to the United States.¹⁰⁶ The rapid growth of immigration soon necessitated the establishment of a centralized authority to administer and enforce a uniform policy, to bring consistency to the disparate rules established by the individual states. In 1864, Congress established a Bureau of Immigration to keep track of immigration records and compile reports. And in 1875, adjudicating a case that hinged on the federal power to regulate commerce (*Henderson v. Mayor of New York*), the Supreme Court determined that the Constitution gave Congress exclusive power to regulate the entry of immigrants to the country.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁵ Zolberg, 86.

¹⁰⁶ By the middle of the 19th century, newcomers were entering the country by the millions. Beginning in the 1840s, the United States took in 1.7, 2.6 and 2.3 million immigrants respectively during each succeeding decade. In the 1870s, another 2.8 million immigrants stepped foot on American shores. See “Immigration to the United States: fiscal years 1820-2003,” *Yearbook of Immigration Statistics: 2003*, Department of Homeland Security; <http://www.dhs.gov/yearbook-immigration-statistics-2003-0> (18 September 2012).

¹⁰⁷ *Henderson v. Mayor of City of New York*, 92 U.S. 259 (1875); 273, 274.

That the Supreme Court judged the federal government to have sole jurisdiction over matters of immigration is not an insignificant development. In fact, this has had major consequences for undocumented aliens in the country. In instances when states passed draconian laws to address local problems with illegal immigration (e.g., California's Prop 187 in 1994 and more recently, Arizona's SB1070), many provisions of such laws failed to be implemented, ruled unconstitutional because they infringed on the federal government's exclusive authority over immigration.

The implementation of federal control over immigration ushered the United States into the Era of Regulation (1882-1916). Regulation, however, did not mean a decline in new arrivals. Indeed, some of the biggest gains in immigration in all of American history occurred during these decades. Between 1901 and 1910, almost 8.8 million immigrants entered the country, the highest level up to that point. In fact, this number would not be surpassed until the 1990s, when, within that ten-year span, immigration crossed the 9 million mark.¹⁰⁸ But even as the Era of Regulation saw an unprecedented influx of immigrants, it simultaneously launched the systemization of policy, enforcement and the targeted exclusion of specific immigrant groups. As Bernard points out, it was during

Giving the federal government full authority over immigration, the Court ruled:

It is equally clear that the matter of these statutes may be, and ought to be, the subject of a uniform system or plan. The laws which govern the right to land passengers in the United States from other countries ought to be the same in New York, Boston, New Orleans, and San Francisco. A striking evidence of the truth of this proposition is to be found in the similarity, we might almost say in the identity, of the statutes of New York, of Louisiana, and California.

...

We are of opinion that this whole subject has been confided to Congress by the Constitution; that Congress can more appropriately and with more acceptance exercise it than any other body known to our law, state or national; that by providing a system of laws in these matters, applicable to all ports and to all vessels, a serious question, which has long been matter of contest and complaint, may be effectually and satisfactorily settled.

¹⁰⁸ In 1880s, there were roughly 5.2 million immigrants; in the 1890s there were 3.6 million immigrants. "Immigration to the United States: fiscal years 1820-2003," *Yearbook of Immigration Statistics: 2003*.

this period that “the federal government built the administrative and bureaucratic machinery that would operate [the] new federal immigration policy.”¹⁰⁹

As more and more immigrants came to the United States, concerns about social problems supposedly brought about by immigration also increased. In response to these fears, policy makers began crafting immigration rules that privileged not only the healthy and employable but also those they deemed assimilable to American society. Beyond attempting to keep out the unwanted (paupers, felons, convicts, lunatics, idiots, potential public charges, prostitutes, anarchists, etc.¹¹⁰), federal policy looked to address an important issue sparked by the increasing heterogeneity of the nation’s population. Immigration brought to the fore questions about how newcomers would adapt and integrate themselves to existing communities and the greater American society. In response to the question of the assimilability of more recent, non-Western European immigrants, lawmakers implemented new rules to disqualify and exclude groups based on race and class.

Indeed, the impetus to move from disparate state rules to a consistent national policy was fueled in large part by the influx of Chinese immigrants in the West. In the 19th century, many Chinese came to California during the Gold Rush and others followed later as contract laborers to build the railroads. With the support of the state assembly, the governor of California initiated restrictive measures against the Chinese, who were perceived as a threat to American culture and society in that they were too foreign and unassimilable. Because Chinese laborers were willing to work for little pay, they

¹⁰⁹ Bernard, 57.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 59.

represented another potential harm – this time, to the wages and occupational conditions of local workers. In contrast to the attitudes that prevailed during the Colonial and Open Door Eras, immigrant labor was now viewed as a dangerous influence rather than a welcome force.

Thus, in 1882, Congress passed the Chinese Exclusion Act which suspended the entry of Chinese laborers for ten years and prohibited Chinese immigrants from becoming naturalized citizens. Curiously, however, the law made exceptions for certain classes of Chinese including merchants, teachers, students, diplomats and travelers. By using multiple social categories as the basis for restriction, the Chinese Exclusion Act signaled a critical development in federal immigration policy. As Erika Lee notes, the law marked “the first time in American history that the United States barred a group of immigrants because of its race and class.”¹¹¹ If, as Mae Ngai argues, restriction engenders illegal immigration, it is not surprising that the Chinese Exclusion Act inevitably produced illegal aliens. Undeterred by the law and exploiting flaws within immigration enforcement system, Chinese immigrants entered the United States through “back door” channels. Many hired guides to smuggle them across the Canadian and Mexican borders. Lee suggests that by circumventing the law and entering without permission, Chinese “became, in effect, the first ‘illegal immigrants.’”¹¹²

To be sure, immigrants of European and Mexican descent also entered the country illegally during this time. But as Lee documents in her book, the public’s concern and the federal government’s preoccupation with America’s growing “Chinese problem”

¹¹¹ Lee, *At America’s Gates*, 4.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 147.

ineluctably gave illegal immigration a Chinese face. Newspapers and magazines that covered illegal immigration deployed familiar racist stereotypes that cast Chinese as wily, shrewd and threateningly foreign. Based on her study of Chinese immigration, Lee astutely observes that “the image of the illegal immigrant was, from its inception, a highly racialized one.”¹¹³ Indeed, the racialization of its protagonist would be an enduring feature of the political and cultural narrative of the illegal alien. For the practice of linking illegal immigration with a specific racial group would persist into the twentieth century, evolving only in that Mexicans would take the place occupied earlier by the Chinese.

The Chinese Exclusion Act provided a framework and paved the way for future race- and class-based immigration policy. In 1885, for example, Congress passed the Foran Act, which prohibited the recruitment and immigration of all contract laborers. And in 1888, Congress amended the Alien Contract Labor laws to allow for the deportation of immigrant workers within one year of entry. Notably, this deportation provision was the first since the Alien and Sedition laws of 1798, which gave the president authority to expel aliens who posed a threat to the peace and safety of the United States.¹¹⁴

Such laws, to be sure, affected not just Chinese immigrants, who were the initial targets of restrictive policies. The “new immigrants” from Eastern and Southern Europe – Slavs, Jews, Hungarians, Italians – also felt the force of anti-immigrant sentiment, for they were thought to be racially inferior and unassimilable. Exhibiting visible markers of

¹¹³ Ibid., 170.

¹¹⁴ Hing, 209-210.

difference like skin color, physical characteristics, customs, language and religion, these groups were perceived to be more “alien” and markedly distinct from the Northern- and Western-European immigrants of earlier generations. In 1910, the congressionally appointed Dillingham Commission used pseudo-scientific evidence as justification for their efforts to block the entry of “new immigrants” whom they deemed incapable of becoming Americans. In an oblique yet strategic move of discrimination, the Commission pushed for the implementation of a literacy test as a means to decrease the number of racially undesirable immigrants.¹¹⁵

In the Era of Regulation, the systemization of federal control of immigration was accomplished by the establishment of administrative apparatuses that would execute the policies passed by the national legislature. During this period, Congress created the post of superintendent of immigration and established the Bureau of Immigration and Naturalization to carry out the laws that determined who would be kept out of and who would be allowed through America’s doors.¹¹⁶ Perhaps a fitting symbol for not only the efficient enforcement of immigration policy but also the conflicting twin forces of hospitality and hostility that animate U.S. immigration, Ellis Island embodied the formalization of regulatory practices and the systematic implementation of immigration procedures.¹¹⁷ In Ellis Island, which operated as an immigration processing facility from 1892 to 1924, newcomers were methodically inspected by doctors, checked for diseases

¹¹⁵ Bernard, 60. Although the literacy test was never implemented, it led the way for other creative ways to restrict immigration.

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 60, 62.

¹¹⁷ In *A Forgetful Nation*, Ali Behdad suggests that American immigration could be characterized by the two contradictory forces of “hostility” and “hospitality.”

and, after having their vital statistics and background information recorded, were either allowed to pass through or sent back to their country of origin.

As a symbolic door to the United States, the establishment of Ellis Island heralded America's transformation into what Erika Lee calls a "gatekeeping nation."¹¹⁸ In the period that followed the Era of Regulation, America's gates were tightly guarded but not completely closed. However, during the Era of Restriction (1917-1964), exclusionary and selective immigration policies were strengthened and, in some ways, perfected. With the passage of the Immigration Act of 1917, the literacy requirement for admission was finally put in place. The Act also defined an "Asiatic Barred Zone," which effectively excluded all immigrants from India, Indochina, Afghanistan, Arabia, the East Indies, Burma, Siam, the Malay States, parts of Russia and most of the Polynesian Islands.¹¹⁹

Under the Immigration Act of 1921 and the Johnson-Reed Act of 1924, immigration quotas were established that severely restricted the entry of southern and eastern Europeans and practically all Asians.¹²⁰ In an effort to preserve the racial and cultural homogeneity of American society, the national origins system of the Johnson-Reed Act gave preference to northern and western European groups and barred the immigration of all races and ethnicities ineligible for citizenship. The effects of restriction were immediate and apparent. Immigration levels declined precipitously and steadily. Even taking into account the events of World War II and the Great Depression, immigration during the Era of Restriction contracted significantly. This, however, is not

¹¹⁸ Lee, *At America's Gates*; "A Nation of Immigrants," 6.

¹¹⁹ Lee, *At America's Gates*, 39; Bernard, 63.

¹²⁰ Lee, *At America's Gates*, 39. Initially, Filipinos were exempted from the law, but they too would be excluded by 1934.

surprising given that post-1924 the annual admissible number of immigrants was reduced to 165,000.¹²¹

In many ways, the drastic restrictive policies of the time set the stage for the American problem of illegal immigration – the biggest, most contentious, and enduring issue in U.S. immigration. As noted earlier, Ngai sees the Johnson-Reed Act of 1924 as playing a critical role in the historical rise of the illegal alien. She writes, “The passage of the quota laws marked a turn in both the volume and nature of unlawful entry and in the philosophy and practice of deportation.”¹²² Because the 1924 Act required all immigrants to have a visa, those who entered without proof of permission would be considered in violation of the law, in other words, illegal. Because quotas established a finite number of admissible entrants, anyone who fell into the surplus category would also be deemed illegal. To address the problem of unauthorized immigrants (the surplus and the undocumented), the Johnson-Reed Act bolstered deportation policy, allowing for the expulsion of all undocumented persons who entered after July 1, 1924 and removing the statute of limitations on deportation without regard to immigrants’ length of residence in the country or existing family ties.¹²³

During the Era of Restriction, Congress created a land Border Patrol to prevent and curb illegal entry. And in a significant move that would have far-reaching legal consequences, Congress, in 1929, made unlawful entry a criminal offense. As a result, undocumented immigrants were caught in a terrible legal bind. As Ngai explains, illegal

¹²¹ Bernard, 64.

¹²² Ngai, *Impossible Subjects*, 60.

¹²³ *Ibid.*, 60; Hing, 211.

aliens “were subject to both deportation, under which proceedings they still lacked constitutional protections, and separate criminal prosecution and punishment.”¹²⁴

Perhaps emblematic of the federal government’s focal shift towards expulsion of illegal immigrants, Ellis Island was converted from an immigration processing station to a detention and deportation center in 1924. Indicative of an inverse trend, immigration decreased from 805,228 in 1921 to 241,700 in 1930 while deportations increased from 2,762 in 1920 to a decade high of 25,888 in 1929.¹²⁵

In 1954, 1,074,277 immigrants were formally required to depart, the highest number of deportations during the Era of Restriction.¹²⁶ The mass deportation coincided with the implementation of Operation Wetback, an immigration campaign that targeted undocumented agricultural workers in the Southwestern states. Ironically, the problem Operation Wetback sought to address was, in some ways, brought on by another program that was supposed to alleviate illegal immigration in the first place – the Bracero Program. An effort to deal with the agricultural labor shortage precipitated by World War II, the Bracero Program, instituted in 1942, allowed U.S. employers to hire Mexican contract laborers to tend farms and harvest crops nine months out of the year.¹²⁷ As authorized migrant workers, braceros were deemed to be a practical solution to illegal

¹²⁴ Ngai, *Impossible Subjects*, 60.

¹²⁵ “Immigration to the United States: fiscal years 1820-2003,” *Yearbook of Immigration Statistics: 2003; Historical Statistics of the US from Colonial Times to 1970* (Washington, DC: GPO, 1975), 114. Deportation figures for 1920 include both required and voluntary departures. Prior to 1927, deportation statistics did not indicate voluntary vs. required departures. Figures for 1929 and 1954 include only required departures.

¹²⁶ “Immigration to the United States: fiscal years 1820-2003,” *Yearbook of Immigration Statistics: 2003; Historical Statistics of the US from Colonial Times to 1970*, 114. Figure 1954 includes only required departures.

¹²⁷ Although a majority of braceros worked in agriculture, several thousand were also contracted for railroad track maintenance.

immigration in that they would replace the undocumented laborers employed by American growers. But like the national quotas imposed by the Johnson-Reed Act, the finite spaces in the Bracero Program served only to provoke even greater illegal immigration as more Mexicans who sought employment as legal contract workers were turned away. Because the Bracero Program could not accommodate the abundant supply of laborers, the “surplus” resorted to working illegally for the U.S. farms that were willing to employ them.¹²⁸

The Bracero Program, the illegal immigration it precipitated, and the federal government’s response in the form of Operation Wetback all served to reinforce the association of Mexicans with illegality. As Ngai meticulously demonstrates in *Impossible Subjects*, Mexicans emerged as the iconic illegal alien in the twentieth century primarily as a result of selective deportation practices and preferential application of administrative status adjustments. Whereas unauthorized Mexicans were targeted for individual and mass deportations, undocumented Europeans benefitted from appeals and administrative reforms that facilitated their legalization. As Ngai puts it, Mexicans were consistently “made” into illegal aliens while Europeans were regularly “unmade” as illegal aliens.¹²⁹

The Bracero Program was officially terminated in 1964 as part of the agreement for the passage of the Immigration and Naturalization Act of 1965. The 1965 Act, also known as the Hart-Celler Act, was an historic reform of immigration policy, the provisions of which are still in effect today. It modified and added significant

¹²⁸ Ngai, *Impossible Subjects*, 129-158; LeMay, *Illegal Immigration*, 4.

¹²⁹ Ngai, *Impossible Subjects*, see especially Chapter 2.

amendments to the 1952 McCarran-Walter Act, which had earlier unified the nation's heretofore diverse immigration and naturalization policies under one code.¹³⁰ Although the McCarran-Walter Act had lifted the racial restrictions on citizenship, it preserved the preferential quota system that favored immigrants from the United Kingdom and northern European countries. Thus, when the national origins quota system was finally abolished by the Hart-Celler Act in 1965, the United States entered the final immigration era of the 20th century – the Era of Liberalization (1965-2001).

A testament perhaps to the country's embrace of its new self-image as "a nation of immigrants," the Act of 1965 bore the imprint of John F. Kennedy's proposals for immigration reform, which he articulated in his book *A Nation of Immigrants* years before his presidency and his death.¹³¹ For his part, Lyndon Johnson, under whose presidency the Hart-Celler Act was passed into law, also invoked and promoted the myth of immigrant America by describing the United States as "a nation that was built by the immigrants of all lands" in his 1964 state of the union message.¹³² Mobilizing rhetoric that supported the mythic narrative in multiple levels, Johnson simultaneously called attention to the American people's immigrant roots even as he acknowledged immigrants' historical contributions to the development of the nation.

Although Johnson himself downplayed the significance of the Hart-Celler Act, saying it was "not a revolutionary bill," many scholars in fact see it as a liberalizing force because it opened America's gates to increased immigration from the Third World, which

¹³⁰ The McCarran-Walter Act is also known as the Immigration and Naturalization Act.

¹³¹ Daniels, 338-39.

¹³² Lyndon Johnson, State of the Union speech, quoted in Vanessa Beasley, *You, the People: American National Identity in Presidential Rhetoric* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2004), 85.

had been disadvantaged, if not entirely shut out, prior to the law's passage.¹³³ In place of an overtly imbalanced national origins quota system, the Act of 1965 established an annual immigration ceiling of 290,000 but allocated a maximum of 20,000 immigrant visas per nation, per year. Admission was conducted on a first-come, first-served basis.¹³⁴ Yet even as the Act abolished the prejudicial national quotas, it did not completely do away with the preference system, as priority was given to family members of citizens and resident aliens, immigrants with specific or exceptional skills, and workers in short supply.¹³⁵

While the Hart-Celler Act significantly altered the dynamics and the face of immigration in the late 20th century, Ngai argues that in no way did it overturn the regime of restriction that the Johnson-Reed Act instituted decades earlier.¹³⁶ As she points out, "Hart-Celler's continued commitment to numerical restriction, especially its imposition of quotas on the Western Hemisphere countries, ensured that illegal immigration would continue and, in fact, increase."¹³⁷ Michael LeMay attributes the post-1965 rise in illegal immigration to the elimination of the Bracero Program in particular. Supporting this claim is the fact that Mexicans indeed comprised the largest group of unauthorized aliens in the decades following 1965.¹³⁸ Coupled with the 20,000 per-country visa limit, the end of the contract labor program meant that the thousands of workers who once entered

¹³³ Daniels, 340-41.

¹³⁴ The annual ceiling was divided between hemispheres, the Eastern receiving an allowance of 170,000 and the Western 120,000 visas.

¹³⁵ For details on the preference system under the 1965 Act, see LeMay, *Illegal Immigration*, 8.

¹³⁶ Ngai, *Impossible Subjects*, 265.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*

¹³⁸ Mexicans made up 69% of unauthorized immigrants in 1986 and 57% in 2002. See LeMay, *Illegal Immigration*, 178.

legally joined the ranks of the undocumented when they returned and were rehired by American employers.

During the Era of Liberalization, nativist and anti-immigrant sentiment ebbed and flowed, often in response to political changes and economic challenges experienced by individual states and the country as a whole. Not surprisingly, the issues and concerns that were often raised were the same ones that had been voiced ever since the U.S. began closing its doors to immigrants in the 1880s. Immigrants were condemned for taking jobs from citizens and blamed for social decay and the high crime rates in cities. Non-white immigrants continued to be seen as unassimilable or accused of purposely refusing to acculturate and integrate themselves to mainstream America. Illegal aliens in particular were regarded as opportunistic burdens to society, taking advantage of and undeservedly reaping the benefits of the welfare state in terms of education and health care.

Because illegal immigration indicated no signs of abating, and with public dissatisfaction with the Immigration and Naturalization Service's (INS) ineffective enforcement of policies, Congress passed the Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA) in 1986. At the time of the law's passage, roughly 5.6 million illegal aliens were estimated to be residing in the United States.¹³⁹ In addition to boosting the INS budget to increase enforcement measures, IRCA imposed sanctions on employers who "knowingly hire" undocumented workers and provided amnesty to illegal aliens who met certain

¹³⁹ The 5.6 million estimate was provided by the Congressional Budget Office, which was charged with the task of calculating the effects of IRCA. But as Bill Ong Hing notes, that number was far from definitive and was based on much speculation. In the early 1980s, the estimated number of illegal aliens ranged from 2 to 8 million; the disparity is not insignificant, however, given that the number would have real consequences in terms of IRCA's legalization and amnesty provisions. See Hing, 165; Ngai, *Impossible Subjects*, 266.

criteria. Under the law, employers would be fined between \$250 to \$10,000 for each unauthorized worker they hired, and employers with repeat violations would also face criminal penalties. In terms of legalization, permanent resident status was granted to roughly 2.7 million undocumented immigrants, specifically to those residing in the U.S. since January 1, 1982 and agricultural workers who worked for at least 90 days between May 1, 1985 and May 1, 1986.¹⁴⁰

The passage of IRCA, I suggest, represents a significant development in the evolution of the national narrative of immigrant America. As the debates about IRCA demonstrate, the law contributed to the widening divergence and the solidification of two distinct narratives about immigration – legal and illegal. Although illegal immigration had been, for some time, a clearly defined issue for the federal government, a *Newsweek* poll published in 1984 showed that the American public, by contrast, expressed a general “ambivalence about all immigration, legal as well as illegal.”¹⁴¹ The nature of the poll itself was particularly telling, for, as Lina Newton notes, it “did not ask that the respondents differentiate between legal and illegal immigrants.”¹⁴² The poll revealed Americans’ contradictory attitudes towards immigrants, but the results were not necessarily confounding. While 61% of respondents thought immigrants took jobs from American workers, 80% believed immigrants were also hard workers, taking jobs that Americans don’t want. Fifty-nine percent viewed immigrants as potential burdens to the

¹⁴⁰ See Hing, 167, 180; Ngai, *Impossible Subjects*, 266, LeMay, *Illegal Immigration*, 10-20.

¹⁴¹ *Newsweek* poll quoted in Newton, 67.

¹⁴² Newton, 67.

state (ending up on welfare and raising taxes for Americans), but 61% also favorably saw immigrants as contributing to the improvement of American culture.¹⁴³

In her insightful study of IRCA, Newton discerns several narratives that emerged from the congressional debates surrounding the law. Focusing on a particular issue within the larger question of immigration, each narrative also featured specific protagonists (employers, farmers, legal and illegal immigrants). Newton presents the different versions as follows: the anti-regulation narrative that affected employers, agriculturalists and the family farmer; the anti-discrimination and victimization narrative that impacted legal immigrant and citizen minorities; and the “undeserving” versus “deserving” immigrant narrative that centered on the illegal alien.¹⁴⁴ Newton’s analysis is profoundly instructive in terms of exposing the ways in which the key players in immigration couched their arguments to promote and preserve their own interests.

Yet from a broader perspective, we might say that all the stories, despite their contradictory messages, were in fact helping to define and differentiate a narrative specifically about illegal immigrants by competing for how the story would be told. Put another way, the debates over IRCA and the provisions of the final law itself made more salient the distinction between illegal and legal immigrants. Indeed, all the major provisions of IRCA pivoted around illegal aliens and illegal immigration, from control via employment (employer sanctions and worker eligibility requirements) and enforcement (increased Border Patrol and deportation procedures) to legalization (status

¹⁴³ Poll results reprinted in Newton, 67.

¹⁴⁴ For a full analysis of the narratives, see Newton, Chapter 3.

adjustment) and immigration reform (a commission to study of unauthorized migration).¹⁴⁵

Of all the law's provisions, however, IRCA's amnesty program perhaps most clearly illustrates the splintering of a separate illegal immigrant narrative from the greater myth of immigrant America. By providing for the legalization of millions of unauthorized aliens, IRCA laid bare both the limits of and the conditions for acceptance into "the nation of immigrants." The United States, it turns out, is not simply "a nation of immigrants" but rather "a nation of *legal* immigrants." As for illegal aliens, not only are they excluded from the national story, they would actually be cast rather perniciously as antagonists in the narrative of immigrant America. In contrast to the story of the legal alien whose teleological conclusion of citizenship affirms America's exceptionalism, the narrative of the illegal alien is a tale gone awry, one that casts doubt on America's generosity and its greatness.

If the amnesty program under IRCA offered relief to many unauthorized aliens, it represented a unique exception to the country's otherwise aggressive approach toward illegal immigration. In the decade following the passage of IRCA, anti-immigrant sentiment was squarely concentrated on undocumented aliens. At the state level, anti-illegal immigration efforts culminated in the passage of Proposition 187 in California in 1994. Approved by 60 percent of the state electorate, Prop 187 not only required state and local agencies to report suspected illegal aliens to the INS, it also denied public social

¹⁴⁵ For a summary of IRCA provisions, see Newton, 50-51.

services, health care services and public education to undocumented immigrants.¹⁴⁶ The illegal immigration “crisis” along the U.S.-Mexico border provoked federal response in the form of Operation Gatekeeper in California, Operation Safeguard in Arizona, and Operation Rio Grande in Texas.¹⁴⁷ These operations contributed greatly to what Ngai describes as “the militarization of the border,” turning the Southwest into a highly policed zone with miles and miles of walls and fences, high-tech land and air surveillance, and thousands of Border Patrol agents.¹⁴⁸ Although undocumented alien apprehensions and deportations did increase after 1994, the various operations did little to stem the tide of illegal immigration. As Bill Ong Hing observes, the national enforcement strategies simply “move[d] the undocumented foot traffic relatively out of the public eye,” forcing illegal immigrants to find new but more dangerous routes to the north.¹⁴⁹

Operation Gatekeeper and other similar state programs it spawned were put in place under the administration of President Bill Clinton, who, in 1996, also signed into law the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act (IIRAIRA).

¹⁴⁶ Under Prop 187, undocumented youths would be barred from elementary and secondary schools. In terms of health care, illegal aliens would only be treated in cases of emergency. The constitutionality of Prop 187 was challenged by the League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC) and other organizations. After the federal district court ruled many of the measure’s provisions unconstitutional, Governor Pete Wilson took the case to the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals. Although Proposition 187 was ultimately not implemented – the administration of Governor Gray Davis withdrew the appeal in 1999 – it provided a framework for more recent state-based immigration laws in Arizona, Georgia, Alabama and Mississippi. Regarding Prop 187, see Joseph Nevins, *Operation Gatekeeper: The Rise of the “Illegal Alien” and the Making of the U.S.-Mexico Boundary* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 91; LeMay, *Illegal Immigration*, 17; Ken Ono and John Sloop, *Shifting Borders: Rhetoric, Immigration, and California’s Proposition 187* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2002).

¹⁴⁷ Operation Gatekeeper and Operation Safeguard commenced in 1994. Operation Rio Grande was implemented in 1997. See Hing, 187.

¹⁴⁸ Ngai, *Impossible Subjects*, 266.

¹⁴⁹ In the late 1990s, migrant deaths were on the rise. In 2000, 499 migrants died along the Southwest border. Causes of death include hypothermia and heat stroke, drowning, accidents and homicide. See Hing, 189, 191.

Several scholars have noted that the provisions of the 1996 Act bear a striking resemblance to those of California's Prop 187.¹⁵⁰ Like its state law counterpart, IIRAIRA denied illegal immigrants access to public benefits like Social Security, housing, food stamps, and post-secondary educational assistance. And besides funneling still more funds for immigration enforcement and efforts to curtail illegal entries, it also allowed for the expedited removal of unauthorized aliens.¹⁵¹

But if Clinton has the dubious honor of signing a bill that severely restricted illegal aliens' access to public benefits, we might also credit him for introducing to the mainstream a significant modification to the narrative of immigrant America. In his 1995 state of the union address, Clinton added a notable qualification to the country's motto, declaring: "We are a nation of immigrants, but we are also a nation of laws."¹⁵² These words would have a lasting impact on the American discourse on immigration, altering the way politicians and the public conceive of and speak about the nation. In fact, both presidents who succeeded Clinton, George W. Bush and Barack Obama, would echo this refrain in their own speeches and their discussions of immigration policy.

In the context of the speech, Clinton's recasting of America as a nation of laws represents a rhetorical move that specifically calls attention to the problem of illegal immigration. Although Clinton presents the two images of America side by side, the structure of the juxtaposition has the effect of emphasizing the latter over the former. That is to say, while it is a given that America is "a nation of immigrants," citizens need

¹⁵⁰ LeMay, *Illegal Immigration*, 18; Newton, 57-60, 105-06.

¹⁵¹ Newton, 60.

¹⁵² Quoted in Beasley, *You, the People*, 91.

to remember and immigrants need to know that the United States is, at its core, a nation governed by laws. Deserving more than a passing notice, Clinton's declaration signals a striking shift in the discourse of immigration, from a narrative of hospitality to a narrative of order.

In the "nation of laws" narrative, illegal aliens are unquestionably the antagonists. Addressing the American public's concern about "the large numbers of illegal aliens entering our country," Clinton remarked:

The jobs they hold might otherwise be held by citizens or legal immigrants. The public services they use impose burdens on our taxpayers. That's why our Administration has moved aggressively to secure our borders more, by hiring a record number of new border guards, by deporting twice as many criminal aliens as ever before, by cracking down on illegal hiring, by barring welfare benefits to illegal aliens...[W]e will try to do more to speed the deportation of illegal aliens who are arrested for crimes, to better identify illegal aliens in the workplace... We are a nation of immigrants, but we are also a nation of laws. It is wrong and ultimately self-defeating for a nation of immigrants to permit the kind of abuse of our immigration laws we have seen in recent years, and we must do more to stop it.¹⁵³

Sounding a familiar tune, Clinton portrays illegal aliens as job stealers, burdens to society and, above all, lawbreakers. By singling out illegal aliens as undeserving opportunists, the President in effect reinforces the notion that they are unworthy of belonging to the nation of immigrants, which is made up of responsible and law abiding legal immigrants, citizens and taxpayers. Excluded from immigrant America, illegal aliens are instead written into the American narrative of order and law. In this story, they are cast as abusers of "our immigration laws." Because their very existence is predicated on the

¹⁵³ Bill Clinton, State of the Union Address, January 24, 1995; <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=51634> (25 September 2012).

violation of the rule of law, illegal aliens are inherently deemed at odds with the nation of laws. Moreover, they threaten the very idea of the United States as a nation of immigrants, for their unauthorized presence undermines the principle of consent upon which American liberal democracy is built. Unlike the “nation of immigrants” narrative which promises legal aliens the American Dream, the “nation of laws” narrative ends in deportation, which is the logical conclusion to a story that is populated with guards and whose plot is driven by the aggressive pursuit, scrutiny and identification of illegal aliens.

Suspicion, surveillance, and curbed civil liberties would characterize the latest period in U.S. immigration history. Not long after the September 11th terrorist attacks, President George W. Bush signed into law the USA Patriot Act (Uniting and Strengthening America by Providing Appropriate Tools Required to Intercept and Obstruct Terrorism Act), ushering in the Post-9/11 Era.¹⁵⁴ The Patriot Act’s consequences for immigration were far reaching. It not only broadened the power of law enforcement and immigration authorities to detain and deport immigrants suspected of terrorism-related activities. More importantly, it dramatically recast immigration as a national security concern, linking it to America’s ideological “War on Terror.” In 2003, the federal government dissolved the Immigration and Naturalization Service and transferred the administration of immigration to the jurisdiction of the newly created Department of Homeland Security. Today, immigration is handled by two agencies: the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement and the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services. Previously, immigration was under the Department of Justice, and before that, under the Department of Labor. That immigration is now administered by the

¹⁵⁴ The Patriot Act was signed on October 26, 2001.

Department of Homeland Security suggests a critical and indeed alarming turn in the nation's approach towards immigration. In this era, blatantly nativist and anti-immigrant policies pass under the guise of "security."

Since the September 11th attacks, there has been a push for even stronger enforcement of U.S. borders and the implementation of tougher immigration laws at both the federal and state levels. Notably, in December 2005, the House of Representatives passed The Border Protection, Anti-terrorism, and Illegal Immigration Control Act (H.R. 4437), which, among other things, raised penalties for illegal immigration, classified illegal aliens as felons, and made it a criminal offense to help undocumented aliens remain in the United States.¹⁵⁵ H.R. 4437 incited major demonstrations and immigration reform protests in cities across the United States, which perhaps contributed to the bill's ultimate demise in the Senate. While Congressional efforts at comprehensive immigration reform fail time and again, states including Arizona, Utah, Georgia, Indiana, Alabama, South Carolina, Tennessee, Florida, Kentucky and Virginia have passed or taken steps to enact laws directly aimed at identifying and deporting illegal aliens.¹⁵⁶ Gaining the most national attention, Arizona's SB 1070, signed into law on April 23, 2010, gave local police the power to detain anyone suspected of being an illegal alien and made it a criminal offense for aliens to fail to carry their immigration documents and

¹⁵⁵ HR 4437. The prohibition to help illegal aliens was seen as a particularly draconian proviso since it tied the hands of religious and humanitarian organizations from assisting those they deemed most vulnerable.

¹⁵⁶ "Anti-Illegal Immigration Laws in States," *The New York Times*, April 22, 2012; <http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2012/04/22/us/anti-illegal-immigration-laws-in-states.html> (17 September 2012).

proof of permission to reside in the United States.¹⁵⁷ Becoming notoriously known as Arizona's "Papers, Please" law, SB 1070 was denounced by critics for encouraging racial profiling. In response, a supporter of the law, Congressman Brian Bilbray, suggested that illegal aliens would be identified not by their race but by the clothes and shoes they wear and the way they act.¹⁵⁸ On June 25, 2012, the U.S. Supreme Court struck down a majority of SB 1070's provisions except for the "papers, please" rule, which the judges unanimously upheld.¹⁵⁹

In the Post-9/11 Era, hostile reaction against undocumented aliens has noticeably been on the rise, and immigrants from Mexico and Latin American countries continue to bear the brunt of the anti-immigration efforts. However, the linking of immigration and terrorism has spurred targeted attacks against Arab Americans, American Muslims, Sikhs and immigrants of South Asian descent. Recapitulating historical trends, immigrants today are cast as convenient scapegoats for matters both related and unrelated to terrorism. If the Mexican immigrant continues to be the iconic illegal alien, the Middle Eastern immigrant has emerged as the face of the immigrant-terrorist.

In the decade following the September 11th attacks, deportation of illegal immigrants has been on the rise. Purportedly focused on undocumented immigrants with criminal records, the Obama administration has achieved record-setting deportations

¹⁵⁷ Randal C. Archibold, "Arizona Enacts Stringent Law on Immigration," *The New York Times*, April 23, 2010; <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/04/24/us/politics/24immig.html> (17 September 2012).

¹⁵⁸ See Jeff Muskus, "Brian Bilbray, GOP Rep., Claims Clothes Identify Illegal Immigrants," *Huffington Post*, April 22, 2010; http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2010/04/22/brian-bilbray-gop-rep-cla_n_547710.html (12 April 2011).

¹⁵⁹ Adam Liptak, "Blocking Parts of Arizona Law, Justices Allow Its Centerpiece," *The New York Times*, June 25, 2012; <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/06/26/us/supreme-court-rejects-part-of-arizona-immigration-law.html?hp> (17 September 2012).

approaching 400,000 annual removals since 2009.¹⁶⁰ In 2011, the Pew Hispanic Center reported a downward trend in illegal immigration, suggesting that the economic recession coupled with federal, state and local enforcement efforts may have contributed to the decline in unauthorized entry.¹⁶¹ In June 2012, President Barack Obama announced a new policy that offered a temporary reprieve from deportation for young immigrants. Viewed both cynically and pragmatically by pundits as an election-year move to woo Latino voters, the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program grants deportation deferrals and legal work permits to undocumented aliens who would have benefitted from the DREAM Act.¹⁶² First introduced in 2001, the DREAM Act (Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors) sought to grant a stay of deportation and a path to lawful permanent resident status to illegal immigrants who were brought to the U.S. as minors, provided they meet certain criteria: be of “good moral character,” graduate from High School or obtain a GED, graduate from a two-year community college or complete two years toward a four-year degree, or serve two years in the military. Despite many Congressional debates and numerous iterations of the bill, the DREAM Act has never successfully passed both houses of Congress to become law.

¹⁶⁰ “Immigration Enforcement Actions: 2010,” Department of Homeland Security, Office of Immigration Statistics, Annual Report, June 2011; <http://www.dhs.gov/immigration-enforcement-actions-2010> (17 September 2012)

¹⁶¹ Jeffrey Passel and D’Vera Cohn, “Unauthorized Immigrant Population: National and State Trends, 2010,” February 1, 2011, Pew Hispanic Center. <http://www.pewhispanic.org/2011/02/01/unauthorized-immigrant-population-brnational-and-state-trends-2010/> (17 September 2012).

¹⁶² Jeffrey Passel and Mark Hugo Lopez, “Up to 1.7 Million Unauthorized Youth May Benefit from New Deportation Rules,” Pew Hispanic Center, August, 14, 2012; <http://www.pewhispanic.org/2012/08/14/up-to-1-7-million-unauthorized-immigrant-youth-may-benefit-from-new-deportation-rules/> (17 September 2012).

A consolation of sorts, the Deferred Action program extends amnesty-like benefits to as many as 1.7 undocumented immigrant youths.¹⁶³

The political and cultural narrative of the illegal alien continues to evolve even as the United States marches forward in the 21st century. Perpetually an “impossible subject” – “a person who cannot be and a problem that cannot be solved” – the illegal alien continues to pose a challenge for the U.S. immigration system.¹⁶⁴ Today, the dual image of America as “a nation of immigrants” and “a nation of laws” has become firmly ensconced in the discourse of immigration. And ironically, it is the illegal alien, the “impossible subject,” who is forcing the country’s leaders to negotiate and find a balance between the ideals these images represent. George W. Bush, for example, in a 2006 speech on immigration, remarked: “We are a nation of laws, and we must enforce our laws. We’re also a nation of immigrants, and we must uphold that tradition, which has strengthened our country in so many ways. These are not contradictory goals. America can be a lawful society and a welcoming society at the same time.”¹⁶⁵ Deploying the same rhetoric in a speech he delivered following the announcement of the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals program, President Barack Obama referred to “our

¹⁶³ Ibid.; Julia Preston, “Young Immigrants, in America Illegally, Line Up for Reprieve,” *The New York Times*, August 13, 2012; <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/08/14/us/young-immigrants-poised-for-deportation-deferral-program.html?pagewanted=all> (17 September 2012).

¹⁶⁴ Ngai, *Impossible Subjects*, 5.

¹⁶⁵ George W. Bush’s Speech on Immigration, May 15, 2006; transcript published in *The New York Times*; <http://www.nytimes.com/2006/05/15/washington/15text-bush.html> (17 September 2012).

heritage as a nation of laws and a nation of immigrants,” saying that “[w]e have always drawn strength” from both.¹⁶⁶

That “nation of laws” now precedes “nation of immigrants” in these examples is perhaps suggestive of the future direction not only of U.S. immigration discourse but more importantly immigration policy. Given that the nation of laws calls for the deportation of illegal immigrants, can there actually be a place for undocumented aliens in the nation of immigrants? As a vehicle for (re)imagining possibilities, can literature narrate the illegal alien back into the story of immigrant America? Or is the illegal alien too much of an impossible subject, proving not only to be a legal impossibility but also a *literary* impossibility?

¹⁶⁶ Barack Obama speaking about the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals. “Remarks by the President on Immigration,” June 15, 2012; <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2012/06/15/remarks-president-immigration> (17 September 2012).

Chapter Two

Unsettling Conventions: The Illegal American in Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine*

Toward the end of Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine* (1989), in chapter twenty-three, the novel's eponymous heroine and narrator declares: "I became an American in an apartment on Claremont Avenue across the street from a Barnard College dormitory."¹ Recalling an earlier period in her life, Jasmine locates her transformation into an American during the time she lived with Taylor and Wylie Hayes and served as an *au pair* for Duff, the couple's adopted daughter. An Indian immigrant who recently escaped the ethnic "ghetto" of Flushing, Queens, wherein she felt imprisoned behind a "fortress of Punjabiness," Jasmine enters the lives of the Hayeses and is ushered into the urban, professional, white, upper-middle-class world of mainstream America. In the Hayes household, immersed in a way of life and surrounded by people she perceives to be "entirely" or "perfectly American," Jasmine evolves into the American "Jase," the "prowling adventurer" who "lived for today."²

In a novel that has been described both by its author and by critics as a story about what it means to become an American, the protagonist's transformation from "reliable" and "diffident" Jasmine to brash and adventurous Jase indeed marks a significant moment

¹ Bharati Mukherjee, *Jasmine* (New York, Grove Press, 1989), 165. It is perhaps more accurate to say that Jane Ripplemeyer, who is the latest of the protagonist's various incarnations and from whose retrospective point of view much of the novel is told, is the narrator of the story. However, for the sake of consistency and to avoid confusion I will refer to the protagonist/narrator primarily as Jasmine, the character's titular moniker. I will use her other names only when it is appropriate to make a distinction between her various personas.

² *Ibid.*, 145, 148, 167, 170, 176.

in the immigrant heroine's life.³ Yet while the matter-of-fact tone with which the narrator declares "I became an American" seems but a straightforward acknowledgment of her successful Americanization, her confident assertion belies an incontrovertible fact: Jasmine/Jase is an illegal alien, and she remains so through the end of the novel. If Jasmine finds it unproblematic to claim for herself an American identity as an illegal immigrant, neither does her creator Bharati Mukherjee regard it as a source of conflict, for she presents the episode without a hint of irony. Dispelling the notion that Jasmine's identification as an American could merely be a delusion borne out of the heroine's naiveté, Mukherjee has explicitly stated that her character "is an American."⁴

Authorial and authoritative as it may be, Mukherjee's assertion begs an explanation, if not at least a qualification of terms. Indeed, the very simplicity of the claim ought to raise questions in the minds of more careful readers. For in immigration law and in popular discourse, illegal immigrants are invariably considered to be "not American." To staunch anti-immigrationists, undocumented aliens are unequivocally unwelcome foreigners, uninvited guests on U.S. soil. In other words, being illegal is fundamentally antithetical to being American. Thus, how can an illegal immigrant who is excluded from formal membership in the U.S. polity be an American? If Jasmine, as

³ Ibid., 176, 186. Mukherjee has said that a primary theme of her works, including *Jasmine*, is "the making of new Americans." Similarly, Gilbert Muller sees Jasmine as "a new American type," one who is "rooted in the cosmic rhythms of the Indian subcontinent and also in the rhythms and adventure and mobility so central to the mythology of the North American subcontinent." Michael Gorra, in his review of the book for *The New York Times*, says that *Jasmine* "stands as one of the most suggestive novels we have about what it is to become an American." See Bharati Mukherjee, "A Four-Hundred-Year-Old Woman," in *The Writer on Her Work, Volume II: New Essays in New Territory*, ed. Janet Sternburg (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1991), 37; Gilbert Muller, *New Strangers in Paradise: The Immigrant Experience and Contemporary American Fiction* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1999), 210; Michael Gorra, "Call It Exile, Call It Immigration," *The New York Times Book Review*, 10 September 1989; <http://www.nytimes.com/1989/09/10/books/call-it-exile-call-it-immigration.html> (25 June 2012).

⁴ Mukherjee, "A Four-Hundred-Year-Old Woman," 38; hereafter "Four-Hundred."

an undocumented alien, is barred from citizenship and has no recourse to rights, what then is the substance of her American identity?

Mukherjee's thoughts on American identity, as elaborated in various interviews, shed light on these questions. For her, being American is about "believing in certain social and civic ideals rather than blood and soil."⁵ Although she posits that American national identity emerges in part from citizens' shared belief in the democratic ideals "embedded in the U.S. Constitution and Bill of Rights," she also suggests that being American is more than just "hav[ing] a legal document that lets us shuttle back and forth across borders."⁶ Indeed, for Mukherjee, being American transcends the limitations that geography might otherwise impose. "Wherever I travel in the (very) Old World," she explains, "I find 'Americans' in the making, *whether or not they ever make it to these shores*. I see them as dreamers and conquerors, not afraid of transforming themselves, not afraid of abandoning some of their principles along the way."⁷ Mukherjee thus imagines being American to be something transcendental in that it is neither determined by one's membership to the nation-state nor constrained by its territorial borders. Offering perhaps her most radically abstract definition, she has suggested that "American" means having "an intensity of spirit and a quality of desire."⁸

⁵ Bharati Mukherjee, interview by Shefali Desai and Tony Barnstone, "A Usable Past: An Interview with Bharati Mukherjee," reprinted in *Conversations with Bharati Mukherjee*, ed. Bradley C. Edwards (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi 2009), 113.

⁶ Mukherjee, interview by Bradley C. Edwards, "Saying Yes to Opportunities: An Interview with Bharati Mukherjee," reprinted in *Conversations with Bharati Mukherjee*, 156, 175.

⁷ Mukherjee, "Four-Hundred," 37; emphasis added.

⁸ Mukherjee, interview by Sybil Steinberg, "Bharati Mukherjee," reprinted in *Conversations with Bharati Mukherjee*, 36.

Given her view of what it means to be American, it is not surprising that Mukherjee would have no reservations characterizing Jasmine as an American despite her heroine's illegal status. Jasmine is American because she is a dreamer who hopes.⁹ Moreover, not only does she have profound desires that she seeks to satiate, she also has the fighting spirit that enables her to go after what she wants. According to Mukherjee, "Jasmine's very open to new experience and optimistic about outcome. Her attitude is: [...] *You can't push me around! I'm here, I'm gonna stay if I want to, and I'm gonna conquer the territory!*"¹⁰ Having such strength of character is admirable, to be sure. But is that all that is required to be American? Is that what makes an American? In Mukherjee's America, apparently so. As David Li observes, Mukherjee's America is "not marked with geopolitical boundaries and does not require passports or residence cards, [rather,] it is a limitless inner space, 'an intensity of spirit' measured by 'hope' and 'a quality of desire' defined by 'wants.'"¹¹ In this America, it seems peculiarly easy for an illegal immigrant like Jasmine to become an American.

The apparent irrelevance of legal status and citizenship to Jasmine's process of Americanization contrasts sharply with the way Mukherjee describes her own transformation from immigrant to American. If Jasmine becomes American privately in an apartment in New York's Upper West Side, Mukherjee becomes American publicly at

⁹ Mukherjee, interview by Michael Connell, Jessie Grearson and Tom Grimes, "An Interview with Bharati Mukherjee and Clark Blaise," reprinted in *Conversations with Bharati Mukherjee*, 52.

¹⁰ Mukherjee, interview by Tina Chen and S.X. Goudie, "Holders of the Word: An Interview with Bharati Mukherjee," reprinted in *Conversations with Bharati Mukherjee*, 79; emphasis in the original.

¹¹ David Leiwei Li, *Imagining the Nation: Asian American Literature and Cultural Consent* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 98.

a Federal District Courthouse in Manhattan's Foley Square.¹² Declaring "I'm one of you now," Mukherjee marks her naturalization from alien to citizen as the culmination of her Americanization.¹³ For her, that moment represents the end "of a long process of searching for a home that is right for me."¹⁴ Having exchanged her green card for a naturalization certificate, she is no longer an immigrant "other" but rather "one of you," a full-fledged American citizen. Although Mukherjee seems to downplay "[b]eing officially received into the United States" as "a bureaucratic exercise," she is well aware of the rights, protections and privileges that she gains by becoming a citizen.¹⁵ "I take my American citizenship very seriously," she says.¹⁶ Not only does she recognize the power of voting as a means of making one's voice heard, she also values and encourages the use of legal remedies when a citizen's constitutional rights are violated. In fact, she is particularly adamant about citizens knowing about and fighting for their rights. In her essay "American Dreamer," she writes, "Make your voice heard. [...] If you are a citizen, let your vote count. [...] Know your constitutional rights, and when they are violated, use the agencies of redress the Constitution makes available to you."¹⁷

¹² Bharati Mukherjee, "Immigrant Writing: Give Us Your Maximalists!," *The New York Times*, 28 August 1988, BR1; hereafter "Maximalists."

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid., BR29.

¹⁵ Ibid., BR 1.

¹⁶ Bharati Mukherjee, "Beyond Multiculturalism: Surviving the Nineties," *Journal of Modern Literature* 20.1 (1996): 31; hereafter "Multiculturalism."

¹⁷ Bharati Mukherjee, "American Dreamer," *Mother Jones* (January/February 1997); <http://motherjones.com/politics/1997/01/american-dreamer> (9 March 2010). See also Mukherjee, interview by Angela Elam, "The True Heirs: An Interview with Bharati Mukherjee," reprinted in *Conversations with Bharati Mukherjee*, 139.

In Mukherjee's personal experience, then, citizenship and its accompanying rights and privileges are a fundamental part of being American. This notion of American identity grounded in the language of law, rights and citizenship, however, is obscured in her novel, which envisions Americanness in ambiguous terms as having a particular character, spirit and desire. Placed side by side, it is evident that the kind of Americanness Mukherjee experiences and claims for herself differs significantly from the kind she imagines for her character Jasmine, who, as an illegal alien, cannot exercise the rights the author values so highly. Indeed, Mukherjee can be confident in publicly proclaiming herself an American because her new identity is granted and legitimized by the state. Jasmine's claim to being American, on the other hand, is illegitimate and unauthorized. For her, being American can only ever be a matter of personal and private experience.

My point in highlighting these differences is not to expose some sort of problematic inconsistency in Mukherjee's thinking and criticize her for it. Rather, I call attention to the incongruity in order to place under critical examination the American identity that the novel imagines for and makes available to the undocumented immigrant.

To be sure, Jasmine's assertion of American identity challenges any exclusivist view that would regard "American" solely as a matter of legal-political identification. But while the novel does open up possibilities for re-thinking what it means to be American, it also affords us the opportunity to consider the limits of claiming such an identity for the undocumented immigrant. What does an American identity look like for the illegal alien? What kind of an American is the undocumented immigrant if she has not even the right to be in the United States? What does it mean to be an "American" but

not have the rights and privileges of a citizen? What are the limits of this kind of “American” identity?

Reading *Jasmine*, I am hesitant to agree with the author and the critics who regard the novel as a story of an immigrant’s successful transformation into an American. Analyzing the ways in which illegality shapes Jasmine’s experiences and defines her identity, I suggest that the novel produces a paradoxical subject: the “illegal American.” Rife with contradiction, the illegal American in Mukherjee’s novel prefigures (more than a decade earlier!) the “Dreamers” of the DREAM Act generation, whose lives and experiences are beset with incongruities, especially with regard to their cultural and official legal/national identification.

Centering on the figure of the illegal American as a means to offer a new way of reading and understanding the novel, this chapter examines the ways in which illegality challenges, disrupts and unsettles the narrative conventions Mukherjee uses to tell Jasmine’s immigration story. The discussion focuses on three main tropes: the immigrant’s process of Americanization, the immigrant’s pursuit of the American Dream, and the immigrant’s effort to root herself in America through the formation of kinship bonds (especially vis-à-vis marriage). As a constitutive part of her identity, Jasmine’s illegality precludes her from becoming fully American. For no matter how great a cultural transformation Jasmine undergoes, her Americanness, unaccompanied by a legitimate legal identity, is precarious at best. Moreover, being illegal limits Jasmine’s attainment of the American Dream. Despite possessing what Mukherjee would characterize as the quintessential American spirit – a spirit that seeks to “re-position the stars” and is “greedy with wants and reckless from hope” – Jasmine is unable to escape

the fear and anxiety that comes from being illegal.¹⁸ Obscuring the promise of America, illegality threatens to turn the American Dream into a nightmare instead. Finally, illegal alienage prevents Jasmine from establishing legal kinship ties that could help secure her membership to the American polity. Posing a problem for the conventional marriage plot, Jasmine's illegality affords her only illegitimate and illicit relationships rather than a lawful marital union.

The "Mainstreaming" of the Illegal Alien by an American Author

To provide context for the ensuing analysis and discussion, it is instructive first to examine Mukherjee's personal journey of becoming American, her self-positioning as an American writer, her views on immigration, and her engagement of the issue of illegal immigration in her work.

Jasmine occupies an important place in Mukherjee's literary corpus, for as Gurleen Grewal notes, it represents "the culmination of a literary trajectory" that began with her very first novel, *The Tiger's Daughter* (1972). Mukherjee has described this trajectory as "a movement away from the aloofness of expatriation, to the exuberance of immigration."¹⁹ In her earlier work Mukherjee maintained an expatriate sensibility and wrote from the perspective of a "detached on-looker," employing "a mordant self-protective irony" that allowed her to distance herself from immigrants whom she saw then as "lost souls put upon and pathetic."²⁰ However, starting with her short story

¹⁸ Mukherjee, *Jasmine*, 240-41.

¹⁹ Bharati Mukherjee, "Introduction," in *Darkness* (Ontario, Canada: Penguin Books, 1985), 3.

²⁰ Mukherjee, "Multiculturalism," 31; "Introduction" to *Darkness*, 1.

collection *Darkness* (1985), Mukherjee began to surrender her “expatriate aristocrat” sense of self, accepting a less certain identity as an “immigrant nobody.”²¹ By the time she published *Jasmine*, Mukherjee had already come to view herself as a “committed immigrant.”²² Freed from the imprisoning confinement of expatriate nostalgia, she put roots down in the United States and fully embraced her new American identity. As evidence of her transformation from expatriate to immigrant, *Jasmine* is, in a very distinct way, a reflection of Mukherjee’s “clear-eyed but definite love for America.”²³

Mukherjee’s love for America developed over time and came about as a result of a life-long search for home. As she herself has noted, “[I] found my way to the United States after many transit stops.”²⁴ Born on July 27, 1940 in Calcutta, India, Mukherjee was raised in the elite Brahminical society characterized by “top family, top school, top caste, top city.”²⁵ As part of her early childhood education, she attended schools in England and Switzerland, where her father, a chemist, conducted research as part of his work. When the family returned to India, Mukherjee continued her education in Loreto House, a private British convent school run by Irish nuns. She received her Bachelor’s degree in English at the University of Calcutta and then went on to pursue her Master’s degree at the University of Baroda, studying English and ancient Indian culture. Having decided to become a writer, a career decision that her father supported, Mukherjee left India in 1961 to attend the University of Iowa’s Writers’ Workshop. After receiving her

²¹ Bharati Mukherjee, “Two Ways to Belong in America,” *The New York Times*, 22 September 1996, E13.

²² Mukherjee, “Multiculturalism,” 31.

²³ Mukherjee, interview by Sybil Steinberg, 36.

²⁴ Mukherjee, “Four-Hundred,” 34.

²⁵ Mukherjee, “Maximalists,” B28.

MFA in 1963, she applied and was admitted to the University of Iowa's doctoral program in English and Comparative Literature, completing the degree in 1969.²⁶

Mukherjee's first immersion into American life and society occurred during her years in Iowa. However, it would not be until over a decade later that she finally made the United States her permanent home. In 1966, while still working on her Ph.D., Mukherjee and her husband Clarke Blaise moved to Montreal. Blaise, who is Canadian, was a fellow student at the Writers' Workshop. The two were married in the fall of 1963. The couple lived in Canada for fourteen years, establishing a life, successful careers, and a family there.²⁷ Although Mukherjee became a Canadian citizen, she considered herself more as an expatriate Bengali, not least of all because as a person of color she felt excluded from the country's national identity. She describes the years in Canada as "particularly harsh," a time she found herself becoming increasingly angry and paranoid as a result of the race-related harassments she observed and personally experienced.²⁸

Dissatisfied with Canada's policy of multiculturalism, which led to the exclusion rather than the assimilation of immigrants, Mukherjee relocated her family to the United States in 1980. From her perspective, America's "melting pot theory of immigration" not only encouraged "a healthier attitude toward Indian immigrants," it also "help[ed] the newcomer to feel more welcome."²⁹ Developing a deep appreciation for the ideals

²⁶ Biographical information on Mukherjee cited from Alam Fakrul, *Bharati Mukherjee* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1996), xiii-11.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, xiii, 5-8.

²⁸ Mukherjee explains that in Canada, she was often assumed to be either a prostitute, a shoplifter or a domestic. Mukherjee, "American Dreamer."

²⁹ Mukherjee, interview by Allison Carb, "An Interview with Bharati Mukherjee," reprinted in *Conversations with Bharati Mukherjee*, 29; Mukherjee, interview by Sybil Steinberg, 35.

contained in the American Bill of Rights and the Constitution, she embraced America in the same way she felt accepted by America.

In contrast to Canada where she felt suffocated and trapped, the United States proved to be a liberating and transformative place for Mukherjee and her writing. While serving as a writer-in-residence at Georgia's Emory University in the winter of 1983, she had a burst of creativity, the product of which are the stories contained in *Darkness*. More importantly, it was during this time that she gained clarity with regard to the inspiration for her work. As she recalls, "I finally had a glimpse of my true material, and that is immigration."³⁰ Gone was the expatriate's nostalgic impulse to preserve a fragile Indian identity. In its place was the immigrant writer's surrender to the fluidity of identity and the possibilities for self-transformation.

Mukherjee acknowledges that her transformation as a writer coincided with her immigration to the United States.³¹ Surrendering her Canadian citizenship, she became a "committed immigrant" who made "emotional, social, and political commitments to this country." She describes herself as a "voluntary immigrant" and a "citizen by choice." Unlike those who are citizens "by simple accident of birth," she considers herself as one who has "earned the right to think of myself as an American."³² That she made a conscious decision to immigrate to the U.S. and become a naturalized citizen has profoundly shaped the way she conceives of herself as a writer.

³⁰ Mukherjee, "Four-Hundred," 37.

³¹ Mukherjee, "Introduction" to *Darkness*, 2.

³² Mukherjee, "American Dreamer"; Mukherjee, "Multiculturalism," 31.

Expressly differentiating herself from Indian, exilic and expatriate writers, Bharati Mukherjee proudly professes to be “an American writer, in the American mainstream.”³³ Unlike some of her contemporaries who embrace a hyphenated ethnic-American identity, she frankly rejects being labeled as an Indian-American writer. On more than one occasion, she has described herself as “an American author in the tradition of other American authors whose ancestors arrived at Ellis Island.”³⁴ Perhaps not surprisingly, Mukherjee’s self-positioning as part of a distinctly European immigrant literary legacy has garnered her much criticism from postcolonial and Asian American critics who regard her assimilationist attitude to be problematic, if not alarming. Anindyo Roy, for example, asserts that Mukherjee “subsumes her postcoloniality” in a “Euro-centered aesthetic rite of passage” in order to “legitimize her own romantic ‘epic’ imagination, seamlessly weaving it into the archetypal European immigrant experience in the New World.”³⁵ Similarly, Shirley Geok-lin Lim suggests that Mukherjee “goes further than many Asian American writers in her assimilatory position.” In fact, Lim finds Mukherjee’s embrace of assimilation so troubling that she accuses the author of “advocating historical amnesia,” specifically vis-à-vis the discourses of nationalism, racism and sexism that have informed the Asian American immigrant experience.³⁶

³³ Mukherjee, “Four-Hundred,” 34.

³⁴ Mukherjee, interview by Allison Carb, 27. Similarly, in the “Introduction” to her short story collection *Darkness*, she writes: “I see myself as an American writer in the tradition of other American writers whose parents or grandparents had passed through Ellis Island” (*Darkness*, 3).

³⁵ Anindyo Roy, “The Aesthetics of an (Un)willing Immigrant,” in *Bharati Mukherjee: Critical Perspectives*, ed. Emmanuel S. Nelson (New York: Garland Publishing, 1993), 130.

³⁶ Shirley Geok-lin Lim, “Immigration and Diaspora,” in *An Interethnic Companion to Asian American Literature*, ed. King-Kok Cheung (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 303.

Echoing Lim's concerns, Ketu Katrak notes that "in general, Mukherjee stays within a safe 'political' space with regard to the politics of race in the United States."³⁷

Despite such scathing criticism, Mukherjee stands firm and is unapologetic about her position on assimilation. As an immigrant who has chosen to make the United States her home, she acknowledges that her "investment is in the American reality, not the Indian."³⁸ However, as she has professed, her American reality is very much shaped by her experience of immigration. "We immigrants have fascinating tales to relate," she says. "Our lives are remarkable, often heroic."³⁹ Writing about immigrants' lives, she says: "My task as an author is to make my intricate and unknown world comprehensible to mainstream American readers."⁴⁰

Based on her self-representation, then, we might say that Mukherjee is a mainstream American author writing for mainstream American readers about the immigrant experience. Occupying a privileged position as a renowned and respected literary figure, she sees herself as an intermediary between immigrants and the American reading public. And her goal is to make the "unknown" world of the former apprehensible to the latter. Mukherjee is not unlike other immigrant writers in that she seeks to render the immigrant experience understandable to mainstream Americans who have a history of being not only wary of foreigners but also suspicious of difference. As discussed in the previous chapter, immigrant writers – including the Ellis Island authors

³⁷ Ketu Katrak, "Colonialism, Imperialism, and Imagined Homes," in *The Columbia History of the American Novel*, ed. Emory Elliot (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 678.

³⁸ Mukherjee, "Four-Hundred," 34.

³⁹ Mukherjee, interview by Allison Carb, 30.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

that Mukherjee speaks of – have traditionally written for mainstream audiences because the practice enables them to escape the margins and move more towards the center of American society. For many immigrant authors, writing becomes a means by which they and their respective immigrant communities are introduced and integrated into the dominant culture.⁴¹

Writing in the context of late-twentieth century United States, Mukherjee positions herself as a voice for the new immigrant America. In her famous and oft-quoted *New York Times* article “Immigrant Writing: Give Us Your Maximalists,” she states:

All around me I see the face of America changing. So do you, if you live in cities, teach in universities, ride public transport. But where, in fiction, do you read of it? Who, in other words, speaks for us, the new Americans from nontraditional immigrant countries? Which is another way of saying, in this altered America, who speaks for you?⁴²

The rhetorical move the author makes here should not be overlooked. According to David Cowart, implied in Mukherjee’s question is the following proposition: “we” are (or will soon be) “you.”⁴³ As an immigrant-turned-citizen who boldly declares to her American readers “I am one of you now,” Mukherjee is part of both “the new Americans” and “the altered America.”⁴⁴ Though far from being the only voice in immigrant/altered America, she is one author who aims and claims to speak for both “us”

⁴¹ For more on the role of writing as a means for ethnic writers to enter into mainstream society, see Thomas Ferraro, *Ethnic Passages: Literary Immigrants in Twentieth-Century America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993).

⁴² Mukherjee, “Maximalists,” BR1.

⁴³ David Cowart, *Trailing Clouds: Immigrant Fiction in Contemporary America* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2006), 1.

⁴⁴ Mukherjee, “Maximalists,” BR1.

and “you.” Noticing the absence of this group from American literature, she makes it her goal in her own work to portray the changing face of America.

In *Jasmine*, Mukherjee presents an American social landscape being reconfigured and transformed by the mass migration of Third World peoples from around the world. From Florida to New York, from Iowa to California, the United States is depicted as the stage for inevitable encounters between ordinary American citizens and immigrants and refugees. Set broadly in the 1980s, the novel speaks to the historical realities of its time, when the U.S. was responding to and experiencing the aftereffects of not only the country’s military interventions abroad (e.g., Vietnam and Latin America) but also the significant immigration legislation enacted during the preceding decades. And as discussed previously, the problem of illegal immigration was starting to dominate domestic national politics, forcing Congress to craft and pass the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986.

Given the controversial and highly political nature of illegal immigration around the time of *Jasmine*’s publication, it seems a bold, if not potentially risky move on Mukherjee’s part to cast an undocumented alien at the center of her novel. Would readers find her illegal immigrant heroine to be a sympathetic character? Would conservative audiences criticize the book for its implicit approval of illegal immigration? Reviews of the novel and the body of scholarship that has developed around the book attest to the fact that neither Jasmine’s undocumented status nor the issue of illegal immigration that the book raises has received much attention from critics or readers. While almost all critics acknowledge that immigration is both the organizing plot and a

central theme of the novel, only a few ever mention Jasmine's illegal alienage, let alone address it as an issue that might have some bearing on the way we read the story.

If Jasmine's illegal status can be all too easily overlooked by critics who, bear in mind, are writing during a time when illegal immigration is an ever-present concern in national political discourse, it may be due to the fact that Mukherjee's novel allows for such an oversight to occur. In other words, if in the course of reading the novel people forget that the protagonist is an undocumented alien, it is because the narrative framework Mukherjee relies on to tell Jasmine's story functions in such a way as to obscure the character's status.

Writing in the tradition of "Ellis Island writers," Mukherjee anchors the novel in the "white ethnic tradition" of "assimilation and melting pot mythology."⁴⁵ She employs the familiar tropes of social mobility, cultural assimilation and inter-racial/inter-ethnic romance that are archetypal of white European immigration narratives. Because Mukherjee uses a narrative framework that traditionally presumes the legality of its immigrant characters, Jasmine's undocumented status at times becomes obscured in the story. Indeed, in many ways Jasmine appears to be just another incarnation of the immigrant who successfully achieves the American Dream. Considering the relative ease with which she assimilates into American culture and her rapid transformation from abused and impoverished immigrant to common-law wife of a white middle-class Midwestern business man, it is not surprising that many critics would treat her undocumented status as inconsequential. In the grand scheme of this immigrant

⁴⁵ Li, 93-94; Rob Burton, *Artists of the Floating World: Contemporary Writers Between Cultures* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2007), 89.

assimilation and upward mobility narrative, the heroine's illegality *seems* to make no difference at all. But as I will show later in this chapter, Jasmine's undocumented status does, in fact, matter. For to acknowledge the real consequences of illegal alienage – not least of all the perpetual threat of deportation – is to risk derailment of the Americanization narrative.

Gurleen Grewal, one critic who does take note of the protagonist's undocumented status, astutely observes that *Jasmine* is “a narrative about the ‘mainstreaming’ of an illegal alien.”⁴⁶ Based on my own assessment of Mukherjee's work, I am inclined to agree with Grewal's characterization of the novel as such. Intending to represent the “non-traditional” immigrants who are transforming the very character and make up of America, Mukherjee, I suggest, attempts to “mainstream” the illegal alien precisely by writing her into the conventional immigration narrative that is most familiar to her target audience. By downplaying the impact of immigrant status on Jasmine's process of Americanization, Mukherjee works toward achieving her literary aim of “[making] the exotic familiar.”⁴⁷ If readers see that an undocumented immigrant like Jasmine desires and has the capacity to obtain the American Dream just like the archetypal (legal) immigrant, they are less likely to perceive the illegal alien as a threat. In other words, Mukherjee makes the exotic familiar by de-emphasizing the difference between legal and illegal immigrants. From Mukherjee's optimistic outlook, both classes of persons have the potential to become Americans, regardless of their status.

⁴⁶ Gurleen Grewal, “Indian-American Literature,” in *New Immigrant Literatures in the United States*, ed. Alpana Sharma Knippling (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1996), 100.

⁴⁷ Mukherjee, “Four-Hundred,” 35.

Minimizing the differences that distinguish one immigrant from another is, for better or worse, a consequence of Mukherjee's self-appointed task of representing the "new Americans" of "altered America." Although she herself comes from a specific cultural and social location and occupies a position of privilege as a highly educated professional, Mukherjee makes it a point to cast her lot with the variegated masses of non-traditional immigrants. She writes: "I see *myself* in those same outcasts; I see myself in an article on a Trinidad-Indian hooker; I see myself in the successful executive who slides Hindi film music in his tape deck as he drives into Manhattan; I see myself in the shady accountant who's trying to marry off his loose-living daughter; in professors, domestics, high school students, illegal busboys in ethnic restaurants."⁴⁸ By focusing on what connects her to – as opposed to what differentiates her from – other non-traditional immigrants, Mukherjee finds a place from which to "speak for" immigrant outcasts, hookers, executives, domestics and illegal busboys.

As with her position on assimilation, Mukherjee has been roundly lambasted for depicting and claiming to speak for immigrants with whom she does not share a common ethnic or class background. Surveying her work, one finds that Mukherjee's stories are indeed populated by vast array of immigrant characters. While some do bear degrees of resemblance to her, many more are quite different in terms of race, ethnicity, class and gender. Her characters include Bengali women trying to cope with life in North America, South Asian imported brides, Indian families in the ethnic enclaves of Queens, Vietnamese American children of veterans, undocumented immigrants from countries like Trinidad, Afghanistan and Mexico living as students, restaurant workers and

⁴⁸ Mukherjee, "Introduction" to *Darkness*, 3; italics in the original.

domestics. In Mukherjee's representation of immigration, critics not only perceive a disingenuous disavowal of the author's own privileges as a post-colonial elite; they also detect a tendency to gloss over the socio-economic, cultural, ethnic and racial differences that shape the experiences of diverse immigrant communities. Because Mukherjee tends to elide the material realities that impact immigrants' lives, some critics see her as a questionable representative of the Third World immigrants for whom she purports to speak.⁴⁹

With regard to *Jasmine*, critics would not be incorrect to point out that there exists a large socio-economic chasm between the elite Brahminical society in which Mukherjee was raised and the lower caste from which her impoverished protagonist hails. And to be sure, there is an incontrovertible difference between the author's immigrant status and that of Jasmine. In an interview with Angela Elam, Mukherjee has said that while her stories include characters "who had come in *sneaki*" (i.e., "snuck into the United States"), she herself was never illegal.⁵⁰ Given Mukherjee's privileged social status, some critics have thus called into question her credibility to represent a woman who is part of the Third World immigrant underclass.

Unlike many of her detractors, however, my concern is not whether Mukherjee's background inherently prevents or disqualifies her from writing an "authentic" representation of a poor, uneducated, undocumented immigrant woman's life. I will

⁴⁹ See Gurleen Grewal, "Indian-American Literature" in *New Immigrant Literatures in the United States*; G. Grewal, "Born Again American: The Immigrant Consciousness in *Jasmine*" in *Bharati Mukherjee: Critical Perspectives*, ed. Emmanuel S. Nelson; Alpana Sharma Knippling, "Toward An Investigation of the Subaltern in Bharati Mukherjee's *The Middleman and Other Stories* and *Jasmine*" in *Bharati Mukherjee: Critical Perspectives*, ed. Emmanuel S. Nelson; Anindyo Roy, "The Aesthetics of an (Un)willing Immigrant" in *Bharati Mukherjee: Critical Perspectives*, ed. Emmanuel S. Nelson.

⁵⁰ Mukherjee, interview by Angela Elam, 38.

leave the question of authenticity for others to debate. My interest lies in the way Mukherjee uses traditional narrative structures to tell the story of an otherwise unconventional immigrant protagonist. In what ways does illegality challenge the narrative structures that implicitly favor the legal immigrant? How does the traditional immigrant narrative succeed or fail to accommodate the figure of the illegal alien? What representational problems might the illegal alien pose for a narrative that seeks to imagine a place for the immigrant in America? What are the political implications of writing the illegal immigrant into a traditional narrative?

The Problems that Illegality Poses

In his book *New Strangers in Paradise*, Gilbert H. Muller examines the “ways in which American novelists and short story writers utilize the immigrant experience to erect new epics or national narratives for our times.” Analyzing Bharati Mukherjee’s *Jasmine*, he suggests that the novel “posits a new American type rooted in the cosmic rhythms of the Indian subcontinent and also in the rhythms of adventure and mobility so central to the mythology of the North American continent.” To be sure, *Jasmine* presents a different perspective on the immigrant experience by focusing on the Third World South Asian immigrant. But apart from this twist, I argue that the novel can hardly be seen as a break from convention, for it rehearses long-standing national myths of mobility and regeneration that Muller himself states are “intrinsic” to American immigration.⁵¹

⁵¹ Gilbert H. Muller, *New Strangers in Paradise*, ix, 210, 209, 206.

As discussed earlier, critics interested in issues of ethnicity and race have, to varying degrees, criticized *Jasmine* as a national narrative that seeks to represent the experience of Indian Americans and, more broadly, Asian Americans. Yet few have taken the novel to task for its representation of undocumented immigrants. Indeed, my contention is that *Jasmine* ought not be read only through the lens of race and ethnicity. For inasmuch as the novel is about an Indian/Asian immigrant, it is equally about an illegal alien. Bearing this in mind, it is instructive for us to consider *Jasmine* as a kind of national narrative for the undocumented immigrant.

That Mukherjee seeks to find a symbolic place for the illegal alien within the American immigrant narrative is evident in her work. Pointing to a pivotal moment in *Jasmine*, she refers to a passage in which she writes about the “people whose lives and whose accommodations are inspiring [her] as an immigrant, a naturalized American writer.” Included in this group of people is the undocumented alien, who, she explains, has appeared in her short stories and is now the featured character in what has arguably become her most popular novel.⁵²

Any reader of Mukherjee can see that she has not shied away from broaching the subject of illegal immigration in her work. In her collections *Darkness* and *The Middleman and Other Stories*, she introduces undocumented immigrant characters in different socio-cultural contexts and in a variety of guises. In “Isolated Incidents,” a

⁵² Mukherjee, interview by Angela Elam, 137. Mukherjee states that the passage appears about one-third of the way into the novel. She seems to be referring to the section that begins Chapter 15 which describes people in transit and those who are not always welcomed into the United States: “But we are refugees and mercenaries and guest workers... We are the outcasts and deportees, strange pilgrims visiting outlandish shrines, landing at the end of tarmacs, ferried in old army trucks where we are roughly handled and taken to roped-off corners of waiting rooms where surly, barely wakened customs guards await their bribe... We ask only one thing: to be allowed to land; to pass through; to continue... We must sneak in, land by night in little-used strips (*Jasmine*, 100-101).

Hispanic woman in Toronto who is in danger of being deported after her visa expires receives no help from a Human Rights organization.⁵³ Undocumented workers at a restaurant scramble to avoid capture during an immigration raid in the story “Tamurlane.” “Buried Lives” chronicles the circuitous journey of a Sri Lankan man as he attempts to make his way to North America with falsified documents. In “Danny’s Girls,” mail-order brides smuggled into the United States become victims of a human trafficking operation that promises green cards in exchange for marriage. “Orbiting” alludes to undocumented Afghan political refugees who are locked up in a New York detention center.⁵⁴

Regularly including undocumented aliens into the backdrop of her short stories, Mukherjee shows the ways in which illegal immigration has become part and parcel of contemporary life in the United States and Canada. In *Jasmine*, however, she moves the figure of the undocumented alien to the foreground, crafting an expansive tale of immigration premised on a young Indian woman’s illegal entry to the U.S., her cultural assimilation, and her subsequent transformation into an American. As Mukherjee has explained, the novel grew out of a short story included in her prize-winning collection *The Middleman and Other Stories*, for which she won the National Book Critics Circle Award in 1988. Bearing the same title as the succeeding novel, the short story revolves around an undocumented woman named Jasmine, the character with whom, Mukherjee

⁵³ The story does not specify the woman’s country of origin. She does not have a name and is referred to primarily as the sister of one Mister Hernandez.

⁵⁴ See Bharati Mukherjee, *Darkness; The Middleman and Other Stories* (New York: Fawcett Crest, 1988).

confesses, she “fell in love” and for whom she later created a more complex and elaborate narrative.⁵⁵

In the short story, Jasmine makes her way to Detroit, Michigan from Port-of-Spain, Trinidad via Canada, crossing the border covertly in the back of a delivery van. “A girl with ambition,” Jasmine leaves her relatively comfortable middle-class existence in Trinidad to “do something with her life” in the United States.⁵⁶ In Detroit, she connects with the Daboos, a Trinidad Indian family with whom her father had made arrangements. For a while she works as a housekeeper at a local motel managed by the Daboos and as a bookkeeper for the same family’s “match-up marriage service,” which arranges unions between illegal and legal immigrants.⁵⁷ However, wanting more out of life, she leaves Detroit for Ann Arbor, where one supposedly gets an education and secures a good future. There, she poses as a student and finds employment as a live-in caretaker for Muffie, the daughter of the Moffits. Bill, a molecular biology professor, and Lara, a performance artist, embrace her as part of the family. Allured by his kind and easy-going American ways, she soon develops romantic feelings for Bill, who in turn acts on his own attraction towards her. When Lara leaves town for a performance tour, Bill makes advances on Jasmine. Throwing caution to the wind, she welcomes his seduction

⁵⁵ Mukherjee, interview by Connell, Grearson and Grimes, 46.

⁵⁶ Bharati Mukherjee, “Jasmine” in *The Middleman and Other Stories*, 123-24. As Mukherjee has explained in her interview with Connell, Grearson and Grimes, the Jasmine of the short story comes from a middle-class family in Trinidad (46). In the story, we learn that Jasmine’s father is a well-known doctor and she herself held a professional job at a bank.

⁵⁷ Mukherjee, “Jasmine,” 125.

and willingly yields to the moment, “[giving] herself up to it.”⁵⁸ Here the short story ends.

In the relatively brief span of the story, Jasmine undergoes a significant transformation. Slowly distancing herself “from anything too islandy,” she learns from Lara how to become “her own person.”⁵⁹ Heartened by a newfound sense of freedom and independence, she takes an optimistic outlook on her life and even considers her undocumented status (“no visa, no papers, and no birth certificate”) as an opportunity to become anything “she wanted to invent and tell.”⁶⁰ In the short story, Jasmine develops what is perhaps her most defining characteristic: her attitude of hopeful abandon. Indeed, this trait is preserved and even more apparent in her later incarnation in the novel. As attentive readers will see, the “girl rushing wildly into the future” whom we meet in the short story bears a striking resemblance to the young woman in the novel who is “greedy with wants and reckless from hope.”⁶¹

Comparing the short story and the novel, we see that the two tales share the same basic plot: a young woman comes to the United States illegally, works as an *au pair* for a white upper-middle class family, and develops a romantic relationship with the husband. However, in the process of making Jasmine a “deeper, more complicated character,” Mukherjee felt it necessary to make significant changes not only to the setting of the

⁵⁸ Ibid., 135.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 131-32.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 135.

⁶¹ Ibid.; *Jasmine*, 241. In his comparison of the short story and the novel, Alam Fakrul also observes the close similarity between the two Jasmynes. See Alam Fakrul, *Bharati Mukherjee*, 101.

story but also to the heroine's social and cultural background.⁶² Whereas the Jasmine of the short story is a Trinidad Indian woman who settles in Michigan, the Jasmine of the novel is a Punjabi woman from Hasnapur, India who makes her way through Florida, New York and Iowa.⁶³ Moreover, while the former grows up in a middle-class household with enough resources to afford a servant, the latter comes from a rural family of modest means and is dowry-less.

In both versions of the story, Mukherjee extols the idea of self-transformation that immigration makes possible. For the two incarnations of Jasmine, transformation manifests in the assertion of one's personal freedom, the attainment of some degree of financial independence through work, and the ownership and exercise of one's sexuality. Of course, the heroine's process of re-invention is significantly more compelling in the novel. However, this is due not simply to the greater space for development that the genre affords. Crucial here is Mukherjee's decision to change the heroine's cultural and class origins. In the author's estimation, Trinidadian society is similarly adaptable like American society and thus does not provide enough of a contrast. To emphasize and make more dramatic the protagonist's transformation, Mukherjee states that she "had to give [Jasmine] a society that was so repressive, traditional, so caste-bound, class bound, [and] genderist, that she could discard it."⁶⁴

By re-situating the heroine's origins within a more repressive society, Mukherjee sets the stage for Jasmine's rejection of the Old World and her subsequent preference for

⁶² Mukherjee, interview by Connell, Gearson and Grimes, 46.

⁶³ To be more explicit, the Jasmine of the short story is of Indian descent but was born and raised in the Caribbean island of Trinidad.

⁶⁴ Mukherjee, interview by Connell, Gearson and Grimes, 46.

the New. In this light, Jasmine's desire to assimilate to American society would thus appear justifiable and reasonable. Not surprisingly, she readily abandons the rigid customs of her upbringing soon after she arrives in the United States. Freed from the social strictures of the Old World, Jasmine eagerly embraces the "fluidity" of American society, which, from Mukherjee's perspective, is precisely what allows for self-transformation and re-invention to occur.⁶⁵ Furthermore, by making Jasmine part of a lower class and caste, Mukherjee creates a condition whereby the protagonist can pursue the American Dream and achieve social mobility. Unlike the middle-class Jasmine of the short story who experiences and "resents the social demotion" that immigration brought about, the Jasmine of the novel sees only opportunities to improve her station in life.⁶⁶

Regarding her decision to expand the short story into a novel, Mukherjee states that she had to "find the metaphors and symbolic location for [Jasmine], and then the right series of events to dramatize the ideas" she wanted to convey.⁶⁷ To be sure, the long form of the novel affords Mukherjee the opportunity to incorporate new dramatic scenes that develop and complicate Jasmine's story. But the novel does more than just give Mukherjee the "space to fulfill [Jasmine's] dreams."⁶⁸ Through the novel,

⁶⁵ Mukherjee's view of American society as "fluid" is largely influenced by her experience of Indian society as restrictive and inflexible. That the Jasmine of the novel sees the fluidity of US society as an opportunity to re-invent herself is, according to Mukherjee, a reflection of her autobiographical impulse (Interview by Connell, Grearson and Grimes, 46). Describing her marriage to Clark Blaise when she was a student at the University of Iowa, she says: "By choosing a husband who was not my father's selection, I was opting for fluidity, self-invention, blue jeans and T-shirts, and renouncing 3,000 years (at least) of caste-observant, 'pure-culture' marriage in the Mukherjee family" ("Two Ways to Belong in America," E13).

⁶⁶ Mukherjee, interview by Connell, Grearson and Grimes, 47.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 46-47.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 47.

Mukherjee links herself and her work to an existing literary tradition of American immigration narratives, from which she draws inspiration.

Like her immigrant author forbears, Mukherjee engages familiar questions regarding cultural identity, assimilation, the process of Americanization, and the myth of the American Dream. In her novel, she employs many of the same metaphors, motifs, tropes, and formal elements that have proven to be effective narrative tools for relating the immigrant experience. And while some of these elements are used to good effect in Jasmine's story, others are put to the test, most pointedly by the heroine's illegal status. In what follows, I will examine the ways in which illegality complicates and challenges the conventions Mukherjee uses to narrate the story of how an undocumented immigrant becomes an American.

From the early chapters of *Jasmine*, the reader is clued in that transformation or metamorphosis will be an organizing theme for the novel. Told in the first person point of view, the story is recounted by and from the perspective of Jane Ripplemeyer, the heroine's incarnation as the common-law wife of a Midwestern banker. At the age of twenty-four, living in Baden, Elsa County, Iowa, Jane is "lifetimes" away from Jyoti, the "fast and venturesome, scabrous-armed" young Indian girl who lived in the village of Hasnapur.⁶⁹ That the protagonist will find her way to the United States from India is established within the first three pages of the book. Signaling that immigration will figure prominently in the story, the novel invites readers to follow the protagonist's extraordinary transformation from Jyoti to Jane.

⁶⁹ Mukherjee, *Jasmine*, 3.

When we meet her early in the novel, Jane appears to have already reached the point at which most immigrant tales end. She is culturally assimilated, firmly ensconced in the middle class and living in the heartland of America. Married to Bud Ripplemeyer, a well-regarded man in the community, Jane is now considered part of the Ripplemeyer clan. She relinquishes her old Indian name and the new one she adopts even lends her an air of connection to the longtime German-American residents of Baden. Although her dark skin and “exotic” features still betray her foreign origins, especially against the backdrop of the predominantly white Iowan community, Jane Ripplemeyer represents the latest and most Americanized version of the immigrant heroine who has been crafting for herself an American identity.

Although the heroine has fully embraced being American by the time she is Jane, becoming American is the least of her concerns when she initially sets out for the United States. Piecing together the entirety of Jasmine’s story from the narrator’s fragmented and non-chronological recollections, we learn that unlike the quintessential immigrant, she had no desires of pursuing the American Dream when she first alighted on America’s shores. In fact, instead of seeing the United States as a place for a new beginning or rebirth, she intended it to be the site of her death. Following the Hindu custom of *sati* or self-immolation, the young and recently-widowed Jasmine planned to commit suicide in America, her final act of devotion to her late husband, Prakash, whose dream was to study and make a better life for himself (and his wife) in the United States. In a tragic twist of fate, Prakash, who had been admitted to study at a university in Florida, was killed during a Sikh terrorist bombing the day before he was set to leave for America. Rather than return to her family and spend the rest of her life grieving in the company of

other widows, Jasmine takes it upon herself to “complete the mission of Prakash.”⁷⁰ She devises a plan to go to America. There, in a symbolic ritual, she would burn some of Prakash’s belongings and lay herself down in the pyre. And at her death, she would reunite with her husband’s soul.

For the newly-widowed Jasmine, America stood for death rather than new life: “I had not given even a day’s survival in America a single thought. This was the place I had chosen to die, on the first day if possible.”⁷¹ However, this grim and gruesome outlook on America does not persist very long in a novel that is meant to celebrate the resilience and fighting spirit of an American-in-the-making such as Jasmine. Reflecting Mukherjee’s belief that America is a place of self-transformation and regeneration, the United States turns out to be a place of rebirth for Jasmine after all. When she finally sneaks into the Gulf Coast of Florida, after a long and harrowing journey that traces the desultory path taken only by those who have no choice but to enter the United States covertly, Jasmine undergoes a horrific experience that upends her plans. She is brutally raped by Half-Face, the ship captain who smuggled her and the other illegals into Florida. Having thus been defiled, she no longer sees herself fit to commit *sati*. Instead of “balanc[ing] [her] defilement with [her] death,” she balances it with her defiler’s, exacting revenge on Half-Face by killing him.⁷²

The America that Jasmine encounters upon her arrival is far from the mythic image of a hospitable land that welcomes the tired, poor and huddled masses of the

⁷⁰ Ibid., 97.

⁷¹ Ibid., 120.

⁷² Ibid., 117.

world. Rather, she is thrust into a world of violence, abuse and exploitation – one in which she is immediately forced to take an active part. In this dark and shadowy underside of America, where violence begets violence, a rape victim becomes a murderer. Ironically, however, it is Half-Face’s death that occasions Jasmine’s rebirth. Explaining the murder scene vis-à-vis Hindu mythology, Mukherjee states that Jasmine becomes “Kali, the goddess of destruction” who destroys evil “so that the world can be renewed.”⁷³ Realizing that her own death might have been denied her for a reason, Jasmine decides to take her chances in America. On her “first full American day,” Jasmine “[begins] her journey, traveling light.”⁷⁴ Interestingly, the baggage she discards includes not only her actual material belongings but her old identity as well. In a symbolic act signifying the death of Jyoti/Jasmine the widow, she burns the luggage containing Prakash’s suit, her widow’s white sari and the photographs she brought from India.

Having shed the reminders of her previous identity, Jasmine begins a series of transformations that traces her passage from alien to American. When she is rescued by Lillian Gordon, a Quaker woman who runs her house as an informal refuge for undocumented immigrants and refugees, she quickly learns how to navigate American society as an illegal alien. Wise to the ways of INS agents, Lillian teaches Jasmine how to “walk and talk American” in order to avoid suspicion, capture and deportation. Trading her “fake American jacket, salwar-kameez, and rhinestoned Jullundhari sandals” for “a T-shirt, tight cords and running shoes,” she sheds the telltale signs of her

⁷³ Mukherjee, interview by Connell, Grearson and Grimes, 48.

⁷⁴ Mukherjee, *Jasmine*, 121.

undocumented status and dons a more American look.⁷⁵ With the help of Lillian, Jasmine becomes Jazzy, a young woman with a confident deportment who could “pass” for an American.

While she makes only a very brief appearance in the novel, Lillian plays an important role in Jasmine’s American transformation. The social and cultural education Jasmine receives from Lillian points to the way in which identity is, to a certain degree, a performative exercise. That an undocumented immigrant like Jasmine could fool “most Americans” into thinking that she was “born here” simply by changing her appearance and behavior exposes the fiction of an essential American identity.⁷⁶ On some level, the performativity of identity poses a direct challenge to immigration laws that rely in part on “the regime of looking” for their enforcement. The regime of looking, as Kalpana Seshradi-Crooks explains in her work on race, is an aesthetic practice whereby difference is deemed apparent through visible “arbitrary bodily marks.”⁷⁷

When Lillian first meets Jasmine, she immediately takes note of her footwear, warning her that “those chappies from the INS would leap at the sight of you in those sandals.” Shoes, according to Lillian, “are the biggest giveaway” because illegal aliens “wear boxy shoes with ambitious heels.”⁷⁸ In another scene, Lillian puts Jasmine’s American skills to the test by making her ride an escalator at the mall. She tells Jasmine,

⁷⁵ Ibid., 134, 127, 133.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 135.

⁷⁷ I borrow the concept of “the regime of looking” from Kalpana Seshradi-Crooks who argues that race is a practice of visibility – an aesthetic practice that relies on visible physical markers of difference and the act of looking. See Kalpana Seshradi-Crooks, *Desiring Whiteness: A Lacanian Analysis of Race* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 2, 19, 38.

⁷⁸ Mukherjee, *Jasmine*, 130, 132.

“They pick up dark people like you who’re afraid to get on or off.”⁷⁹ Lillian’s lessons for Jasmine highlight the ways in which race and class profoundly inform the discourse of immigration in the United States. Whereas whiteness, confidence and a middle-class look give one an air of being American, dark skin, timidity and cheap shoes make one look suspiciously like an illegal alien. While Jasmine cannot change the color of her skin, her ability to walk, talk and dress American can go a long way towards undermining immigration law’s regime of visibility. By getting rid of readily identifiable markers (such as shoes, dress, behavior and accent), Jasmine can make herself less conspicuous and thus elude immigration enforcement agents.⁸⁰

Jasmine’s transformation into Jazzy suggests that the American identity she constructs for herself is fundamentally a matter of performance. She becomes more American only to the extent that her actions and behavior closely mimic what are perceived to be cultural and social norms within (mainstream) U.S. society. Because there is ultimately no essential American identity that can be acquired or possessed, it could be argued that any articulation of American identity is in fact merely a performance. In this way, immigrants like Jasmine can make claims to an American identity simply by aligning themselves with American cultural and social values.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 133.

⁸⁰ Though written decades before, the novel’s observation about shoes calls to mind the recent controversy surrounding the 2010 Arizona anti-illegal immigration bill (SB1070) which makes it a crime for an immigrant to be in Arizona without carrying proof of his/her legal right to be in the United States. When critics pointed out that the law encourages racial profiling, U.S. House Representative Brian Bilbray (a Republican from California) suggested that law enforcement agents would use “non-ethnic aspects” to identify illegal immigrants, including attire: “They will look at the kind of dress you wear, there is different type of attire, there is different type of -- right down to the shoes, right down to the clothes.” Bilbray goes on to say that aside from what they wear, illegal immigrants could also be detected by the way they act. According to him, illegal immigrants “just act illegal.” See Jeff Muskus, “Brian Bilbray, GOP Rep., Claims Clothes Identify Illegal Immigrants,” *Huffington Post*, 22 April 2010; http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2010/04/22/brian-bilbray-gop-rep-cla_n_547710.html (12 April 2011).

While performativity opens up the possibility for a more liberal conception of American identity, its force is significantly minimized when viewed in relation to immigration as a system governed by laws. Immigration policies, predicated as they are on the sovereignty of nation states, necessarily produce legal and political subjects. Within the institution of immigration, it is one's legal identity that matters. As exemplified most clearly in the ongoing debates over the DREAM Act, claiming American cultural identity does little to protect undocumented immigrants from deportation. No matter how culturally assimilated they are and despite their longtime residence in the United States, undocumented "Dreamers" are still considered illegal aliens under the law and therefore have no legal right to be in the United States.⁸¹

The undocumented immigrant's powerlessness against the law and the inescapable threat of deportation, of course, serve as constant reminders of the limits of a non-judicial concept of American identity. In the novel, the possible consequences of Jasmine's illegal status expose the precariousness of her nascent American identity. She fears being caught, unsure as she is of her ability to put on a convincing performance as a socially-adept American woman. During the escalator ride meant to test her, Jasmine is gripped with fear and imagines "the hairy arm of the law [waiting] to haul [her] in" upon reaching to top. The law thus becomes a looming and omnipresent specter, ready to

⁸¹ Since the DREAM Act was first introduced in 2001, many undocumented students have rallied in support of the bill, voluntarily disclosing their status. In voicing their opinions, many students spoke about how they felt and thought of themselves as Americans, having grown up in the United States. In many ways, they identified themselves (culturally) as Americans even if their legal status attested otherwise. See David M. Herszenhorn, "Senate Blocks Bill for Young Illegal Immigrants," *The New York Times*, 18 December 2010; <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/12/19/us/politics/19immig.html> (25 June 2012). For student testimonies, see "Comprehensive Immigration Reform: The Future of Undocumented Immigrant Students: Hearing Before the Subcommittee on Immigration, Citizenship, Refugees, Border Security, and International Law of the Committee on the Judiciary House of Representatives," 110th Congress (18 May 2007).

apprehend her as soon as she slips up. But fortunately for her, she survives the experiment. Commending her performance, Lillian tells her, “You pass, Jazzy.”⁸²

More than just an offhand comment, Lillian’s remark is particularly interesting for what it implies. Jasmine’s success here is twofold. In passing the task Lillian set for her, she also supposedly successfully “passes” for an American girl. As critical race theorists point out, the phenomenon of “passing” carries with it the potential to subvert oppressive categories that are often viewed in binary terms and are considered to be distinct. By passing for an American, Jasmine shows that within immigration’s regime of visibility, the line between illegal and legal, American and non-American is permeable. This is not to suggest, however, that passing always works or that it is a strategy available to all. Racial profiling persists in immigration enforcement because, as has already been explained, illegality came to be associated most closely with Mexicans (and by extension, with Latinos in general).

In a way, Jasmine is able to “pass” more easily than other undocumented immigrants because, despite being “dark,” she does not belong to a racial/ethnic group that is typically associated with illegality. Thus, bizarre as it may seem, Jasmine becomes an inadvertent beneficiary of a racist immigration enforcement system that targets Mexicans and other Latinos. Indeed, over the course of the novel, Jasmine develops an awareness of the racial overtones of U.S. immigration discourse and realizes how her experience as an undocumented alien is notably different from others’ because of her race. In a particularly telling scene, Jasmine (as Jane) and Bud’s adopted son Du watch on television an immigration raid at a factory in Texas. Seeing several Mexican

⁸² Mukherjee, *Jasmine*, 133.

workers apprehended by INS agents, she recognizes that unlike the unfortunate men, she's one of "the ones who didn't get caught."⁸³

While Jasmine is largely spared from being racially targeted by law enforcement agents, she is nonetheless extremely conscious of the insecurity of her position as an undocumented alien. The disconnect between her outward appearance (as a woman who can "walk and talk American") and her lack of legal status proves to be an enduring and inescapable source of anxiety for her. For no matter how convincing her performance is as an American, she remains without rights and has no recourse to the legal protections extended to legal aliens or citizens. Such is the paradoxical predicament of being an "illegal American." Although "passing" enables her to keep her status a secret, it does not guarantee her safety.

As scholars readily point out, the act of passing always carries with it the possibility of being found out. And Jasmine is well aware of the consequences of being exposed. While working for the Hayeses in New York, she is forced to confront the harsh reality of a life without rights. On a day out at the park with Taylor and Duff, Jasmine sees Prakash's murderer, Sukhwinder, and realizes that he has been tracking her whereabouts. Although it is not entirely clear why Sukhwinder goes to such lengths to follow Jasmine (even to the point of coming after her in the United States), it is obvious that his intentions are malicious and he seeks to do her harm. Knowing that her husband's murderer will stop at nothing to achieve his malevolent plans, Jasmine fears not only for her life but also for Taylor and Duff's safety. In an effort to calm her fears, Taylor suggests that they contact the police. Jasmine, however, knows that reporting

⁸³ Mukherjee, *Jasmine*, 28.

Sukhwinder to the authorities is not a viable option. Explaining her predicament to Taylor, she says: “Don’t you see that’s impossible? I’m illegal here, he knows that. I can’t come out and challenge him. I’m very exposed.”⁸⁴ As an undocumented immigrant, Jasmine is caught between a rock and a hard place. If she calls the police, she risks being discovered and deported. But failing to report him, she would be forced to live under the menacing threat of Sukhwinder. Presented with two equally unfavorable choices, Jasmine opts for neither and chooses instead to run away, leaving her life in New York to start a new one in Iowa.

The disruption of Jasmine’s life in New York, as precipitated by the necessity to flee, is just one of the “collateral effects” of her illegal alienage. In her book *The Citizen and the Alien*, legal scholar Linda Bosniak writes, “The collateral effects of [U.S. immigration law’s] deportation provisions on undocumented immigrants arguably structure their experience in this country more than any other single factor.”⁸⁵ Indeed, the threat of deportation shapes Jasmine’s immigrant experience more powerfully than critics of the novel often acknowledge. Reading Jasmine’s movement across the country and through the lives of people (e.g., the Vadheras, the Hayeses, the Ripplemeyers) simply as the self-forged path of an independent and strong-willed woman overlooks the ways in which her status profoundly affects the course of her life and the decisions she makes. By crafting a westward trajectory for Jasmine’s story (i.e., the heroine’s odyssey from New York to California), Mukherjee, of course, rehearses the trope of American expansion and recalls the romantic myth of the frontier. But even as her journey reenacts

⁸⁴ Ibid., 189.

⁸⁵ Linda Bosniak, *The Citizen and the Alien: Dilemmas of Contemporary Membership* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006), 70.

these quintessential American narratives, it simultaneously betrays the transient character of life as an illegal immigrant.

In fact, the moment Jasmine steps foot on U.S. soil, her life becomes one of running and hiding. When she leaves the care of Lillian Gordon to stay with the Vadheras (family friends in New York), she soon finds herself trapped in the “ghetto” of Flushing, Queens. Lacking a green card, she doesn’t “feel safe going outdoors” and sees herself as “a prisoner doing unreal time.”⁸⁶ Through the help of Lillian’s daughter, she is able to escape Queens, but only to be confined again as a live-in babysitter for the Hayeses. And no sooner than the possibility of building a life with Taylor arises (after the husband and wife separate), Jasmine is forced to run again, as a direct result of her encounter with Sukhwinder. As we shall see later, this theme of running also appears in *Typical American* and *Odyssey to the North* as each novel’s protagonist tries to evade immigration and law enforcement agents.

Although the text does not always make it explicit, we can observe the ways in which immigration law circumscribes Jasmine’s every move. Time and again, her self-professed American identity proves inconsequential when pitted against the regime of law. By focusing only on the ways Jasmine exhibits courage and an American fighting spirit, critics tend to overlook the fear and anxiety that pervade her daily life. In fact, Jasmine lives her life not so much as a carefree American but rather as a cautious undocumented immigrant. She does not “get or send out much mail” because doing so would risk “leav[ing] a paper trail for the INS to track.” Even at the end of the novel, the long arm of the law remains at the forefront of her concerns. When Taylor arrives at her

⁸⁶ Mukherjee, *Jasmine*, 148.

house in Iowa to try to win her back, her fears cloud her excitement. Upon seeing a strange car pull up her driveway, she wonders if it's a "a government car" because "immigration cops" are "still [her] first anxiety."⁸⁷

For Jasmine, anxiety becomes a constitutive part of her existence as an illegal American. She knows that the life she is building for herself in the United States could come to an end at any given moment. The law offers her neither security nor solace. On the contrary, the threat of deportation posed by the law prevents her from exercising the few rights she potentially has vis-à-vis the domain of "territorial personhood" in the Constitution and the realm of human rights. As Linda Bosniak notes, the Supreme Court has ruled on various occasions that undocumented immigrants still fall within "the protective bounds of the Constitution."⁸⁸ She writes: "A century ago *Wong Wing* established that even aliens who are in the country illegally enjoy the protections of the Fifth and Sixth Amendments, and in *Plyler [v. Doe]*, nine Justices agreed that undocumented aliens are considered 'persons' for Fourteenth Amendment purposes, notwithstanding their status under the immigration laws."⁸⁹ Pointing to the concept of "territorial personhood," Bosniak explains that "the Court carved out for all aliens a zone of protected personhood, where the nation's membership interests are of no consequence at all."⁹⁰

⁸⁷ Ibid., 208, 237.

⁸⁸ Bosniak, 64.

⁸⁹ Ibid. See also *Wong Wing v. U.S.*, 163 U.S. 228 (1896) and *Plyler v. Doe*, 45 U.S. 202 (1982).

⁹⁰ Bosniak, 64.

As an undocumented alien, Jasmine technically enjoys what Bosniak refers to as “non-immigration-related civil and economic rights.”⁹¹ In theory, her civil rights – as accorded by the Constitution – ought to be able to protect her, for instance, from the threat that Sukhwinder poses. However, deportation provisions in immigration law effectively render these rights irrelevant and meaningless, for exercising these rights only likely leads to an investigation of immigration status and, eventually, to deportation. As Bosniak plainly puts it, “the government’s deportation power substantially constrains undocumented aliens’ sometimes acknowledged rights as territorial persons.”⁹² In Jasmine’s case, her decision not to seek help from authorities clearly demonstrates the force with which immigration law structures her life and her experiences in the United States.

Jasmine’s vulnerability vis-à-vis the law – both her powerlessness against deportation and her inability to use the law for her protection – highlights the incongruity between her illegal status and her self-professed American identity. It is worth remembering that it is during her time in New York, with the Hayeses, that Jasmine claims to have become an American. Thus, it is perhaps only fitting that the substance of her American identity is first put to the test in the same context wherein it developed and was fully embraced. But to the extent that it might make a practical difference in her life, Jasmine’s self-created American identity comes out wanting. Unable to exercise the rights and privileges guaranteed to citizens and extended to legal aliens (and indeed to illegal aliens), Jasmine’s American identity affords her no legal protections to enjoy the

⁹¹ Ibid., 69.

⁹² Ibid., 70.

freedoms that supposedly come with being an American. Such is the paradoxical predicament of being an illegal American.

Curiously, Jasmine does not seem to perceive or experience a cognitive dissonance between the American identity she claims and the realities of remaining an undocumented immigrant. Unlike many ethnic immigrant protagonists who frequently wrestle with the issue of competing (cultural) identities, Jasmine does not attempt to reconcile the tensions precipitated by the clash between her illegal alien self and her American self. Yet if Jasmine does not demonstrably struggle with a sense of doubleness, it is largely because she conceives her two identities as existing in separate spheres, as though they were mutually exclusive.

Throughout the novel, Jasmine's American transformation happens strictly on a personal and private level. She embraces mainstream American cultural and social values via the domestic sphere, successfully integrating herself, first, into the Hayes household and, later, into the Ripplemeyer family. Yet despite her assimilation, Jasmine's American identity never extends beyond the boundaries of her private life. Rather tellingly, when it comes to her public and political identity, she routinely sees herself as an illegal alien. Though she never trumpets her undocumented status (for obvious reasons), she frequently identifies with the other illegal aliens she encounters or hears about. Suspicious of the law and constantly trying to evade INS authorities, Jasmine tries very hard to be inconspicuous. As a result, she has very little of what could be considered a public life. As an illegal American, Jasmine experiences an extensive yet private cultural assimilation; however, her assimilation does not lead to any sort of meaningful civic integration.

That Jasmine's American identity effects no public or political consequences in her life suggests a troubling vision of the kind of American identity the novel imagines for the undocumented immigrant. Indeed, it is precisely this sort of de-politicized identity that present-day "Dreamers" want to overcome. As a model of "the new American" or "an American in the making," as both her creator and literary critics often celebrate her to be, Jasmine represents not a promising new archetype but rather a disconcerting one. Fated to a life of exclusion and powerlessness, Jasmine is no better than a second-class citizen. In fact, in a way she is worse off, for she does not possess the sort of legal status that would prevent her expulsion from the country. Already relegated to a marginalized and subordinated class, she does not even have the right to remain in the country she has embraced as her own. Exercised only in private and never affirmed in public, Jasmine's American identity is incomplete, diminished and precarious at best.

Toward the end of the novel, in a scene of self-reflection, Jasmine (as Jane) compares her American transformation with that of her adopted son Du. She says: "My transformation has been genetic; Du's was hyphenated."⁹³ In her estimation, Du is a "hybrid" because he combined his two cultural identities to create a new one. Like other ethnic hyphenates, Du chooses to affirm his identity as a Vietnamese-American. She, on the other hand, is no hybrid. Seeing herself as organically changed, she deems herself as an American through and through. Not unlike the novel's author herself, Jasmine claims a transformation that would refuse hyphenation. But Jasmine's expressed certainty with regard to her self-professed American identity belies the incontrovertible fact of her

⁹³ Mukherjee, *Jasmine*, 222.

illegality. To the perceptive reader, her confident assertion serves only to highlight the profound incongruity that marks her condition as an illegal American.

As Jasmine's predicament demonstrates, illegality presents an inescapable challenge to the teleological narrative that imagines the immigrant's transformation as a straightforward path from "alien" to "American." For an undocumented immigrant like Jasmine, the designation "American" cannot but have a hollow ring as long as her status problem remains unresolved. Rather than a triumphant tale about how an immigrant successfully becomes an American, *Jasmine* is, at best, an unfinished story whose ultimate ending is unknown. Like the uncertain fate of many undocumented immigrants, Jasmine's future could end tragically in her deportation or favorably in her attainment of citizenship. As readers, we can only hope for the best. But at the close of the novel, only one thing is certain: Jasmine remains in a state of limbo and must live as an illegal alien in the United States.

If illegality unsettles the "alien to American" framework Mukherjee employs in the novel, it equally undermines the American Dream narrative she constructs for her protagonist. Like other immigrant writers, Mukherjee engages the myth of the American Dream in her work. And while the novel is far from a blind endorsement of the myth, it clearly exhibits an unabashed optimism with regard to the idea of America as a land of opportunity and promise. Illustrating Mukherjee's "clear-eyed" view of America, the novel gestures to the ways in which U.S. society is sometimes a less-than-hospitable place for immigrants where they become victims of violence, racism and prejudice. Despite such criticism, however, Mukherjee demonstrates her "definite love" for her adopted country by maintaining an unwavering faith in the spirit of American

individualism, self-determination and social mobility. Mirroring Mukherjee's faith in America, Jasmine takes risks in the United States precisely because she is hopeful that the risks will pay off and that her efforts will be rewarded.

In the same way that Jasmine's identity undergoes significant transformations over the course of the novel, her notion of the American Dream also goes through a noticeable evolution. Before Prakash's death, before America becomes only a place to commit *sati*, Jasmine actually had a positive view of the United States. Exemplifying what Mukherjee describes as an "American in the making" who as yet lives in the "Old World," Jasmine initially has designs of attaining the American Dream even before she steps on U.S. shores.⁹⁴ Her American dreams first take shape shortly after her marriage to Prakash, who instills in her the idea of immigrating to the United States. A modern man who encourages Jasmine to reject the feudal traditions of India, Prakash wants for the two of them "to go away and have a real life" in America and leave behind the corruption, backwardness and mediocrity that he sees in his country.⁹⁵ In preparation for their "real life" in the United State (as if life in India were but a mere imitation), Prakash motivates Jasmine to learn English and, true to the American spirit, cultivates in her "independence" and "self-reliance," a litany she learns by heart.⁹⁶

In its initial version, however, Jasmine's American Dream is simply an extension of Prakash's own desires. Intent on forging his own immigrant success story – a story he

⁹⁴ In "A Four-Hundred-Year-Old Woman," Mukherjee uses Jasmine as an example of the Americans-in-the-making that she finds in the Old World. She sees these people as having the American spirit. According to Mukherjee, they have the potential to be Americans, whether or not they actually make it to the United States ("Four-Hundred," 37).

⁹⁵ Mukherjee, *Jasmine*, 81.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 76.

frequently heard from his former professor and mentor, Devinder Vadhera, who himself moved to the United States – Prakash plans to study in the United States, work hard and ultimately establish a family business. In his vision of their American life, the two of them work side by side in their electronics repair shop, which they call “Vijh & Wife” or “Vijh & Vijh” or “Vijh & Sons,” each name representing the couple’s equal partnership and future familial aspirations.⁹⁷ Not yet ready to articulate ambitions of her own, Jasmine takes on “Vijh & Wife” as her American Dream – a dream emerging not so much from her individual desires but rather engendered by the marriage she greatly treasures. Modest and simple, the couple’s goal is not unlike that of earlier European immigrants who come to the United States seeking a better life. But reflecting the changing immigration patterns of the late-twentieth century, theirs is an American Dream that’s made in India.

Jasmine and Prakash’s ambitions, of course, do not come to fruition as a result of Prakash’s death. Thousands of miles away from the United States, their dream comes to an end even before it has a chance to take root in America. However, the demise of the couple’s dream frees Jasmine to explore her own path once she arrives in the United States. Because she no longer feels obligated to fulfill Prakash’s wishes, her American Dream takes on a more personal and individualistic character.

After only a few months living with the Vadheras in Queens, New York, Jasmine soon feels the need to assert her independence. Feeling trapped in an environment of “artificially maintained Indianness,” she longs to “distance [herself] from everything

⁹⁷ Ibid., 79.

Indian,” break out of the ghetto and immerse herself fully in mainstream America.⁹⁸ In an effort to exercise self-determination and gain a sense of economic independence, she sets a goal for herself: to get a job. But the reality of her situation quickly puts a damper on her dream. Dr. Vadhera informs her that obtaining a fake green card, let alone a real one, is a difficult and expensive proposition. Lacking the resources, Jasmine is unable to pursue her American Dream in a straightforward manner. Because of her illegal status, it becomes clear that her path toward happiness and freedom – things she has come to associate with a green card – will be filled with many obstacles.

Rather than pursue the American Dream in mainstream society, Jasmine must settle for what she can get through the informal economy of illegal employment. (In *Typical American* and *Odyssey to the North*, Ralph and Calixto are forced to do exactly the same.) As a female undocumented worker, she enters the U.S. labor market through the world of private domestic work. Through a clandestine network available to her through her connection with Lillian Gordon, Jasmine finds work as a live-in *au pair* for the daughter of a young couple, Wylie and Taylor Hayes, in Manhattan. The Hayeses take her on without asking for papers or references. Neither does Jasmine voluntarily disclose her undocumented status to the kind couple. That Jasmine’s status goes unacknowledged by all parties reveals how complicity and silence are central to the workings of the informal economy of undocumented labor. Yet for an illegal alien like Jasmine, this is one of the few avenues through which she can work towards her American Dream.

⁹⁸ Ibid., 145.

During her employment with the Hayeses, Jasmine makes notable gains toward her goal of becoming an independent and economically self-sufficient woman. When Duff starts school, Jasmine finds herself with more free time on her hands. Through the help of Taylor she gets a part-time job as a secretary in the Mathematics department at Columbia University. Because of her Indian language skills, she is hired as a Punjabi reader and tutor for the Indian Languages department, getting paid forty dollars an hour for her services. From the salary she receives as an *au pair* and from her part-time jobs, Jasmine suddenly finds herself with enough income to move out and get a place of her own, which, to her, seems like “the American thing to do.”⁹⁹ But at Wylie’s insistence, she decides to stay with the Hayeses, allowing her to keep even more of her earnings.

As part of her education on the American Dream, Jasmine quickly learns that earning money allows her to become an active part of U.S. consumer culture. With her newfound freedom, she spends her money going to the movies and buying clothes in shops and fancy department stores in the city. As though making up for lost time spent in the “parsimonious ghettos of Flushing,” Jasmine embraces a life of “profligate squandering.”¹⁰⁰ Beguiled by infomercials, she even starts purchasing useless items advertised on television: Japanese knives, a radio-controlled car, jewelry, records, books and a car stereo for a vehicle she does not yet own. But the thrill of material consumption does not last and she soon becomes overwhelmed by her own spending habits. From Taylor she learns another important lesson about America: in the United

⁹⁹ Ibid., 180.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 176.

States, you can send back anything you do not want simply by marking it “Return To Sender.”¹⁰¹

Much like the idea behind “return to sender,” Jasmine discovers that the content of one’s American Dream can easily be exchanged and replaced. She observes this most poignantly in Wylie’s decision to leave Taylor for another man with whom she falls in love. From Wylie’s example, Jasmine learns that the pursuit of happiness in America is, more often than not, a radically selfish endeavor. That one would put oneself first contrasts sharply with Jasmine’s previous attitude of self-sacrifice, as earlier exemplified by her capitulation to Prakash’s desires. But as eye-opening as this lesson is for Jasmine, she herself will become brutally selfish in going after what she wants, when, at the end of the novel, she leaves her crippled husband Bud to reunite with Taylor.

If, as Jasmine recognizes, the American Dream is malleable, it can also be quite ephemeral, especially for an undocumented immigrant. When Wylie leaves Taylor, the door opens up for Jasmine to get even closer to attaining her heart’s desires. Realizing that she has fallen “head over heels in love” with Taylor and that he reciprocates her feelings, Jasmine sees that a complete, fulfilled and happy life is within sight. She imagines herself with Taylor, and Duff; the three of them together – her “new, perfect family.”¹⁰² No longer just about obtaining economic independence and achieving social mobility, Jasmine’s American Dream takes a romantic turn in which she not only finds love but also secures an instant happy family. But this dream is quickly extinguished

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 186.

¹⁰² Ibid., 176, 183.

when her insecure position as an undocumented immigrant forces her to leave New York to escape from her husband's murderer.

As Jasmine's American Dream evolves to take on a dimension beyond material prosperity, it becomes apparent that the attainment and, perhaps more importantly, the preservation of that dream repeatedly prove elusive for an illegal alien such as herself. However, in keeping with the narrative convention of immigrant class mobility, Mukherjee nonetheless lays out for Jasmine a continual upward path on the American social ladder. In fact, Jasmine's movement both geographically and through the different families she encounters corresponds with an incremental rise in her class standing. In the Indian "ghetto" of Queens, New York, she starts out as an impoverished and unemployed houseguest who lives primarily on the kindness of the Vadheras. In the Upper West Side of Manhattan, in the Hayes household, she enters the immigrant working class, earning a modest living as the live-in nanny of a middle class white American family. In Baden, Iowa, she herself ascends to the American middle class, becoming part of the Ripplemeyer family as the common-law wife of Bud, a local banker.

In *Jasmine*, a novel written in the tradition of Ellis Island writers, Mukherjee is intent on showing that America continues to be a land of promise for immigrants. She keeps intact the narrative of upward mobility in that Jasmine successfully makes her way up to the middle class. And at the end of the novel, Jasmine appears to have gotten the man and the family she longs for when she, Taylor and Duff set out for California to start a new life. However, when viewed in light of immigrant realities in the United States, the problem of illegality, in fact, calls into question the triumphant American Dream narrative that Mukherjee writes for Jasmine. As an undeniably constitutive part of her

immigrant identity, Jasmine's illegality looms as an all-too-real menace that threatens to turn her American Dream into an immigrant nightmare. For until she becomes legal, she will always live in fear of discovery and deportation.

Just as Jasmine's illegality renders her American Dream uncertain and her transformation into an American incomplete, it also influences the symbolic bonds of kinship that she is able to develop with the metaphorical family that is the American nation. As Werner Sollors observes, much of ethnic writing, of which immigrant literature is part, "contribute[s] to the construction of new forms of symbolic kinship."¹⁰³ For immigrants, these kinship ties often serve to represent their entry and inclusion into American society. In re-imagining kinship, early 20th century European immigrant authors frequently used romance, love and marriage plots as allegories for the consensual relationship that forms between the immigrant and the United States. Mirroring the way in which the immigrant legally chooses to become an American citizen via the ceremony of naturalization, characters in immigration fiction willingly enter into relationships with and choose to marry native-born Americans who stand in as proxies for the American nation.

In the corpus of immigrant writing, Sollors observes the recurrence of what he calls "melting-pot love," which is dramatized as "a marital union or a love relationship across boundaries that are significant."¹⁰⁴ Crossing racial, ethnic and class divisions, melting-pot love binds together the American and the foreigner vis-à-vis the legal institution of marriage. Marriage thus produces a symbolic bond of kinship via the law,

¹⁰³ Werner Sollors, *Beyond Ethnicity: Consent and Descent in American Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 7.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 72.

much like the legal relationship that is formed through the rite of naturalization between the immigrant-turned-citizen and America.

Upping the ante on convention, Mukherjee employs not one, but two exogamous romance plots in *Jasmine*. First, the young heroine develops a love affair with Taylor Hayes, the father of the child she is hired to care for. Later, when she moves to Iowa, she takes up with Bud Ripplemeyer, a successful local banker, with whom she is expecting her first (biological, non-adoptive) child. In her use of melting-pot love in the novel, Mukherjee rehearses and reproduces the archetypal mode by which the immigrant foreigner forms new kinship ties that bind her to America. And on the surface, Jasmine's romantic relationships with Taylor and Bud appear to achieve their narrative and symbolic functions. For Jasmine, the love affairs become a means through which she is able to insert herself into the American family. Not coincidentally, her romantic relationships also come to play an instrumental role in the process of her Americanization as she embraces more and more the ways of America through Taylor and Bud. From the standpoint of conventional interpretation, it would thus seem that melting-pot love allows Jasmine to successfully become a part of both the literal American family (the Hayeses and the Ripplemeyers) and the metaphorical national family.

However, the way we interpret Jasmine's love affairs changes significantly if we take into serious account her illegality rather than dismiss it as if it were some inconsequential matter. Indeed, the symbolic implications of her relationships are dramatically altered if we consider that the very means by which the bond of kinship could be forged – i.e., the law – actively works against her. While Jasmine's separate love affairs with Taylor and Bud might outwardly reflect the actions of consenting adults,

the resulting relationships rather belie something illicit. Neither one culminating in marriage, her romance with Taylor and her live-in situation with Bud produce not legal familial bonds but, as I suggest, illegitimate kinships instead.

Reading Mukherjee's *The Middleman and Other Stories*, S.K. Tikoo observes that "the immigrants [in her book] dream of wedding themselves to the American soil and becoming Americans." The image of "wedding" oneself to America, of course, befits Mukherjee's immigrants because, as Tikoo notes further, the author "uses the romantic device a little mechanically, and even frequently" as a means for "effecting transformations of the protagonists and other immigrants into American citizens."¹⁰⁵ As with *The Middleman*, Mukherjee employs melting-pot love as a narrative device in *Jasmine*. But while romances with two white American men do contribute to the transformation of the novel's heroine, the love affairs ultimately neither end in marriage nor lead to the protagonist's attainment of citizenship. Put another way, Jasmine is not wed to Taylor or Bud and, consequently, neither is she symbolically wed to America.

Although Mukherjee's insistence that her character "is an American" seems to suggest that Jasmine is able to integrate herself into the national family, I argue that the text, in fact, reveals a more complex relationship between the immigrant and the country with which she has fallen in love. Far from a straightforward and simple marriage, Jasmine's romance with America – metaphorically played out in her love affairs with Taylor and Bud – is complicated by her illegality. In the novel, illegal alienage disrupts

¹⁰⁵ S.K. Tikoo, "The American Dream: Immigration and Transformation Theme in *The Middleman and Other Stories*" in *The Fiction of Bharati Mukherjee, A Critical Symposium* (New Delhi, India: Prestige, 1996), 138, 142.

the conventional marriage plot and precludes the formation of a relationship that is legitimized by the law.

That Jasmine conflates the idea of America with the person of Taylor is evident in the way she describes her attraction. As she explains, “The love I felt for Taylor that first day had nothing to do with sex.” Instead, she “fell in love with what he represented.” She “fell in love with his world,” which to her “seemed entirely American” in “its ease [and] its careless confidence and graceful self-absorption.” Drawn in by the spirit of inclusivity projected by Taylor’s world, Jasmine longingly desires to be “part of it.” In Taylor’s America, a professor “served biscuits to a servant, smiled at her, and admitted her to the broad democracy of his joking, even when she didn’t understand it.”¹⁰⁶

If Taylor’s America is a reflection of the country with which Jasmine falls in love, it also represents a vision of the United States at its best, kindest and most generous. Like the flip side of a coin, this image contrasts sharply with the cruel and violent America she experienced in her encounter with Half-Face. Whereas Half-Face’s America is a land where illegal aliens are taken advantage of and exploited, Taylor’s America is a place where being undocumented does not seem to matter at all. In Taylor’s world, boundaries of race and class are crossed, obscuring for Jasmine the otherwise incontrovertible social inequality that exists between herself and her employers.

That the Hayeses willfully turn a blind eye to Jasmine’s illegal status works to her advantage. In the Hayes household, she develops and experiences a semblance of kinship with a quintessential American family. A warm and generous couple with liberal social

¹⁰⁶ Mukherjee, *Jasmine*, 167, 171.

and political values, Wylie and Taylor accept Jasmine as “part of the family.”¹⁰⁷ But while viewing Jasmine as “family” demonstrates a kindhearted gesture on the part of the Hayeses, it also serves to appease the discomfort Wylie feels about the reality of the situation: that she, a white woman of privilege, is effectively outsourcing her caregiving duties to a Third World woman who occupies a vastly lower socio-economic status. (This bitter truth painfully hits home for Wylie when she learns that Duff has begun to call Jasmine her “day mummy.”¹⁰⁸) Moreover, the idea of family helps to diffuse the unease caused by the couple’s participation in the exploitation of undocumented labor, a practice that would otherwise offend their liberal moral sentiments. In fact, Jasmine’s designation as a member of the family is a convenient veil that masks what is, at base, an economic relationship between employer and employee. With its pretensions of kinship, Jasmine’s status as “family” disingenuously works to efface the undeniable disparity between the white American couple and the undocumented immigrant woman.

While Jasmine appreciates the idea of being welcomed as part of the family, there are instances in which she cannot help but recognize that she is, in fact, hired help in the household. In one of her early interactions with Taylor, she is amazed that a man of his status would serve biscuits to someone such as herself. However, despite Taylor’s disregard of class conventions (e.g., who serves whom), Jasmine knows that their social standings set them apart. He is a professor and she is the servant. Similarly, although Wylie does her best to make Jasmine feel like her “younger sister,” she nonetheless

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 167.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 177.

frequently refers to her as their “caregiver” when she (Wylie) speaks to her friends.¹⁰⁹

This serves as a constant reminder to Jasmine of her true role in the house, the job for which she was hired.

Yet rather than feel troubled by the seeming contradiction of her situation – namely, that she plays the part of family and the help at the same time – Jasmine, in fact, relishes the idea of being called a “caregiver.” It gives her a sense of pride because it allows her to think of herself as having a legitimate profession. Closer to attaining her American Dream, Jasmine sees herself as a working woman and compares herself to other female professionals “like a schoolteacher or a nurse.” Accepting her dual role in the Hayes household, she remarks: “I was family, and I was professional.”¹¹⁰

During her time with the Hayeses, Jasmine’s “familial” role evolves, passing through stages that hint at the formation of different kinship bonds with each member of the family. Although Jasmine is already a full-grown adult when she begins working for the Hayeses, Mukherjee likens the heroine to a child as she learns to become more comfortable with the English language and the ways of mainstream America. In a move that contradicts the protagonist’s depiction heretofore as a woman who has already lived a lifetime of tragedy, Mukherjee suddenly infantilizes Jasmine the undocumented immigrant.¹¹¹ Despite being widowed at the age of seventeen and having endured a

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 175.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 175.

¹¹¹ The infantilization of immigrants is, of course, not an uncommon practice in cultural and political discourse. As Bonnie Honig points out in *Democracy and the Foreigner*, immigrants are often depicted as helpless and inarticulate persons, lacking English-language skills and requiring a lot of assistance. But such representations, Honig notes, go against the assumption – indeed, the expectation – that immigrants are mature subjects, able to exercise rational judgment particularly in the act of consenting to American citizenship. See Bonnie Honig, *Democracy and the Foreigner* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001), 93.

harrowing journey to the United States, Jasmine reverts to some sort of childlike state during which Duff is “the only American that...[she] was capable of totally understanding.” For Jasmine, the little girl becomes her sole “American friend whose language [she] understood and humor [she] could laugh at.” Not surprisingly, Jasmine initially comes to think of Taylor and Wylie as “my parents.”¹¹²

Outgrowing her role as a “child” of the American couple, Jasmine becomes a younger sister to Wylie. She also becomes a secondary mother (a “day mummy”) to Duff, who she comes to see as “my child.” Later, when Wylie leaves Taylor for another man, Jasmine takes on the role of lover to Taylor. And for a time, Jasmine, Taylor and Duff play the part of a “self-sufficient family.”¹¹³ Yet, however close they might be, the relationships she forges with each individual member of the Hayes family are informal and, at best, create only affective ties. In fact, the most important kinship bond that Jasmine could forge with Taylor – i.e., marriage – never materializes. For an undocumented immigrant like Jasmine, marriage not only could create a legal bond that would legitimize their relationship, it could also provide her with a means to obtain citizenship and thus remain in the United States.

As with her affair with Taylor, Jasmine’s relationship with Bud Ripplemeyer also falls short of a legal marital union. Despite the fact that she is carrying his child and notwithstanding his repeated proposals, Jasmine refuses to marry Bud. In Iowa, she contributes to the destruction of old family ties even as she constructs new kinship bonds as part of the Ripplemeyer clan. For example, she sees herself as “a catalyst” to the

¹¹² Mukherjee, *Jasmine*, 173, 165.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 165.

eventual termination of Bud's marriage to Karin, his first wife. But exculpating herself of wrongdoing, she asserts she was not the "cause" of the divorce; that Bud, going through a mid-life crisis, "would have left Karin" anyway.¹¹⁴ Similar to the way she took Wylie's place as Taylor's lover, Jasmine displaces Karin to become Bud's common-law wife.

In relation to Bud, Jasmine takes on the role of a familiar figure in immigration discourse: the foreign woman who renews, restores and reaffirms American masculinity. Recognizing the figure both in fiction (e.g., literature and film) and in real life (through the mail-order bride trade), Bonnie Honig explains that the foreign bride or foreign lover serves to prop up waning masculinity and to re-enchant traditional, patriarchal family structures.¹¹⁵ It is not surprising then that Jasmine enters Bud's life precisely at the moment when he is going through a mid-life crisis. Ascribing to Jasmine a near-miraculous power to revive that which is lifeless, Bud tells her: "[Y]ou brought me back from the dead." For her part, Jasmine seems keenly aware that her supposed revitalizing power is a direct consequence of Bud's perception of her as Other. Rather cognizant of this dynamic, she acknowledges: "Bud courts me because I am alien. I am darkness, mystery, inscrutability. The East plugs me into instant vitality and wisdom. I rejuvenate him simply by being who I am."¹¹⁶

As someone deemed foreign and Other, Jasmine follows a path often taken by immigrants to root herself in America. She forms new kinship ties through acts of

¹¹⁴ Ibid., 200.

¹¹⁵ Honig, 86-92.

¹¹⁶ Mukherjee, *Jasmine*, 200.

consensual affiliation. In Iowa, she and Bud intentionally choose to enter into a relationship with each other, and by virtue of this association she is accepted into the Ripplemeyer family by no less than the matriarch of the clan, Mother Ripplemeyer. Among the Ripplemeyers, Jasmine and Du are “the new ones.” And despite being immigrants and relatively recent additions to the family, she feels that they both “belong.”¹¹⁷ Although it is unclear – and indeed very unlikely – that she is officially Du’s adoptive parent, given her undocumented status, Jasmine accepts and treats him as her son. Consenting to their respective roles as mother and child, Jasmine and Du form an affective but ultimately fragile familial bond.¹¹⁸

Though consensual in practice, the familial relationships Jasmine forges with the Ripplemeyers and the Hayeses have no legal basis. Even more significant, her romantic relationships with Taylor and Bud do not produce any sort of legitimate legal bond between her and either man. As such, these ties do not help secure her membership to the American polity. In Jasmine’s circumstances, we see the limitations and, to some degree, the inconsequentiality of the undocumented immigrant’s consent. For despite establishing private, social affiliative relationships, her exercise of consent fails to translate into any sort of legally recognized kinship, and neither does it engender her political inclusion to the United States.

That neither of Jasmine’s melting-pot love affairs with two American men results in marriage is suggestive of the undocumented immigrant’s intrinsically complicated and

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 13.

¹¹⁸ The fragility of affective ties becomes evident toward the end of the novel, when Du decides to leave his adoptive parents after learning that his biological sister also survived the refugee camps and is now living in Los Angeles. Breaking the new kinship bonds he formed through adoption, he holds fast to the familial connection originally established by blood.

problematic relationship with the United States. As various scholars have noted, marriage is a paradigmatic metaphor for the constitutive and consensual relationship between the immigrant/naturalizing citizen and the state.¹¹⁹ In fact, Mukherjee herself conceives of her relationship to the United States in terms of marriage. Describing her decision to embrace the United States wholeheartedly, she says, “America spoke to me – I married it.”¹²⁰ In *Public Vows: A History of Marriage and the Nation*, Nancy Cott observes that in the American project of nation building and, more broadly, in American political discourse, marriage has historically served as a “prime metaphor for consensual union and voluntary allegiance.” According to Cott, the idea of a faithful, lifelong, monogamous marriage “was especially congruent with American political ideals” because it reflected “a voluntary union based on consent,” which paralleled the fundamental principle of representative government.¹²¹

Immigration, in particular, highlights the analogical relationship between marriage and naturalization. As Cott points out from an historical standpoint: “Just as consent was essential to entering marriage, it had always been considered essential to forming citizenship.”¹²² Marriage is an expression of volitional consent, formalized through the exchanging of vows and the public affirmation of a couple’s commitment to each other. Similarly, in the process of naturalization, an immigrant professes allegiance to the state while the state accepts the immigrant into the American polity as a full

¹¹⁹ See Honig, 86-98; Sollors, 6, 150-55, 166; Peter H. Schuck, “Plural Citizenships,” in *Dual Nationality, Social Rights and Federal Citizenship in the U.S. and Europe: The Reinvention of Citizenship*, ed. Randall Hansen and Patrick Weil (New York: Berghahn Books, 2002), 61-99; Nancy Cott, *Public Vows: A History of Marriage and the Nation* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 200), 10, 21, 132-155.

¹²⁰ Mukherjee, “To Ways to Belong in America,” E13.

¹²¹ Cott, 21, 3, 10.

¹²² *Ibid.*, 133.

member, with all the rights and privileges of a citizen. Marriage and citizenship have similar consequences as well. In the same way that naturalization establishes a new legal relationship between the naturalized citizen and the state, marriage produces a legal and legitimate kinship bond between two individuals. While marriage brings two people together to create a new family, naturalization binds the new citizen to the existing and ever-growing national family.

While marriage seems an apt metaphor for the legal immigrant who is able to exercise her consent and indeed can become a naturalized citizen, it seems less applicable to the undocumented alien who is viewed as a lawbreaker who “never consents to American laws” and who, in fact, does not have the state’s consent to be present in American territory.¹²³ Notwithstanding undocumented immigrants’ de facto exclusion from the American polity, their very presence in American territory raises great concern for those who believe that American liberal democracy must be based, above all, on the principle of consent. In *Citizenship without Consent: Illegal Aliens in the Polity*, political-legal theorists Peter Schuck and Rogers Smith assert that “the massive presence of illegal aliens [in the United States]” is “the greatest contemporary threat to a consensually based political community.”¹²⁴ Viewed through Schuck and Smith’s alarmist lens, an undocumented immigrant like Jasmine violates “the expressed consent of the political community.”¹²⁵ As such, she is necessarily precluded from entering into a lawful, consensual relationship with the state.

¹²³ Honig, 96.

¹²⁴ Peter H. Schuck and Rogers M. Smith, *Citizenship without Consent: Illegal Aliens in the American Polity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), 5.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, 3.

If, in immigration fiction, marriage is meant to dramatize the formation of a legal and consensual relationship between the immigrant and the nation, how are we to read Jasmine's affairs with Taylor and Bud, neither of which ends in marriage? I suggest that the absence of marriage in the novel can be understood as a consequence of Jasmine's illegal status. Not affirmed through the legal institution of marriage, Jasmine's relationships with Taylor and Bud have an air of the illicit. Displacing the first wife of both her lovers, Jasmine replaces legal marriages with illegitimate affairs. Coming across more like a usurping lover than a real wife, Jasmine fails to build legal familial bonds and ends up with illicit kinships instead. The suggestion here is clear: the undocumented immigrant cannot but have an unlawful and illegitimate relationship with the state.

Despite Jasmine and Taylor's reunion at the end of the story, the text seems to suggest that the undocumented immigrant's path to the lawful and consensual relationship of marriage is fraught with obstacles, if not entirely foreclosed. As demonstrated through Jasmine's melting-pot romances, illegality not only unsettles the conventional marriage plot; it also exposes a fundamental assumption about the marriage metaphor as a means for describing the relationship between the immigrant/citizen and the state. Favoring the legal immigrant, the marriage metaphor proves an inadequate trope for the narrative of the undocumented alien whose very existence is deemed antithetical to the principle of consent.

In Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine*, we see the ways in which illegality disrupts and challenges the conventional tropes commonly found in immigration narratives. As demonstrated in the discussion above, focusing on the question of illegality allows for an alternative and more nuanced reading of the novel, a reading that compels us to

reconsider the role that legal status plays in shaping an immigrant story. The question of status is far from inconsequential. When applied as a critical lens, it exposes the assumptions that underlie enduring national myths about the American Dream and immigrant America. Unlike the legal immigrant who is the favored subject of immigrant America and is thus offered a path to citizenship, the illegal alien is excluded from becoming part of the national family. In *Jasmine*, we see how the promise of America is and will always be an incomplete and unattainable one for the undocumented immigrant. As long as the issue of status is unresolved, the illegal alien's future in America remains uncertain. Without a path to citizenship, the best she can hope to be is an illegal American, one who leads a life of incongruity and is relegated to a paradoxical existence.

In the next chapter, I examine Gish Jen's *Typical American*, a novel that shares *Jasmine*'s assimilative impulse. Like Mukherjee, Jen deploys familiar tropes and engages many of the same themes commonly found in traditional immigration narratives. And like *Jasmine*, *Typical American* raises the issue of illegality and attempts to incorporate it as part of the immigrant protagonist's broader story. But in contrast to Mukherjee who leaves her heroine's fate in limbo by opting not to resolve her illegal status, Jen finds it necessary to fix her protagonist's status problem in order for his American story to continue.

Chapter Three

A Narrative Fix: Solving the Problem of Illegality in Gish Jen's *Typical American*

Early in Gish Jen's *Typical American* (1991), not long after he arrives from China to begin his graduate studies in the United States, Ralph Chang, the novel's immigrant protagonist, fails to renew his student visa and falls into undocumented status. Receiving no help from the University's Foreign Student Affairs Office to fix his visa problem, he unexpectedly finds himself in the position of being an illegal alien.¹ Not only is he forced to leave the school and discontinue his education, he is also soon pursued by the Department of Immigration. Barely staying one step ahead of the law, Ralph goes on the run, moving from place to place in order to avoid capture and deportation. For more than a year he wanders around New York, living in poverty and fear. However, by the end of Part One of the novel, Ralph serendipitously gains a new lease on life. He miraculously reconnects with his sister Theresa, the only member of his family to survive the Communist Revolution in China. But more importantly, he benefits from a government amnesty program that enables him to obtain legal status and remain in the United States. Reunited with family and with his status problem resolved, Ralph, full of hope, continues his immigrant journey in America.

Following the conventions of the immigrant novel, *Typical American* deploys the tropes of Americanization and the pursuit of the American Dream to depict the experience of immigration. Beyond Ralph's particular storyline, the novel explores more

¹ Gish Jen, *Typical American* (New York: Vintage Contemporaries, 1991).

broadly the Chang family's assimilation into American culture and society. Attending to the collective and individual experiences of the three main characters – Ralph, his sister Theresa, and his wife Helen – the novel chronicles both their negotiation of the American myth of limitless possibilities and their transformation from Chinese immigrants into Americans. Although Jen's take on the immigrant experience contains its own set of twists and turns, the narrative largely follows the familiar teleological arc that is a longstanding feature of immigration stories. Indeed, as Jen has asserted, "in the end...[the Changs] themselves become typically American" and they "all find some version of the American Dream."² Assessing the progress and transformation of her characters, Jen echoes Bharati Mukherjee's own affirmation of her heroine Jasmine's realization of an American identity.

That the figure of the illegal alien would be featured in a fairly conventional story about becoming American ought to give both readers and critics pause. It is worth reiterating that as a symbol of social marginalization, economic exploitation and political exclusion, the illegal alien seems to stand in antithetical relation to the very notion of immigrant assimilation and the fulfillment of the American Dream. For the threat and reality of deportation always already foreclose to the undocumented immigrant the full realization of the promise of America: a promise that is not only animated by the hope of socio-economic advancement but also inspired by the ideals of citizenship and equality championed by American liberal democracy.³ Because of his position relative to the

² Gish Jen, interview by Martha Satz, "Writing About Things That Are Dangerous: A Conversation With Gish Jen," *Southwest Review* 78.1 (1993): 132+.

³ As has been mentioned in the previous chapter, Linda Bosniak argues that the threat and actuality of deportation "structure [undocumented immigrants'] experience in this country more than any other single

legal, political and economic structures of U.S. society, the illegal alien thus calls into question the predominant narrative of the immigrant experience, which presupposes a relatively straightforward process that begins with “immigrant” and ends with “American.”

Although it is not entirely clear how long Ralph is without legal status, the novel’s sequence of events suggests that he is undocumented for a little over a year and a half.⁴ Representing only a fraction of the entire novel (roughly 32 pages out of 296), the part of the story during which Ralph is an undocumented immigrant seems but a minor episode in the larger narrative that recounts his Americanization and his pursuit and attainment of the American Dream. Not surprisingly, literary critics have paid very little attention to the change in Ralph’s immigration status, focusing instead on bigger, overarching themes such as assimilation and acculturation. Indeed, in their examination of the novel, some critics make no mention of it at all. Those who do take note of it, however, never interrogate the question of Ralph’s illegality; instead, they discuss it in relation to a different issue. Bonnie TuSmith, for example, talks about the loss of Ralph’s visa in connection to the novel’s deployment of Chinese ideas as *leitmotifs*; in this case, the notion of *xiang banfa* (“to think of a way”), which Ralph applies to his predicament.⁵

factor” (70). Linda Bosniak, *The Citizen and the Alien: Dilemmas of Contemporary Membership* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006).

⁴ Ralph loses his visa the same year that the Communists take over in China, in 1948. He seeks help from his advisor, Mr. Pinkus shortly before or during September of that year (29). By August of the following year, in 1949, he has moved nine times (32). In February of 1950, Theresa finds Ralph at the park (44, 46). He lives with Theresa and Helen in their apartment while working as a draftsman, still as an undocumented person. It is unclear how long he does this for, but soon “the possibility of Ralph’s finishing his Ph.D.” comes (58). We might assume that by autumn 1950, when Ralph would likely return to school, he has already regained legal status.

⁵ Bonnie TuSmith, “Success Chinese American Style: Gish Jen’s Typical American,” *Proteus* 11.2 (1994): 24.

Similarly, Zhou Xiaojing discusses the episode of Ralph's visa trouble and his attempt to resolve it to illustrate Jen's use of humor and irony in her representation of cultural clashes and misunderstandings.⁶ In TuSmith's and Xiaojing's analyses, illegality itself – as a condition of the immigrant – is never directly scrutinized. Readings that treat Ralph's illegality as incidental or those that disregard the matter completely make it seem as though the concept of illegal alienage has no bearing on the important socio-political questions – about immigration, citizenship, and the nation – that the novel raises.

If critics tend not to pay close attention to Ralph's illegality and thus miss its implications for the narrative, it is due in part to the casual hand with which Jen treats the condition of illegal alienage. Implying that becoming illegal somehow occurs accidentally, Ralph loses his student visa for no other reason than that he simply “forgot.” He “mysteriously...let[s] his visa lapse” and the realization takes him by surprise. Ralph's illegality literally comes out of nowhere. Immediately after the scene in which Ralph loses contact with his parents in China, the narrator abruptly tells us: “the next thing Ralph knew, he was having visa trouble.” In *Typical American*, it seems that becoming illegal is just something that happens. As the title of the chapter in which Ralph loses his visa suggests: “These things happen.”⁷

Indeed, Ralph's transformation into an illegal alien seems all the more arbitrary when read in relation to the historical allusion with which the same chapter opens:

⁶ Xiaojing refers specifically to the cultural misunderstanding that occurs between Ralph and Professor Pinkus from whom Ralph asked assistance. See Zhou Xiaojing, “Becoming Americans: Gish Jen's *Typical American*,” in *The Immigrant Experience in North American Literature*, eds. Katherine B. Payant and Toby Rose (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1999), 151-64.

⁷ Jen, *Typical American*, 27, 26, 22.

Kingdoms rise up, kingdoms collapse. Whatever China went through in 1948 – whether she sadly fell or was gladly liberated – she did it, for an old lady, fast. It was an onstage costume change. Out of an acre of worn silk emerged a red, red comrade. A whole different person! Or so it seemed. Isn't this the story of every transformation, though, that the past lies about its feet, in folds, so that when it should dance, well...[sic]⁸

To be sure, the novel's reference to the defeat of the Nationalist government in China and the subsequent Communist takeover of the country serves to provide a historical setting for Ralph's story. However, the regime change in China also functions as a metaphor for Ralph's own transformation; for as the text suggests, the experience of China, personified as an old lady, is "the story of every transformation." Consequently, the way in which history is framed in this passage reveals much about how we are to understand the transformations Ralph undergoes in the chapter. In this instance, history is presented as a cycle of inexplicable and random events, of kingdoms rising and collapsing. Unsure whether the regime change was a sad fall or a happy liberation, the narrator suggests that the reasons for why historical events happen are unknown, and their aftereffects are ambiguous at best. Moreover, historical events can happen quickly, like "an onstage costume change," and they result in a seemingly complete metamorphosis: "A whole different person."

In light of this view of history, becoming illegal is nothing but a random and unexplainable occurrence, not unlike history itself. Perhaps this is why many critics so readily dismiss Ralph's illegality. As an arbitrary turn of events, Ralph's transformation into an undocumented immigrant could indeed be read just as a narrative twist that adds

⁸ Ibid, 22.

drama to the plot. However, Ralph's illegality resists such a simplistic reading. Meriting close and critical attention, the illegal alien is in fact a profoundly significant figure in the novel.

This chapter proposes that the figure of the illegal alien disrupts the teleological narrative that Gish Jen relates in *Typical American*. I argue that Ralph's fall into undocumented status threatens to thwart the Americanization plot of the novel. Thus, in order to keep Ralph on the path toward becoming a "typical American," Jen is forced to solve the problem of his illegality. And she does so by granting him legal status through a state amnesty program. Sure enough, amnesty provides Jen with a handy solution to the narrative conflict posed by illegality. But this convenient resolution is striking given both the complexity and controversial nature of illegal immigration.

It is easy to dismiss Jen's quick fix to the problem of illegality as a serendipitous accident of history that yields positive benefits for Ralph. However, the resolution is worth examining precisely because it is what enables the story to move on. Upon closer inspection, this seemingly minor detail in fact reveals much about the workings of immigration narratives. It shows us that the conventions of immigration fiction privilege a particular kind of immigrant subject – the *legal* immigrant. As the novel demonstrates, it is only by becoming legal that Ralph can truly and fully embark on the path toward becoming American and pursue the American Dream. Moreover, Jen's solution to Ralph's illegality betrays how immigration stories not just rely on but also reproduce the normative narrative of naturalization endorsed by the dominant legal regime, which regards *legality* as a condition for inclusion into national membership.

Jen's use of amnesty to solve the problem of illegality speaks to some of the ways in which the law informs and shapes immigration literature. But immigration stories serve more than just a means to reaffirm dominant narratives of immigration law. In *Typical American*, the cut-and-dried account of legalization and naturalization is cast within a *literary* narrative that imaginatively explores the possibility and process of immigrant inclusion into the nation. I suggest that in conceiving the immigrant's relationship to the nation, the novel presents the idea of adoption as a means by which the immigrant – specifically the illegal alien – can become part of the national community.

As I will elaborate, the novel analogizes the illegal alien's incorporation into the U.S. to the process of adoption, whereby the undocumented immigrant (likened to an irresponsible, undeserving orphan child) is adopted by the benevolent nation (the kind adoptive parent). As scholars have recently shown, the concept of adoption avails for us new possibilities for re-thinking kinship in the context of the imagined community of the nation.⁹ Yet the notion of adoption is problematic as it is productive. I suggest that *Typical American*, in its deployment of adoption as metaphor, performs labor in the service of American exceptionalist political culture by privileging an image of the United States as an inclusive nation that willingly embraces all immigrants into its fold. But as Ali Behdad has argued, this idealized conception of America often elides the exclusionary practices that go hand in hand with the process of building the so-called

⁹ See David Eng, "Transnational Adoption and Queer Diasporas," *Social Text* 21.3 (2003): 1-37; Mark C. Jerng, "Recognizing the Transracial Adoptee: Adoption Life Stories and Chang-rae Lee's *A Gesture Life*," *MELUS* 31.2 (2006): 41-67; Barbara Yngvesson, "Going 'Home': Adoption, Loss of Bearings, and the Myth of Roots," *Social Text* 21.1 (2003): 7-27; Barbara Yngvesson, "Refiguring Kinship in the Space of Adoption," *Anthropological Quarterly* 80.2 (2007): 561-579.

“nation of immigrants.”¹⁰ By emphasizing the state’s benevolence and hospitality toward the illegal alien, the novel obscures the history of American violence and hostility towards undocumented immigrants even as it reaffirms the putatively inclusive myth of immigrant America.

Typical American in Context

A child of immigrant parents who came to the United States in the 1940s (her mother, to pursue education; her father, a hydraulics engineer, to help with the war effort and coordinate the anti-Japanese front in Shanghai), Gish Jen – née Lillian Jen – was born in New York in 1956.¹¹ Raised in the upper middle-class neighborhood of Scarsdale, New York, Jen graduated from Harvard University and went on to receive her MFA from the Iowa Writers’ Workshop. In her work, Jen explores the diverse and complex dimensions of immigrant life in the United States and interrogates what it means to be American, often drawing inspiration from the experiences of her parents and her own struggles as a second-generation Chinese American living “between two worlds.”¹²

Published in 1991, Jen’s debut novel *Typical American* received critical acclaim and was a finalist for the National Book Critics Circle Award. Her second novel, *Mona in the Promised Land*, was named one of the 10 best books of 1996 by the Los Angeles Times. A sequel of sorts to *Typical American*, the novel centers on Ralph and Helen’s daughter, Mona, as she crafts an independent life while negotiating questions of cultural

¹⁰ Ali Behdad, *A Forgetful Nation* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), 7-9.

¹¹ “Becoming American: Personal Journeys,” Interview with Gish Jen by Bill Moyers, Public Broadcasting System, <http://www.pbs.org/becomingamerican/ap_pjourneys_transcript1.html> (16 September 2009).

¹² Jen, interview by Bill Moyers.

and ethnic identity. In 1999, Jen published *Who's Irish?*, a collection of short stories that further explore the author's interest in the immigrant experience, generational differences, the American Dream, and the construction of identity. Her most recent work, *The Love Wife* (2004), revisits these themes in the story of the Wongs, a family consisting of an inter-racial couple (Carnegie, who is of Chinese descent, and Janie, of mixed European stock), two adopted Asian daughters and one bi-racial biological son. In the novel, the Wongs' seemingly happy lives are turned upside down by the arrival of a distant relative from China.

Jen's emergence in the literary scene, signaled most clearly by the publication of *Typical American*, occurred during the curious historical moment discussed previously in Chapter One, when multicultural efforts and anti-immigrant sentiment were simultaneously on the rise. Although there is a distance between the contemporary period in which the book was published and the setting of the story (circa 1947 to 1965), Jen brings to bear the immigration concerns of her time to the earlier historical context of the novel. She raises the politically exigent issue of illegal immigration by introducing the figure of the illegal alien into the plot. To be sure, illegal immigration was not a new phenomenon. It had been a matter of concern during the mid-century as well. However, my sense is that Jen's inclusion of illegal immigration as a thematic element in the novel serves more as a gesture to the political climate of the 1980s and '90s than an exploration of the issue within the specific historical context of the story.

Rather tellingly, the issue of illegality could have been circumvented altogether in the novel. Early in the story, before Ralph forgets to renew his visa, he is given an opportunity to obtain American citizenship when, as a result of the Chinese Revolution,

he becomes a “stranded student.” Prior to the Revolution, the U.S. maintained fairly liberal immigration policies toward Chinese students, who were classified as non-immigrants. These individuals were allowed to remain in the country for a particular length of time but were expected to return to China after they had completed their education and professional objectives. When the Nationalist government fell during the Communist Revolution of 1949, many Chinese students became stranded in the United States. For reasons of national security, they were not allowed to return to their homeland. As a consolation, the U.S. government provided financial assistance to the stranded students and gave them an opportunity to become permanent residents and a path to citizenship through various relief acts.¹³ In the novel, this historical detail is included as part of Ralph’s experience. However, rather than take advantage of this opportunity, Ralph “refused to be made an American citizen[,] thumb[ing] his nose at the relief act meant to help him.”¹⁴ It is Ralph’s decision not to become a citizen that would later give rise to his status problems.

In light of the fact that the problem of illegality could have been averted, I read Ralph’s eventual fall into undocumented status as an attempt on Jen’s part to speak to one of the critical issues of her time. Yet informed more by her contemporary moment than the story’s historical context, Jen’s depiction of illegal immigration, vis-à-vis the experience of Ralph, seems out of sync with the social realities of the 1950s. In the Cold War climate of the ‘50s, the U.S. government tried to make headway with regard to the

¹³ Yelong Han, “An Untold Story: American Policy toward Chinese Students in the United States, 1949-1955,” *The Journal of American-East Asian Relations* 1 (1993): 77-99; Rose Hum Lee, “The Stranded Chinese in the United States,” *The Phylon Quarterly* 19.2 (1958): 180-194; Rose Hum Lee, *The Chinese in the United States of America* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 1960), 86-112.

¹⁴ Jen, *Typical American*, 23.

nation's illegal immigration problem. While undocumented aliens from Mexico bore the brunt of government efforts to counter illegal immigration, Chinese immigrants were affected, too. But within the Chinese community, the target of immigration enforcement was not the out-of-status students like Ralph. Instead, the State and Justice Departments, along with the Immigration and Naturalization Service, focused their attention on identifying the thousands of Chinese who entered the U.S. unlawfully as "paper sons." These so-called paper sons had entered the country during the earlier part of the century by posing as children of Chinese American citizens. The inquiry into paper immigration culminated in the Chinese Confession Program. Although the Confession Program was problematic in both practice and ideology (as it was steeped in anti-Communist rhetoric), it brought unexpected benefits to Chinese illegal aliens. For under the terms of the program, those who confessed were allowed to adjust their status and obtain legal residency. According to historian Mae Ngai, the majority of those who participated in the Confession Program did become legal aliens or naturalized citizens. Few were actually deported as a result of the Program.¹⁵

Notwithstanding the novel's historical inconsistencies, with which some historians and literary critics might take issue, I find Jen's inclusion of the issue of illegal immigration in her work to be instructive; for it gives us an opportunity to examine the figure of the illegal alien in immigration fiction. In *Typical American*, we can see how an author navigates the challenges of representing the illegal alien within the framework of the immigration narrative. Engaging the genre's traditions and conventions, how might

¹⁵ Mae Ngai, *Impossible Subjects: Illegal Aliens and the Making of Modern America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 204.

an author write the figure of the illegal alien into a story about becoming American? If, as scholar David Jacobson notes, “immigration is integral to the way Americans imagine themselves,” we might ask: What place does the undocumented immigrant have in the story of America?¹⁶ Can the illegal alien be a part of the myth of immigrant America?

The Illegal Alien and the Making of an Immigrant Upward Mobility Story

Stories about immigration, real and fictional, not only articulate but also invigorate the liberal myth of “immigrant America.” A repository for positive images of the United States, the myth of immigrant America depicts the U.S. as a nation of immigrants, a refuge for the oppressed and those in search of liberty, and a land of opportunity. Inasmuch as the myth of immigrant America is founded on the ideals of liberal democracy, it is also anchored by the notion of the American Dream, which promises financial success and material wealth. While the search for religious and political freedom is a trope that still appears from time to time in immigration stories, twentieth century and contemporary novels, more often than not, stage the immigrant experience in terms of class mobility. Jen’s novel is no exception. To be sure, *Typical American* is far from a wholesale endorsement of myths of upward mobility and economic prosperity. Parodic in its representation of immigrant success, the novel casts a critical eye on the American Dream. Yet while the novel calls into question the materialism that underlies the capitalist version of the myth, it nonetheless “reinscribes

¹⁶ David Jacobson, “Introduction: An American Journey” in *The Immigration Reader: America in a Multidisciplinary Perspective*, ed. David Jacobson (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 1998), 2.

American bourgeois narratives of capital competition.”¹⁷ Moreover, as Gilbert Muller observes, although Ralph is “a parody of the myth of immigrant success and mobility,” he is simultaneously “a curious affirmation of the myth” in that he “accepts the powerful and unpredictable currents of life in the United States.”¹⁸

In *Typical American*, the immigrant’s Americanization and assimilation go hand in hand with his embrace of the capitalist version of the American Dream. His incorporation into the nation thus has an economic rather than a political trajectory. Ralph becomes what political theorist Bonnie Honig calls the “capitalist immigrant,” who “helps keep the American Dream alive [by] upholding popular beliefs in a meritocratic economy in good times and bad.”¹⁹ But Ralph the successful capitalist immigrant is also, at one point in the story, a downtrodden illegal alien. Signifying extreme poverty and social exclusion, the figure of the illegal alien plays a key role in making *Typical American* a story not just about immigration but also about class mobility.

Typical American is an American immigrant upward mobility story. This much is alluded to in the suggestive opening sentence of the novel: “It’s an American story: Before he was a thinker, or a doer, or an engineer, much less an imagineer like his self-made millionaire friend Grover Ding, Ralph was just a small boy in China, struggling to grow up his father’s son.” Notably, Ralph’s is an “American story” that begins not in the United States but in China. Thus clued into the immigration plot that serves as the basic foundation of the novel, the reader anticipates that although the protagonist, as a six year

¹⁷ Shirley Geok-lin Lim, “Immigration and Diaspora,” in *An Interethnic Companion to Asian American Literature*, ed. King-Kok Cheung (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 229, 301.

¹⁸ Muller, 214.

¹⁹ Bonnie Honig, *Democracy and the Foreigner* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 80.

old, “doesn’t know where or what America is,” he would one day find himself there. Hinting at the social mobility plot that also shapes Ralph’s story, the narrator outlines the various stages of Ralph’s upward progress. Before he becomes an “imagineer,” which is suggested as the requisite condition for becoming a “self-made millionaire” like Grover Ding, Ralph must first undergo several transformations. As the novel unfolds, we see Ralph work his way up from student (a thinker and doer) to middle-class professional (an engineer) to aspiring millionaire (an imagineer).²⁰

Although the immigration trajectory of Ralph’s story is evident from the start, his upward climb on the socio-economic ladder is less apparent. Indeed, in the opening scenes of the novel there seems to be very little possibility for upward mobility to occur at all. Yet this is so not because Ralph faces insurmountable challenges in his path but because his family is already at the top. But as I will elaborate in the following pages, Jen weaves a narrative of upward mobility into Ralph’s immigration story by recasting him as an illegal alien. In fact, it is precisely by deploying the figure of the illegal alien that Jen transforms a plain immigration story into an immigrant upward mobility story.

Although the trope of upward mobility is a common feature in immigration stories, it is important to remember that the upward mobility narrative and the immigration narrative are distinct genres.²¹ Whereas the former chiefly concerns social mobility and the attainment of economic success, the latter traditionally deals with issues of assimilation and acculturation or, in the specific context of the U.S., the process of Americanization. By turning Ralph into an illegal immigrant, Jen is able to conflate the

²⁰ Jen, *Typical American*, 3.

²¹ Here, I am following Bruce Robbins’ cue in viewing upward mobility stories as a “genre.” Bruce Robbins, *Upward Mobility and the Common Good* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), 1.

two genres. This conflation is not insignificant. As Bruce Robbins suggests, “‘Coming to America’ novels... could be said to reinvent the [upward mobility] genre on a transnational scale.” However, the problem with some immigrant upward mobility stories, Robbins rightly points out, is that they sometimes disingenuously disavow their protagonists’ privileged origins “by passing off an upper-class story of lateral mobility – that is, the acculturation of the same class within a different language and culture – as if it were a more strenuous story of class mobility.”²²

In *Typical American*, Jen does not so much attempt to mask Ralph’s story of lateral mobility as she seeks to nullify it. By making Ralph illegal, she ostensibly erases the class privilege that distinguishes the immigrant group of which he is part. Heralding the uniqueness of Jen’s novel among Asian American immigration stories, several literary critics have pointed out that unlike “classic” narratives whose protagonists hail from the working class (e.g., Maxine Hong Kingston’s *China Men* and Carlos Bulosan’s *America Is in the Heart*), *Typical American* focuses on the educated and professional class of Asian immigrants.²³ But cast as an illegal immigrant’s story of upward mobility rather than an international student’s lateral move, *Typical American* may not be so unique after all. In refiguring Ralph as an illegal alien, Jen in effect strips him of his privileged class status to make him a more suitable protagonist for a story of upward mobility. The novel depicts Ralph’s life as an illegal alien as one of economic deprivation, social marginalization, and utter desperation. In this way, Jen deploys the

²² Robbins, 236. Robbins uses Julia Alvarez’s *How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents* (1991) as an example of a story of a lateral-mobility that tries to pass itself off as an upward mobility story.

²³ Xiaojing, 152; Rachel Lee, *The Americas of Asian American Literature: Gendered Fictions of Nation and Transnation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press), 46.

figure of the illegal alien as an iconic signifier for economic oppression and social alienation. Jen uses the figure of the illegal alien as a means to resituate Ralph in a lower socio-economic position from which – true to an upward mobility story – he will rise.²⁴

Ralph's later impoverished condition as an illegal alien contrasts sharply with the economically secure situation he enjoys at the beginning of the novel. Though they live in a small town in a province outside Shanghai, Ralph's family is part of an economically privileged and educated class. His father is a scholar and an ex-government official with connections. His older sister attends a convent school where, we later learn, she is exposed to Western culture, is given an English name (Theresa), and presumably learns to speak English. After Ralph finishes his education in China, he holds a professional job with the Transportation Department. He is even selected to receive a government fellowship to go to America for field training as an advanced engineer. But doubtful of his son's abilities, Ralph's father makes "a few discreet inquiries, among friends" to find out how Ralph came to be chosen for the fellowship. He learns that although Ralph placed seventeenth on the department exam, he was still picked as one of the ten to go.

This episode illustrates not only Ralph's father's connections, but also the special

²⁴ It is worth noting that in recasting Ralph as an illegal alien, Jen attempts to cover over the advantages he already possesses before he becomes undocumented. Problematically, Ralph's transformation into an illegal alien obscures the ways in which his prior cultural capital helps to facilitate his eventual success. The disavowal of advantages and privileges is a common strategy often employed in narrating stories of immigrant success. In this way, stories of immigrant success are told in such a way that fits and supports the dominant ideology of the American Dream. In the context of the United States, the narration of Asian immigrant success stories in this fashion, particularly as told by the media, has contributed to the creation of the "model minority" myth, which promotes Asians as "models" to be emulated by other minority groups. Asians, according to the model minority myth, succeed by dint of hard work, receiving no assistance from anyone (not least of all the government). For a detailed discussion on the ways in which the model minority myth hides structural class inequalities within the Asian American community and in U.S. society as a whole, see Deborah Woo, "The Inventing and Reinventing of 'Model Minorities': The Cultural Veil Obscuring Structural Sources of Inequality" in *Asian Americans: Experiences and Perspectives*, eds. Timothy P. Fong and Larry H. Shinagawa (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2000), 191-212.

treatment Ralph receives. As part of the privileged class, Ralph's family takes advantage of their access to "back doors," which ironically his father, who believes in hard work, despises.²⁵

Because he comes from a position of socio-economic privilege, Ralph's relocation to the United States could be characterized as a "lateral" move.²⁶ His upper class origin is all the more obvious when we learn that Ralph ultimately comes to the United States through private funding, "not through the government, and not for advanced field study, but for graduate study."²⁷ (His mother even arranges a send-off banquet for him before he leaves for America.) Ralph, it turns out, is not some lucky state scholar who gets sent abroad to study only to return so he can repay his country by working as a public servant. Un beholden to the state, Ralph's endeavor is a private one – to go to graduate school so he "could bring back a degree" to his family.²⁸ When Ralph arrives to New York to begin his graduate study in engineering at a prestigious university, there is no real change in his class status.²⁹ Although he encounters his share of linguistic and cultural difficulties, he suffers no economic hardship. Surrounded by other students from China, Ralph finds himself in the company of those who come from the same social strata as he does.

²⁵ Jen, *Typical American*, 4, 5, 47.

²⁶ My reading of Ralph's initial migration to the United States as a "lateral" move is informed by Bruce Robbins' work on upward mobility narratives. See Robbins, 236.

²⁷ Jen, *Typical American*, 6.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ Although the novel does not specify the name of the university Ralph attends, there are hints that suggest it is Columbia University. The novel refers to the location of the university being near 125th street, and it describes a statue that resembles the statue in front of the engineering building.

The lateral mobility that describes Ralph's initial situation in the United States mirrors the historical experience of many Chinese students who came to America for graduate education during the early to mid twentieth century. It is significant to note that between 1882 and 1943, Chinese students were routinely allowed entry to the United States to pursue higher education or specialized training even though the Chinese Exclusion Act, which severely restricted immigration from China, was in force.³⁰ Because the Chinese Exclusion Act was aimed primarily at lower class laborers who were viewed as a threat to the native labor force, the most privileged Chinese were exempted from the law. Among those exempted were merchants, officials, tourists, and students. Most of these students came from well-to-do families.³¹ But equally important is the fact that their relocation did not result in a decline in socio-economic status. According to Rose Hum Lee, Chinese students were "a privileged class, both at home and abroad, [and] entered the host country at the stratum from which they emanated."³²

Arriving in the United States in 1947, Ralph would have been unaffected by the original Chinese Exclusion Act, which had been repealed by that time.³³ However, he

³⁰ For an extended discussion of the Chinese Exclusion Acts, see Erika Lee, *At America's Gates: Chinese Immigration During the Exclusion Era, 1882-1943* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2003).

³¹ As Rose Hum Lee notes, "[t]he mere fact that they [students and intellectuals] travel is in itself a symbol of upper class status, for travel has historically been associated with leisure and hence wealthy groups" (*The Chinese in the USA*, 93). For an analysis of exempted classes and class-based discrimination within the Chinese Exclusion Laws, see Erika Lee, Chapter 3; Rose Hum Lee, Chapter 6 in *The Chinese in the United States of America*; Sucheng Chan, *Asian Americans: An Interpretive History* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1991), 141.

³² Rose Hum Lee, *The Chinese in the USA*, 100. While many students truly came from upper class families, it must be noted that some students only made claims to upper class origins. This strategy of "performing" class, was not limited to students. According to Erika Lee, some working class Chinese tried to pass for wealthy merchants and businessmen in order to gain entry to the United States.

³³ The Chinese Exclusion Act was repealed by the 1943 Magnuson Act. Passed during the Cold War, the Magnuson Act was a means by which the United States could maintain an alliance with China. "[T]he repeal of the exclusion laws," Erika Lee explains, "was mostly a symbolic gesture of friendship to China (a

would have come under the more restrictive 1924 Immigration Act. Under the 1924 Immigration Act, which established national origins quotas and all but banned immigration from Asia, Chinese students were designated as “nonimmigrants” and admitted as “nonquota aliens.”³⁴ Holding student visas, they were permitted to reside legally in the United States not only because they were expected to return home after the completion of their studies but also in part because their socio-economic status helped ensure they would not become burdens to the state.³⁵ Attesting implicitly to the upper class origins of many Chinese students, proof of financial self-sufficiency was one of the criteria for entry as a student under the 1924 Immigration Act.³⁶ More explicitly, however, these students often sought to distinguish themselves not only from U.S.-born Chinese but also from lower class “foreign-borns without higher education.”³⁷ To be sure, some students came to the United States through the sponsorship of the Chinese government. But as Yelong Han notes, the Chinese state in fact “encouraged self-

wartime ally against Japan)” (Lee, 245). The Magnuson Bill also revised laws pertaining to the naturalization of the Chinese, finally allowing them to become citizens. However, the yearly immigration of Chinese was capped at a low 105 persons a year.

³⁴ Chinese students were designated as “nonimmigrants” or “nonquota aliens,” which meant their right to stay in the United States was only temporary. Their numbers did not count toward the annual total immigrant quota, which was capped at 165,000. After completing their educational goals, students were expected to return to China. The 1924 Immigration Act was particularly restrictive toward Asian immigrants seeking to relocate permanently in the U.S. The Act barred immigration from the Asia-Pacific triangle, resulting in the exclusion of all Asians, except Filipinos. The 1924 Act was in force until 1952, when it was replaced by the Walter McCarran Act, which established very small quotas for Asian countries, thus ending the ban on Asian immigration. See Erika Lee, 39; William S. Bernard, “Immigration: History of U.S. Policy” in *The Immigration Reader: America in a Multidisciplinary Perspective*, ed. David Jacobson (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 1998), 64-65, 69-70.

³⁵ Rose Hum Lee, *The Stranded Chinese*, 180; Han, 77.

³⁶ Under the 1924 Immigration Act, a student must also have a bachelor’s or equivalent degree from a Chinese institution and show proof of admission to an accredited higher education institution. Rose Hum Lee, *The Stranded Chinese*, 180.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 181. It is worth noting that many U.S.-born Chinese were also likely to be the descendants of the earlier generation of Chinese immigrants who worked either in agriculture or the railroad, and thus were primarily working class.

supporting students to go to America for higher education.”³⁸ Thus, those like Ralph who had the opportunity and could afford the international travel and educational costs were able to study in the United States.

As a student at a prestigious university in the northeast, Ralph is ushered into one of the most privileged settings in the United States. Yet he acclimates easily enough to this educational context, initially finding solace in his schoolwork. Although Ralph faces some challenges navigating the cultural milieu of New York, he experiences no significant financial setbacks that would suggest a decline in class status on his part. And while the narrator describes Ralph’s life as less than luxurious – he eats supper for a dollar at General Lee’s; he buys a secondhand lamp; he shops at an inexpensive grocery store – his economizing efforts are depicted more as part of his education in the ways of America rather than as a sign of money troubles. As the narrator puts it, these frugal activities are simply some of the “discoveries” and “developments” in Ralph’s emerging “history in America.”³⁹

Ralph’s frugality in his personal expenses contrasts sharply with his generous treatment of Cammy, the secretary at the Foreign Student Affairs office with whom he falls in love. It is in his relationship with Cammy that Ralph’s class privilege manifests itself. Through a man he meets at a diner Ralph learns about the materialistic culture of America. The old man tells Ralph that “dough” was “what was wrong with America.” Money, according to the man, is “all anyone understands in this country. Dough, dough, dough.” And while Americans in general had it bad, “dames,” apparently, “got it the

³⁸ Han, 78.

³⁹ Jen, *Typical American*, 14.

worst” because all they understood were “Diamonds. Pearls. Big fat fur coats.” In short, “Big fat presents.” Taking his cue from the old man, Ralph buys Cammy presents in order to woo her. While he could not afford to buy her diamonds or a car, he nevertheless spent money on her, giving her a scarf, cold cream, pins, belts, booties, and a hat, among other things. And no poor student would have been able to afford “a veritable stockpile” of presents like that which Ralph amassed for Cammy. Coming from a privileged background, Ralph finds himself in familiar territory buying gifts for the object of his affection. For “[p]resents paved roads in China too; this was a type of construction he knew.” Unlike with English, Ralph seems rather fluent in the language of money and materialism.⁴⁰

Because of his class status and the ease with which he takes to American materialism, Ralph seems primed for assimilation into the middle-class of 1950s U.S.A. However, such an easy lateral transition, Jen seems to suggest, is less than compelling for a story about immigration. Within the space of a few pages, Ralph’s story of lateral mobility comes to a close. What ensues is a description of Ralph’s socio-economic descent – a necessary descent that makes possible a new narrative trajectory: upward mobility. From a laterally mobile migrant student, Jen transforms Ralph into an impoverished illegal alien in order to conclude a story of horizontal movement and set in motion an alternative story of vertical progress. Turning to a symbol of one of America’s most socially and economically disadvantaged groups, Jen casts the figure of the illegal alien as the new hero of the novel’s immigrant upward mobility plot.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 17, 18, 20.

In recasting Ralph as a more conventional hero who is fit for an upward mobility story, Jen severs his ties to his origins which afford him certain privileges, security and a sense of identity. Rather abruptly, Ralph is doubly orphaned. As a result of the Communist takeover of China in 1948, Ralph loses not only his parents but also the China he considered to be his home. Ralph is thus twice an orphan – without a family and without a nation.⁴¹ Ironically, by becoming an orphan, Ralph’s point of destination early in the novel – orphanhood – is the place where many upwardly mobile characters begin. One recalls, for example, Pip in Charles Dickens’ *Great Expectations* (1861) and the eponymous heroine of Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* (1847). That Ralph becomes an orphan, however, is not surprising. Orphans are featured frequently in upward mobility narratives because, as Bruce Robbins writes in *Upward Mobility and the Common Good*, “[o]rphanhood seemingly extracts the upwardly mobile protagonist from any necessary or built-in ambivalence, removing the tenderness of early attachment that would guarantee a later conflict of loyalties.” Of course, Robbins also rightly points out that the orphan is never truly free from feelings of “guilt, ambivalence, [and] conflicted loyalties.”⁴² Nevertheless, the orphan’s putative lack of attachment to some fixed origin (family or class) remains a seductive, if convenient, trope because it appears to save the protagonist from what Patricia Alden calls the “double bind” of upward mobility: the feeling of

⁴¹ The family, it should be noted, is commonly used as a metaphor for the nation state. I will discuss the significance of Ralph’s national orphanhood in the final section of this chapter.

⁴² Robbins, 57, 58.

betrayal and estrangement that success produces.⁴³ Without a family, the orphan does not leave anyone behind. She or he (ostensibly) betrays no one.

As a narrative development rather than a starting point, orphanhood in *Typical American* does not function in the exact same way that it does in more traditional upward mobility stories. Speaking strictly in terms of class, Ralph's orphanhood does not serve as a pre-emptive measure against a future conflict of loyalties or the double bind of success. No pre-emption is necessary since no conflict of class loyalties is imminent. As part of the privileged class, Ralph has no attachments to a less fortunate group that could potentially regard his social mobility as a betrayal. In fact, even as an undocumented immigrant, Ralph does not forge ties with the working class. As with other orphan protagonists, orphanhood for Ralph serves the same purpose of extrication from prior entanglements. This liberation from his privileged origins is crucial if Ralph is to succeed on his own in his pursuit of the American Dream; for his upper class status – more a hindrance than a help – actually precludes the possibility of upward mobility because it already places him at the top.

It is significant that Ralph's disentanglement from his origins is achieved not merely through geographic separation but through the death of his parents. In order for Ralph to become a subject of upward mobility, it is not enough for his upper-class status to fade into the past. Instead, the source or origin of privilege itself, the novel suggests, must completely disappear from the picture. Unlike other types of separation, death creates an unbridgeable distance between Ralph's privileged past (as represented by his

⁴³ Patricia Alden, *Social Mobility in the English Bildungsroman: Gissing, Hardy, Bennett, and Lawrence* (Ann Arbor, MI: UMI Research Press, 1986), 10.

parents) and his present and future upwardly mobile self. Interestingly, it is Ralph himself who enacts the final death blow to the past. Not long after the Communists take over China, Ralph receives one last letter from his parents asking him to come home. However, he is unable to return because the U.S. government has detained Chinese students, fearing they would use their education to aid the Communists. Having lost all communication with his parents, Ralph can only imagine what has become of his family: “Their story was an open manhole he could do nothing to close.” Yet closure is precisely what Ralph seeks. Initially, he thinks of “a simple ending” to the story, “the missing lid found.” He imagines himself as the “filial son” rescuing his parents by breaking them out of a mountain prison or by negotiating with Mao.⁴⁴ Ultimately, however, Ralph envisions a different scenario. He imagines his father speaking:

We are alive. His voice is faraway, a sound heard through a wall; yet the corners of his mouth crease and tear with effort. Pained, he blinks. His eyelids crackle like candy wrappers. *We are dead.*⁴⁵

With regard to his parents’ story, Ralph chooses not to hope in the possibility of their survival. Doing so would not bring closure to the matter and only perpetuate the open-endedness of their fate. Instead, liberating himself not only from the past but also from the state of limbo in which he finds himself, he devises an ending that represents an undeniable finality – death. From faraway, he imagines his father saying “We are dead.” Uttered by the voice of authority, these words ring as though they were true. Yet it is important to note here that it is Ralph who is granted the responsibility of closing his parents’ story. Because what actually happens to his parents is never revealed, Ralph’s

⁴⁴ Jen, *Typical American*, 23, 24.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 26.

imagined ending comes to stand in for reality in the novel. (Even when Theresa comes onto the scene, the narrator's description of her personal narrative offers no insight into the question. As with Ralph, Theresa's knowledge of the whereabouts of her parents ends when the Communists arrive.⁴⁶) Indeed, by the time Ralph reunites with Theresa in the United States, the death of their parents is treated as a matter of fact rather than a presumption.⁴⁷ Both siblings appear to have moved on, for neither raise questions about what has happened to their parents. Nevertheless, it is precisely by envisioning his parents' death that Ralph brings closure to the past and extricates himself from his origins.

The death of Ralph's parents illustrates a common logic found in upward mobility stories: "Someone has to die in order for someone else to rise."⁴⁸ The appearance of this logic in *Typical American* becomes painfully ironic if we concede that it is Ralph's imagined ending to his parents' story that in effect seals their fate. However, the novel presents a twist to the zero-sum logic. Although the death of his parents is important to the narrative of Ralph's eventual rise, it first achieves the opposite effect – his decline.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 52. Back in China, when Theresa's marriage prospects fall through, her parents send her to Shanghai to provide company for Hailan, the daughter of family friends. (Hailan would later be called Helen.) Theresa loses contact with her family as a result of the Communist revolution. Through their connections, Hailan's parents find a way to send both their daughter and Theresa to the United States on student visas. Theresa never re-establishes contact with her parents.

⁴⁷ At first, the family does not want to assume that their parents had indeed passed on and have "become ancestors." But their death seems all but accepted when, after Ralph lands a tenure-track job, the family treats them as ancestors, "thank[ing] their parents for whatever help they might have been" in the process (Jen, *Typical American*, 120).

⁴⁸ Robbins, 55. In his book, *Upward Mobility and the Common Good*, Robbins gives several examples to illustrate this logic. He points out a correlation between Edwin Reardon's death and Jasper Milvain's rise in George Gissing's *New Grub Street* (1891). Reading the opening scene of Charles Dickens' *Great Expectations* (1860-61), Robbins suggests that the death of Pip's brothers, in a way, is what makes his rise possible, for it "enacts a social distance that Pip, in order to follow his 'great expectations,' would in any case have had to put between himself and his family if fate had not already done so" (56).

Thus, in the process of remaking a story of lateral mobility into one of upward mobility, the logic changes as well: Someone has to die in order for someone to fall, so that the fallen has a chance to rise again.

The idea of moving up in socio-economic status, of course, is the fundamental premise of the upward mobility genre. But rising to the top makes sense only if someone starts from below. More often than not, we deem most compelling those stories whose protagonists come from the humblest of beginnings. The farther below one begins and the harder one climbs, the more satisfying the attainment of success seems.⁴⁹ Like other rags-to-riches stories, *Typical American* exploits this up-from-the-depths logic. In the novel's upward mobility plot, the degree of Ralph's success would be measured on a recalibrated scale, not in relation to where he originally began but in relation to how far down he sinks. And just how low does he go? Taking a rather hard fall from his upper class beginnings, the recently orphaned Ralph ends up in perhaps the worst possible predicament. He becomes an illegal alien.

If orphanhood disengages Ralph from his origins and initiates his descent, illegal alienage completes his fall. As quickly as the regime change happens in China, and just as unexpectedly as he loses his parents, Ralph suddenly becomes undocumented. He forgets to renew his immigration papers and "the next thing Ralph knew, he was having visa trouble." Although his advisor, Mr. Pinkus, agrees not to report him, Mr. Fitt, the foreign student affairs officer, is less willing to turn a blind eye to Ralph's situation. He ultimately hands the matter over to the Department of Immigration. To avoid capture and

⁴⁹ Robbins calls attention to the "one-downsmanship" that can sometimes happen when we compare rags-to-riches stories. In this "race to the bottom," those who start from the lowest social origins win. (Robbins, x-xi.)

deportation, Ralph leaves the university and moves from one apartment to the next, each new place being worse than the one he just left. Within the span of five months, Ralph “move[s] nine times, in a spiral away from his Chinese friends [...] and the university, [which] formed some center to his universe, but only as a point of origin.”⁵⁰

As an illegal alien, Ralph can only look back at his “point of origin” now that he is distanced from it. Like his parents, Ralph’s friends and the university represent the privileged origin from which he has been separated. The farther he moves from this origination point, the worse off he becomes. As the novel makes undeniably clear in both literal and metaphorical fashion, his move from the comfortable university setting to flea-infested housing illustrates his socio-economic descent. Ralph’s spiraling away from the center, realized through his relocation nine times, calls to mind Dante’s circles of hell. Indeed, the narrator’s description of Ralph’s situation suggests an image not unlike Dante’s figuration. Similar to Dante’s nine concentric circles of hell is an idea of circles of privilege that emanate outward from Ralph’s point of origin. But unlike Dante’s circles of hell where the center is the most terrifying place, it is the margin – the outermost point of the circles of privilege – that represents the worst position. As an illegal alien, Ralph is marginalized in society, forced to live in the outermost circle. Consigned to the place farthest away from privilege, Ralph, it could be said, resides in the depths of socio-economic “hell.”

It is as an illegal alien that Ralph truly hits rock bottom. He finds himself without family, friends, or future prospects. In the chapter entitled “In the Basement,” we learn that in order to survive, Ralph takes a job at a “fresh-killed meat store” killing and

⁵⁰ Jen, *Typical American*, 26, 32.

dressing chickens and other animals.⁵¹ He works in the basement of the store, separated from and unseen by those who live above ground. Ralph's physical location relative to the world above represents not only the lower socio-economic status he now occupies. It also bespeaks the undocumented immigrant's marginalization and invisibility from public life. Even more profoundly, it illustrates his separation from the official national community that is acknowledged and deemed legitimate by the state. Rendered criminal by the law, the illegal alien is forced to hide in the basements of American society.

In the basement, Ralph is literally relegated to the underworld where he performs the difficult and unacknowledged labor of the undocumented immigrant. In his monotonous and sordid job, he cannot even claim a similar dignity that a butcher might find in his vocation. Unlike a butcher who has a visible and valuable role in a local community, Ralph is invisible from public view. He connects to the outside world only through the commodity his labor produces, when, through a trap door, he "plac[es] carefully in the hands of another human being, stooped down to receive them, these – his chickens, his doing."⁵² Consistent with how undocumented aliens are often treated in U.S. society, Ralph's condition speaks to the erasure of illegal immigrants' personhood in the process of transforming their labor into consumable goods.

Moreover, the novel's depiction of Ralph's condition betrays the devaluation not only of his work but also his very life. Described as a "non-life," his existence is rendered worthless and void. Short of complete erasure, Ralph's "non-life" makes him vulnerable to extreme exploitation. In the dirty and dimly lit room, he works amidst

⁵¹ Ibid., 34.

⁵² Ibid., 35.

feces, offal, rotting meat, and animals for slaughter “as though [he were] indigenous to [that] world.”⁵³ The suggestion is clear: Ralph, the illegal alien, is not all that different from the animals and detritus that surround him.

In the scheme of the novel’s upward mobility trajectory, it is significant that Ralph’s “non-life” as an illegal alien revolves around a job that places him “in the basement” of a store. For in the story of Ralph’s subsequent socio-economic rise, the basement functions as a crucial point of reference against which his successes could be read. Throughout the novel, the buildings – both domestic and public spaces – that Ralph and his family inhabit serve as metaphors for the Chang household’s changing socio-economic status.⁵⁴ As the story progresses, after Ralph reunites with Theresa and marries Helen, we see the Changs take up residence in a cramped walk-up apartment in northwest Harlem. In this building that “smelled of mildew and dogs,” they live among “the poorest students” and “[s]o many Negroes,” whom they equate with poverty; they suffer through plumbing, heating, and various other structural problems.⁵⁵ Though far from the lap of luxury, the apartment is an improvement from Ralph’s existence in the basement of the meat store. After Ralph secures a tenure-track job, they move to a larger place in Washington Heights, and unlike their previous apartment, this one has “solid ceilings” and is more spacious; here they convert the dining room into a separate bedroom for

⁵³ Ibid., 34.

⁵⁴ Rachel Lee observes that the buildings also signify the evolving dynamics of the family’s interpersonal/domestic relationships. She writes, “Jen portrays the house as an affective structure that mirrors the stability of the family” (49-50). In the book, there is a preponderance of references to houses and related structures. The titles of some of the chapters serve both a descriptive function of the events described therein and a metaphorical allusion to the state of the family itself: “In the Basement,” “The House Holds,” “Helen is Home,” “The New House,” “Structural Weakening,” “Constructions,” “Watching Overhead” (in reference to the ceiling of the restaurant), “Helen’s House.”

⁵⁵ Jen, *Typical American*, 65-66.

Theresa.⁵⁶ With Ralph's continued success as a professor, the family purchases a spacious two-story home in a middle-class suburb outside New York City. And when Ralph leaves his academic career to embark on a business venture, they buy a building for their restaurant, to which they later add a second level. The novel's deployment of buildings as a trope for socio-economic progress clearly points to the possibility of upward mobility promised by the myth of the American Dream. And in Ralph's particular storyline, the progress associated with the purchase of a two-story home and the addition of a second level to the restaurant is especially made meaningful by the fact that he ascended from the basement of the meat store.

In contrast to the figurative (and literal) heights that Ralph later achieves, the basement represents the lowest point in his life, not just economically but also emotionally and psychologically. It is as a hopeless undocumented immigrant that he contemplates suicide. After his plea for assistance goes unheeded by his former advisor, Ralph sinks into a deep despair. Rebuffed by the person he considered to be his last hope, he resolves "to kill himself...in front of Pinkus's [his advisor's] house."⁵⁷ In his apartment, he turns a cleaver over and over in his hands, first slicing off a fingernail then cutting into his palms. He begins to see his own life as worthless. Equating himself with the animals he kills at the meat store, he imagines a chicken in his hands and then feels "his neck for the vein he had slit countless times before." Like the animals that "became

⁵⁶ Ibid., 120.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 41. The falling out between Dr. Pinkus and Ralph results from a misunderstanding that Ralph is unable to explain. Fearing that his advisor has forgotten about his case, Ralph tries to muster the courage to approach Pinkus again. But greatly intimidated by the professor, Ralph considers approaching one of Pinkus' children instead. Mistaking Ralph's actions and motives to be duplicitous, Pinkus confronts him and promises to report him to the police.

meat” when their life-giving blood is let, he realizes that he too could become mere carcass by the simple act of “a knife mov[ing] an in inch in the wrong direction...transform[ing] everything.”⁵⁸

It is at this point in the novel that it becomes apparent that Ralph’s status problem must be resolved. As an illegal alien, Ralph can either commit suicide or submit to deportation. But in both cases, his path toward becoming a “typical American” would immediately come to a halt. Ironically, while illegality engendered the story’s upward mobility trajectory, it soon becomes an obstacle in the pursuit and fulfillment of the American Dream. Crucially, illegality threatens to derail the Americanization story Jen aims to relate. It is apparent here that the figure of the illegal alien does not fit neatly into the conventional framework of the immigration narrative. Unlike the legal immigrant protagonist, the illegal alien, who is subject to deportation, troubles the telos of immigrant settlement, assimilation and citizenship. In order to preserve this dominant narrative, the undocumented alien must be transformed into a *legal* immigrant subject. For it is only the legal immigrant to whom the promise of upward mobility and Americanization can truly be extended.

Compelled by the urgency of avoiding the immigration authorities who have tracked him down once again, Ralph abandons his tragic plans of suicide. Finding himself at the end of his rope, Ralph decides to surrender. But he surrenders not to the immigration officials or to Mr. Pinkus. Instead, he gives himself up to America: “He lay waiting to see what happened. Anything could happen, this was America. He gave

⁵⁸ Jen, *Typical American*, 41.

himself up to the country, and dreamt.”⁵⁹ For Ralph, the promise of limitless possibilities offered by America eclipses all the struggles he has faced.

In Ralph’s surrender, we see the persistence of a powerful ideology that has profoundly shaped immigrants’ perception of America. Indeed, the notion of limitless possibilities seems particularly seductive to a character such as Ralph, who, as an illegal immigrant with “no job, no family, no visa,” has nothing left to lose.⁶⁰ But by wholeheartedly surrendering to America, Ralph somewhat naively assumes that the country will be benevolent towards him. By “waiting to see what happen[s],” he opts to be passive and gives up his own agency, allowing America to take the active role in determining his fate. Such an idealistic state of surrender, however, is a most precarious, if not dangerous position for an illegal alien to occupy. For the idea of giving oneself up to America also means surrendering to a country that historically has not always shown kindness to immigrants, not least of all to illegal ones. While attaining success is indeed possible in the United States, exploitation, marginalization, and deportation are more often the realities that many illegal aliens face. Yet in the struggle between the novel’s competing images of America as either a hostile or hospitable place for undocumented immigrants, the latter wins out. Willing to move beyond Ralph’s struggles as an exploited and hunted illegal alien, the novel highlights instead the promise of America.

Not surprisingly, and rather fortunately for Ralph, America does show him kindness. His faith in America is rewarded. Slumped on a park bench one day, taking stock of his sad life, Ralph is “delivered” – found by Theresa, his sister, who for months

⁵⁹ Ibid., 42.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 45.

has been looking for him. And soon afterwards, as mysteriously as he had lost his student visa, Ralph's status problem gets resolved by a similar stroke of good fortune:

Then came the possibility of Ralph finishing his Ph.D. after all. This was serendipity itself; with the fall of the Nationalists, other Chinese students had become illegitimate as he. "No status" – that was how they stood with the Immigration Department, suddenly naked as winter trees. What now? They waited. Rumor had it that, having kept the technical students here, the Americans were going to have to do something with them – probably send them all back to school. Sign-up sessions. Ralph went along with everyone else. No, he wasn't a Communist. Yes, his status was "no status." As for how he got that way, "English not so good, excuse please?"

"Say again, please?"

"Whaaa?"

The volunteer let it go.⁶¹

In the span of one paragraph, all of Ralph's legal troubles come to an end. To rectify Ralph's predicament (and by extension, resolve the conflict that threatens to upend the entire story), Jen employs the plot device of *deus ex machina* and calls upon history to intervene. In this instance, history manifests itself through the Displaced Persons Act.⁶² Through this government amnesty program, Ralph is given an opportunity to regain legal status and return to school. As a legal permanent resident and later as a citizen, Ralph is finally able to embark fully on a path to material and financial success. In contrast to *Jasmine* wherein illegality poses little hindrance to the heroine's upward mobility, *Typical American* suggests that legal status is in fact critical for the protagonist's achievement of the American Dream. For soon after Ralph regains his legal status, he

⁶¹ Ibid., 58.

⁶² Although it is not stated explicitly what legal policy allowed Ralph to adjust his status, the novel suggests later that he benefited from the 1948 Displaced Persons Act, which is the same amnesty program that allowed Helen, who was also a stranded student, to file for permanent residency. Jen, *Typical American*, 84.

obtains his Ph.D., lands a tenure-track job, buys a car, purchases a house in the suburbs, gets tenure, quits his job to start a restaurant business, and pursues his dream of becoming a self-made millionaire.

Of course, Ralph's journey is not without obstacles. In Part Four of the novel, aptly titled "Structural Weakening," we see Ralph's dreams begin to crumble. Greed overtakes him. In an effort to increase profit and pay less tax, he falsifies receipts and underreports his business income. To Ralph's mind, the resulting bigger cash flow did not necessarily make them rich, but it made the family more "respectable."⁶³ And in the 1950s setting of the story, "respectable" means being able to "keep up with the Joneses." Enabled by their modest economic success, the Changs recklessly embrace American materialism, purchasing household appliances, furniture, and other objects that make their lives more comfortable. But in the midst of their prosperity, Ralph's family begins to fall apart. Helen has an affair with Ralph's business partner Grover Ding. Ralph fails to recognize this, however, because he is too busy attending to the restaurant's finances. Displeased with Theresa's decision to maintain an adulterous relationship with his friend and colleague Old Chao, Ralph's relationship with his sister becomes strained and she eventually moves out.⁶⁴ His business fails as well. As a result of shoddy construction, the Chicken Palace is forced to close. Representing the limits of Ralph's upward climb on the ladder of success, the ceiling of the restaurant begins to sag and the second level threatens to cave in over their heads. Though the Changs never become impoverished

⁶³ Ibid., 202.

⁶⁴ Ralph is displeased that Theresa begins a romantic relationship with Old Chao, a colleague at the university who also happens to be married to Janice, a friend of Helen's. Ralph is ashamed of what he considers to be Theresa's indiscretion.

(because Ralph returns to his teaching job at the university), the family suffers significant financial losses. Worst of all, Ralph accidentally runs over Theresa, severely injuring her and putting her in a coma. By the end of the novel, there is little left of Ralph's American Dream.

Jen's depiction of the unraveling of Ralph's life, family, and achievements raises interesting and important questions about how we view the American Dream. To be sure, the novel presents a critique of not only unrestrained greed and materialism, but also the notion of limitless possibilities promoted by the myth. Because many scholars have already explored and written on the matter, I do not wish to dwell on it at length here.⁶⁵ It is sufficient, I think, to quote Ralph's thoughts at the close of the novel to illustrate Jen's pointed critique: "He was not what he made up his mind to be. A man was the sum of his limits; freedom only made him see how much so. America was no America."⁶⁶ In agreement with other critics, I believe Ralph's sobering assessment of his situation does inspire readers to reconsider the "myths and realities" of the American Dream.⁶⁷ It makes us question our often-fervent belief in self-reliance and up-from-your-bootstraps, rags-to-riches mythologies that fuel exceptionalist political culture.

Yet despite Ralph's somber realization that "America was no America," it is significant that the final chapter, entitled "Faith," closes the novel on a hopeful note. A happy memory of Theresa playing with Old Chao in a wading pool during a hot summer day interrupts Ralph's bleak thoughts. The sight of his sister full of life and confidence,

⁶⁵ For a discussion of the novel's critique of the American Dream, see Rachel Lee's "Gish Jen and the Gendered Codes of Americanness" in *The Americas of Asian American Literature*, and Zhou Xiaojing's "Becoming Americans."

⁶⁶ Jen, *Typical American*, 296.

⁶⁷ Jen, interview by Satz.

dressed in a loud orange bathing suit, “hearten[s] him.”⁶⁸ If Ralph’s experiences have shown him his limitations, the heartening vision of Theresa yet again reaffirms his belief in the promise of possibilities in America. Interpreting the closing scene, Bonnie TuSmith writes: “We understand that in spite of recognizing the real odds against the [American] Dream, the protagonist is ready to press on and take his chances in American society. This act of faith is no longer predicated on the ‘can-do’ ethic of the rugged individualist, however. Rather, it is grounded in family (represented by Theresa) and the human spirit (represented by her orange bathing suit).”⁶⁹

All is not lost for Ralph after all. Although his perspective in life is now tempered by the reality of his limitations, his faith in the future – in America – is nonetheless restored. Ultimately, *Typical American* does not endorse a complete rejection of the American Dream. On the contrary, it reaffirms the myth even as it challenges the predominant interpretation of what it means to achieve success. Thus, rather than a refutation of the myth, we might describe the novel more appropriately as a moral tale that warns against those impulses – like excessive greed and materialism – that can corrupt an otherwise good thing.

Proposing a more capacious definition of the American Dream, Jen says that “there are many stories.” Regarding the characters in her novel, she asserts, “Helen and Ralph and Theresa all find some version of the American Dream and yet it’s very different for each of them.”⁷⁰ In Ralph’s version is the suggestion that the undocumented

⁶⁸ Jen, *Typical American*, 296.

⁶⁹ TuSmith, 25.

⁷⁰ Jen, interview by Satz.

immigrant has access to the dream, but only if he becomes legal. Thus, in *Typical American*, “immigrant America” is still an America of legal immigrants.

Illegality as a Temporary Inconvenience

If by the end of the novel Ralph’s past as an undocumented immigrant seems but a distant memory, it is because in the narrative’s teleological framework, illegality is depicted only as a temporary and transitory condition. Once surmounted, the problem is forgotten. In fact, in the only scene where his past as an undocumented alien is revisited, Ralph seems to obscure his illegality purposely. Midway through the story of Ralph’s progress, he purchases a car and takes the entire family for a drive around New York City. During their drive, they stop in Chinatown for food. As they leave Chinatown, Ralph notices a fresh-killed meat store and tells them that he “used to work in a store like that.”⁷¹ This surprises Helen, for he has never mentioned this fact to her. In another part of town, he shows the family where his old advisor used to live. He makes no mention, however, that he had once contemplated killing himself in front of this building. Although in showing both places to his family he reveals to them a part of his past, he curiously dismisses a crucial aspect of the story – that these sites are distinctly associated with his past as an illegal alien. Ralph’s utter silence on the matter demonstrates an effort to forget or efface an objectionable episode in his life from which he has since moved on. In other words: He *used to* work at a fresh-killed meat store. He *used to* be an illegal alien. But not anymore.

⁷¹ Jen, *Typical American*, 133.

The novel's suggestion that illegality is merely a temporary stopover on the upward path to success is most evident in the extended context of the driving scene mentioned above. After the family drives past Mr. Pinkus's house, they stop to take a look at their old apartment building in Harlem which is now in ruins. They count themselves lucky to have moved out just in time. Significantly, their drive ends not at their current apartment in Washington Heights but at a quaint suburban middle-class neighborhood in Connecticut. On their journey – in the car ride as well as in life – “a town like this was their destiny.” It is their hoped-for, indeed expected, destination. In this town, in front of a house with a yard and a garage, they “fee[l] themselves to have arrived somewhere.” Here they end their drive and park the car.⁷²

Intriguingly multi-layered, the extended driving scene captures both a metaphorical and a literal dramatization of social mobility. In this episode, we see a concatenated and condensed representation of Ralph's path toward socio-economic success. From Chinatown, which metonymically stands for his nation of origin, we see Ralph drive past several sites that signify different points in his life: the fresh-killed meat store, Mr. Pinkus's house, the dilapidated building in Harlem, and finally the middle-class neighborhood in Connecticut. As a literal review of his past and as a preview of his future, the car ride mirrors Ralph's journey toward attaining the American Dream. Ralph's progress from Chinatown to Connecticut is not unlike Jasmine's advancement from the ghettos of Flushing to the Iowa suburbs. In both novels, the protagonist's social mobility is inextricably tied to his/her geographical movement. From his immigrant origins to his final destination as middle-class professional and entrepreneur,

⁷² Ibid., 133, 135.

Ralph's life is characterized as a steady march to the top. Not insignificant in this scene is the fact that the car is the means by which we witness his journey of socio-economic advancement; for the automobile is nothing if not the quintessential symbol of mobility.⁷³

Yet if the car ride represents a telescopic view of Ralph's life, the quick stopover he makes at the fresh-killed meat store and Mr. Pinkus' house – both of which are associated with his life as an undocumented immigrant – suggests that illegal alienage is only a temporary condition within the grand narrative of the immigrant's Americanization and pursuit of success. In light of the fact that the promise of the American Dream (especially to immigrants) is crucial to American exceptionalist political culture, the novel's suggestion merits serious consideration. But the suggestion also demands careful examination in view of the fact that illegal immigration continues to be a central problem in U.S. immigration policy at the beginning of the twenty-first century. While it is true that, under certain conditions, an illegal alien can adjust his or her status and become legal, such cases represent the exception rather than the rule.⁷⁴ More often than not, undocumented aliens who come to the United States live in a protracted, if not permanent, state of illegality, lacking the means to gain access to resources that could help them obtain legal status. Moreover, with the federal crackdown on illegal immigration since the 1990s and especially after the 9/11 terrorist attacks, deportation and imprisonment rather than amnesty programs have been the government's

⁷³ Needless to say, Ralph's socio-economic progress goes hand in hand with his Americanization and cultural assimilation as well. In the novel, Theresa sees his decision to buy the car as a sign that Ralph is "becoming one-hundred-percent Americanized." Jen, *Typical American*, 28.

⁷⁴ Ngai, 6.

approach to “solving” the nation’s illegal immigration problem.⁷⁵ Thus, the condition of present-day undocumented aliens belies the promise of success that the American Dream supposedly extends to immigrants. Exploited and kept down within the American capitalist system, undocumented aliens have little hope of upward mobility.

I acknowledge that the historical context and circumstances by which Ralph becomes illegal differ from that of today’s illegal immigrants. Whereas Ralph falls out of legal status as a foreign student in the late 1940s, many undocumented immigrants today illegally enter the U.S. in search of work. But my criticism of the novel is not that I think it presents an inaccurate account of illegal immigrants’ lives. My aim is not to judge the novel on its historical accuracy or its merits as a sociological document. My concern is the way in which it imagines the illegal alien’s inclusion into the nation vis-à-vis the trope of upward mobility in which successful integration into America is evidenced by (if not dependent on) one’s adherence to the capitalist materialism that underpins the American Dream. “For the characters in my book,” Jen notes, “it takes a while to become American and it’s not so much becoming a citizen that makes them feel American, it’s something like buying a house.”⁷⁶

Jen’s comment is telling in many ways. That citizenship would play such a minimal role in Ralph’s conception of what it means to become American reveals the way in which the novel glosses over the difference between legal and illegal immigrants. One would suspect that for an undocumented alien such as Ralph, attaining citizenship would have a significant impact on his perception of himself as an American. But by

⁷⁵ The Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986 was the last wide-ranging immigration law to grant amnesty to illegal aliens. See Chapter One for fuller discussion of IRCA.

⁷⁶ Jen, interview by Satz.

downplaying the importance of citizenship to a deportable alien like Ralph, the novel fails to recognize just how critical attaining legal status is for the undocumented immigrant. Moreover, Jen's statement sheds insight into how she perceives the Asian American experience. By presenting Asian immigrant characters who equate Americanness with buying a house (as opposed to attaining citizenship), Jen not only reaffirms the model minority stereotype of Asian Americans as immigrants who stay away from politics; she also reinscribes the notion that Asian American incorporation into the nation is commercial, not political.⁷⁷

In *Typical American*, we see that the trope of upward mobility commonly found in immigration narratives offers a limited path for the immigrant's inclusion into the national community. Jen's novel envisions the immigrant's relationship to the nation-state primarily in economic terms, wherein the alien becomes American by becoming a consumer. As a consumer, the immigrant buys his way into the United States, participating in the life of the nation by helping maintain the economy through the purchase of material goods.⁷⁸ But he is also a consumer in another, more profound sense in that he buys into the ideology of the American Dream. In minimizing the significance of legal and political citizenship and emphasizing instead a depoliticized form of economic citizenship, the novel imagines the immigrant as a subject who makes inroads into the national community not through political agency but through his buying power.

⁷⁷ For a discussion of the relationship between class mobility and citizenship, and the depoliticized Asian model minority, see Honig, 80-81. For a sociological analysis of the relationship between Asian American consumption practices and citizenship, see Lisa Sun-Hee Park, *Consuming Citizenship: Children of Asian Immigrant Entrepreneurs* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005).

⁷⁸ The act of purchasing is frequently tied to the performance of one's American identity. When nativism rises in the U.S., Americans are encouraged to "buy American" in order to help the economy. That shopping is seen as a distinctly patriotic thing is evident in George W. Bush's call to Americans to shop after the 9/11 terrorist attacks.

Bonnie Honig warns, “[c]ontemporary depictions of immigrants as concerned only with material acquisition and not with empowered democratic agency are not only misleading.” They are dangerous as well, for they are “often *enforced* in response to immigrants who become politicized enough to trouble this dominant normative image of quiescence.” In other words, stories that emphasize immigrants’ commercial incorporation into the nation can be used as a depoliticizing tool, to minimize and undermine the potential power of immigrants as political actors.⁷⁹ By privileging an economic relationship between the immigrant and the nation-state, *Typical American*, I suggest, ends up only reaffirming the system of capitalism under which illegal aliens are exploited. And while the illegal alien’s inclusion into the capitalist system *as a consumer* demonstrates the possibility of social mobility, it ultimately does not free him from the state of economic dependence under which he previously labored. By depicting the illegal immigrant as a subject whose inclusion into the nation is based on his economic agency rather than his political agency, the novel forecloses the possibility of the undocumented alien’s escape from the exploitative system of capitalism. The novel thus presents the illegal alien with only two options: either be exploited by the system or subscribe to its ideology and participate in its continuance.

Despite its particularities, then, Ralph’s story is relevant to the contemporary cultural discourse on immigration precisely because it narrates a more general, less historically bound story about immigrant success. Through Ralph’s story, the novel says: Despite the odds against him or her, the illegal immigrant can “make it” in America; all he or she must do is surrender and believe. Although the novel does offer a caveat with

⁷⁹ Honig, 82, 81.

regard to the destructive forces of greed and materialism, it nonetheless promotes an exceptionalist message about the United States that suggests illegal aliens have the same opportunity to achieve the American Dream just like everybody else. In other words, America must truly be a great country because even the most socio-economically oppressed and marginalized – undocumented immigrants – can find success there.

The novel's hopeful tone is admirable, for sure. And granted, the idea that illegal aliens could attain the American Dream is not entirely unreasonable. But we must approach stories like Ralph's with care, for his is precisely the kind that exceptionalist political culture capitalizes on. Ralph's story – which suggests that illegal alienage is only temporary, and that undocumented immigrants can eventually achieve success – is the exception that gets used to gloss over the rule. Absent its moralism about avarice and excessive material accumulation, the narrative of Ralph's ascent from exploited, impoverished illegal alien to middle-class professor and entrepreneur is ultimately still a tale of successful upward mobility. In a way, Jen restages in *Typical American* the conventional success story that Americans love to hear. And while such stories might attest to the opportunities in America and the rewards of hard work, these same stories could be used to downplay the ways in which the nation-state condones and participates in the oppression and exploitation of undocumented immigrants. Exceptional stories – like Ralph's successful class mobility – obscure the very real legal, political and economic barriers that exclude undocumented immigrants from the American Dream.

Adopting the Illegal Immigrant into the National Family

In staging the immigrant experience in her novel, Jen presents a familiar assimilation narrative that imagines Americanization in terms of class mobility. Within this conventional framework, the undocumented alien becomes American by subscribing to and pursuing the capitalist version of the American Dream. But, as we have seen in Ralph's story, he can do so only after he becomes a legal immigrant. It is important to take a critical look at the process by which Ralph becomes legal because it tells us about how the novel conceives of the relationship between the immigrant and the nation.

As has been discussed previously, immigration stories offer symbolic constructions of kinship in the way they depict the immigrant's integration into the national community. One of the most common figurations of kinship featured in immigrant writing is marriage or romantic love. Signifying the immigrant's bond to his or her new country, the "foreigner" volitionally enters into a marital union or a love relationship with the "native," who, more often than not, is represented by a white Anglo-American individual. In Chapter Two, we saw how this trope plays out in Mukherjee's *Jasmine*, a novel in which romance between an undocumented immigrant and a citizen results not in a legitimate/legal marriage but rather in illicit relationships. Similarly, *Typical American* initially explores the possibility of developing this form kinship via Ralph's romance with Cammy. The relationship, however, is short-lived and does not come to fruition.

The failure of Ralph's relationship points to the gender politics of immigration narratives. In her book *Democracy and the Foreigner*, Bonnie Honig observes the common representation of the immigrant foreigner as a woman. From the Book of Ruth

in the Bible to the film *Strictly Ballroom*, the foreign bride arrives time and again in a new land and forges ties with a native son.⁸⁰ Though not a hard and fast rule, male immigrant protagonists by contrast seem less successful than their female counterparts in establishing kinship through marriage. As we shall see in *Odyssey to the North*, for example, Juancho, who represents a foil to Calixto, also has a failed relationship with a white American woman. With the end of Ralph and Cammy's romance, *Typical American* forecloses the possibility of constructing kinship through marriage. The novel, however, imagines an alternative: kinship through adoption.

Although adoption is a seldom-used trope in immigration literature, it is not uncommon to see it deployed as a metaphor in legal and political discourse to describe the immigrant's relationship to the nation. Scholar Susan Bibler Coutin has observed, for example, the use of adoption as an analogy in naturalization ceremonies. Drawing a comparison between citizens-by-birth and citizens-through-naturalization, one judge remarked to a group of immigrants: "I compare this to, perhaps, a child born in a family[;] a child by birthright is within the family. Then there are those children who are as a matter of course outside the family, but adopted into the family... You are the adoptees of this country, and this country has adopted you."⁸¹ Unlike the construct of marriage in which the immigrant and the nation are figured as (heterosexual) lovers, the construct of adoption posits a relationship between parent and child. This latter relationship exhibits what scholar George Lakoff calls the "nation-as-family metaphor, in

⁸⁰ Ibid., 41-72.

⁸¹ Quoted in Susan Bibler Coutin, "Cultural Logics of Belonging and Movement: Transnationalism, Naturalization, and U.S. Immigration Politics," *American Ethnologist* 30.4 (2003): 517.

which the nation is seen as a family, the government as a parent, and the citizens as children.”⁸²

Although there is not an explicit adoption plot in *Typical American* wherein Ralph is taken in by an American family, the conditions of his legalization and eventual naturalization suggest a process akin to adoption. As I noted earlier, Ralph is orphaned early in the novel when he loses his parents as a result of the Communist Revolution in China. And viewing the nation state as a metaphor for the family, we see that Ralph becomes an orphan in another sense in that he loses his parent country with the fall of the Chinese Nationalist government. Within this schema, Ralph’s orphanhood is inextricably linked to the loss of his legal status, for, as I argue below, becoming undocumented achieves a “clean break” from the past, which then frees him to be adopted into a new national family.

Barbara Yngvesson and Susan Bibler Coutin’s comparative inquiry into the ways in which kinship is refigured in the realms of adoption and immigration provides insight into our present discussion. Yngvesson and Coutin observe that adoption and immigration not only share common assumptions but also operate under a similar logic. Adoption and immigration, they assert, are often framed as narratives of new beginnings; as such, they “are presumed to produce new persons.”⁸³ Crucial to the production of new persons is the notion of the “clean break,” which “forms the ground for starting anew.”⁸⁴

⁸² George Lakoff, “Metaphor, Morality and Politics, Or, Why Conservatives Have Left Liberals in the Dust,” *Social Research* 62.2 (1995): 195.

⁸³ Barbara Yngvesson and Susan Bibler Coutin, “Backed by Papers: Undoing Persons, Histories, and Return,” *American Ethnologist* 33.2 (2006): 180.

⁸⁴ Yngvesson, “Going ‘Home,’” 7.

In the case of adoption, the clean break is commonly preceded by a story of abandonment. In this story, a mother surreptitiously leaves her baby at the hospital, outside an orphanage or some other public place where it is discovered. Alternatively, a mother openly gives up her baby to orphanage staff or state child welfare officials and relinquishes her rights to her child. Abandonment facilitates a clean break in that it helps establish the baby as a “freestanding child,” who is legally separated from her biological parents.⁸⁵ Through the process of legal separation, a child is officially declared an orphan and becomes free for adoption. Final and finite, the clean break in adoption is marked by the sealing (and sometimes destruction) of original birth records, the creation of a new birth certificate, and the irrevocable termination of birth-parent rights.⁸⁶ Once adopted, a child is given a new name to signify her new identity and kinship to a new family. While a child’s separation from her biological family is characteristic of all clean break adoptions, there is an additional dimension to the separation in the case of international adoptions. International adoptees are disconnected not only from their original family but also their state of origin. As Yngvesson explains, the clean break in international adoption “separates the child from everything that constitutes her grounds for belonging as a child to *this* family and *this* nation, while establishing her transferability to *that* family and *that* nation. With a past that has been cut away – an old identity that no longer exists – the child can be reembedded in a new place, almost as though he or she never moved at all.”⁸⁷

⁸⁵ Ibid., 8.

⁸⁶ Yngvesson and Coutin, 180.

⁸⁷ Yngvesson, “Going ‘Home,’” 7.

Much like adoptees who are integrated into new families, immigrants are similarly taken in by receiving countries and incorporated into the metaphorical family of the nation. Through the naturalization process, immigrants gain citizenship and legally become official members of the national community. Susan Bibler Coutin observes that the clean break logic works similarly in immigration discourse as it does in adoption. In the specific context of the U.S., new citizens are required to renounce their allegiance to any other foreign state. Immigrants thus make a clean break from their country of origin in order to receive their new national identity as Americans.⁸⁸ Naturalization is profoundly significant in that it reconfigures the immigrant's relationship to the state. Naturalization, in effect, transforms the alien visitor into a family member. As Coutin writes, naturalization functions as "a rebirth of sorts, giving new citizens a quasi-biological connection to the United States."⁸⁹

In both adoption and immigration, legal documents or "papers" not only serve as proof of belonging (to family or nation) but also authenticate one's new identity. Birth records, adoption papers, naturalization certificates, passports and visas document important moments and movements in an individual's life. But papers function not simply as records of the past. In fact, they have the power to shape a person's present and future in that they "have the potential to redefine persons, compel movement, alter

⁸⁸ It is important to note, however, that while new American citizens might formally renounce their prior allegiances, states of origin may continue to make claims on these naturalized individuals. It is also not uncommon for some Americans to hold dual citizenship. While the clean break logic makes sense in theory, it is more problematic in practice, for many immigrants maintain strong ties with their country of origin not least of all because of the persistence of family relations.

⁸⁹ Coutin, 518.

moments, and make ties ambiguous.” In short, papers play a fundamental role in “figuring belonging and being.”⁹⁰

In the broader system of international migration, which upholds states’ sovereignty over national territorial borders, having appropriate papers has become of utmost importance in regulating the movements of persons across different countries. For immigrants in the United States, “belonging” and “being” are evidenced primarily by passports and visas, which document one’s national identity and prove permission of entry into the country. As we saw in Chapter One, the passage of the 1924 Johnson-Reed Immigration Act marked a turning point in the use of documents in U.S. immigration, instituting what Mae Ngai calls “the regime of papers.”⁹¹ The new emphasis on having the right documentation – specifically, the “proper visa” – was instrumental in defining the difference between legal and illegal aliens.⁹²

Lacking legal status, the undocumented immigrant has no legitimate connection to the country where he does not even have a right to be present. Indeed, in the eyes of the state, the undocumented immigrant is a specter of sorts, “a body stripped of individual personage.”⁹³ Put another way, the undocumented immigrant has no juridical identity in the country where he illegally resides. The condition of illegal alienage thus creates a disconnect between an individual’s bodily presence and his juridical existence. This is in

⁹⁰ Yngvesson and Coutin, 184, 185.

⁹¹ Ngai, 17.

⁹² Ibid., 61.

⁹³ Ibid.

part what makes the illegal alien an “impossible subject” – a subject “whose inclusion within the nation [is] simultaneously a social reality and a legal impossibility.”⁹⁴

Within the regime of papers, documents have the power to establish or sever a person’s connections to a particular place. In the American system of immigration, visas determine what type relationship an alien will have to the United States. The connection may be temporary, as in the case of tourism, business, employment, and education. At other times, it is ongoing and more permanent, as is the case for resident aliens and those seeking citizenship. If the granting of a visa establishes a connection, the loss of a visa results in a break in that connection. Those who fall out of legal status and become undocumented are rendered deportable. In a way, we can view deportation as the culmination of the severing of ties between alien and nation.

Returning now to our examination of Jen’s *Typical American*, I suggest that Ralph’s narrative of immigration can be read as an allegorical story of adoption that seeks to imagine how the illegal alien might be assimilated into the nation. That adoption is relevant to Ralph’s story is signaled by his orphanhood early in the novel. And as the novel progresses, we see the clean break logic reflected in Ralph’s legalization and incorporation into the United States.

If Ralph’s clean break from the past is initiated by the loss of his family and the fall of his home country to the Communists, it is ultimately completed by the loss of his visa and his transformation into an illegal alien. In order to become a “freestanding child” available for adoption, Ralph has to lose his visa because it represents his old identity as a Chinese student. By becoming an illegal alien, who is stripped of his pre-

⁹⁴ Ibid., 4.

existing juridical identity, Ralph is given the opportunity to be reborn, this time with a legitimate or “quasi-biological” connection to the United States. Thus, for Ralph, becoming illegal is part of the process of achieving a clean break, for it enables him to be transferred from his old family/nation and be re-embedded into a new family/nation. In this light, Ralph is not unlike an international adoptee.

It is significant to note that in the trope of adoption, the illegal immigrant is figured as a child. This figuration stands in contrast to the more common depiction of the immigrant as a spouse or lover. In the marriage trope, the lover expresses consent and voluntarily enters into the relationship. The child, on the other hand, cannot exercise volition or consent in the matter of his adoption. In *Typical American*, the adoptee’s (or illegal alien’s) lack of consent is dramatized rather vividly in the scene where Ralph is given the opportunity to return to school as part of the amnesty program for displaced Chinese students. When a volunteer asks Ralph how he came to have “no status,” he is unable to give a coherent response. Failing to give an explanation, all he says is: “English not so good, excuse please?”; “Say again, please?”; “Whaaa?”⁹⁵ In this scene, Ralph is infantilized, depicted as a child unable to communicate. Like a child put up for adoption, Ralph exercises no consent whatsoever in his status adjustment and legalization.

The novel’s figuration of the illegal alien as an adopted child has significant implications for how we might imagine undocumented immigrants’ relationship to the nation. For adoption posits a drastically different relationship between immigrant and nation than does marriage. The distinction between adoptive child and spouse/lover is

⁹⁵ Jen, *Typical American*, 58.

important because it calls attention to the principle of consent, which is fundamental to the United States' conception of itself as a liberal democracy. The symbolic kinship established through marriage valorizes choice and thus re-enacts liberalism's "fictive foundation in individual acts of uncoerced consent."⁹⁶ As such, the trope of marriage gives power to the mythology of "immigrant America" and the discourse of American exceptionalism. From the perspective of exceptionalist political culture, the United States' choice-worthiness – its distinctiveness and superiority to other nations – is reaffirmed time and again by immigrants' desire and decision to become Americans.

Whereas marriage is, ideally, an equal partnership, the parent-child relationship is not. As a basis for establishing kinship, adoption differs from marriage in that it places the power of choice entirely in the hands of the adoptive parent(s). In the construct of adoption, the relationship between nation and immigrant is not defined by mutual consent; rather, it is guided by benevolent paternalism. Here, one cannot help but think of the complicated discourse surrounding the DREAM Act. In the politics of immigration, "Dreamers" are often cast as unwitting victims of their parents' bad decisions. In the DREAM Act, undocumented youth are literally treated as children, for their eligibility for legal adjustment is in many ways predicated on their status as minors when they came to the United States. Viewed as children, "Dreamers" become objects of American pity and benevolence. This is perhaps why many critics of the law see their legalization as a form of "amnesty." (Some proponents of the DREAM Act, in contrast, resist the infantilization of undocumented youth, arguing that these individuals have

⁹⁶ Honig, 75.

“earned” legal status and potentially citizenship through hard work – by completing their education or by serving in the military.)

In *Typical American*, the United States emerges as a kind and forgiving adoptive parent who is willing to take in an irresponsible and undeserving orphan child. Ever the generous nation, the United States grants amnesty to an illegal alien like Ralph instead of deporting him. Lacking the principle of mutual consent, the benevolent paternalism that underlies the trope of adoption runs counter to the liberal narrative of consensual citizenship. Yet as Ali Behdad argues, “the benevolent discourse of immigration” still performs labor for exceptionalist ideology by reinforcing “the narrative of America as a hospitable nation” that welcomes the immigrant masses of the world.⁹⁷

As a re-figuration of kinship, the construct of adoption – as presented in *Typical American* – extends to the illegal alien the possibility of building familial ties to the nation. But being part of the family might not be all it’s cracked up to be. Benevolent though it might seem, the paternalism that structures the adoptive relationship is still, at base, a relation of power. Being adopted, then, comes with costs as well as benefits. For within the framework of adoption, the immigrant – positioned as a child within the family – is as much subject to paternal authority and discipline as he is to paternal guidance and care.

In the next chapter, we will examine the consequences when neither adoption nor marriage is availed to the undocumented immigrant as a means for establishing symbolic kinship with the national family. Calling into question a central myth in the American national narrative, Mario Bencastro’s *Odyssey to the North* depicts the United States not

⁹⁷ Behdad, 77, 9.

as a “nation of immigrants” but rather a “nation of laws,” where illegal aliens live in perpetual social marginalization and economic stagnation or suffer the fate of ultimate exclusion – deportation.

Chapter Four

Undocumented America:

Illegal Aliens and the Nation of Laws in Mario Bencastro's *Odyssey to the North*

Mario Bencastro's *Odyssey to the North* (1998) begins with a gruesome scene of a dead man's body smashed on the pavement of a street in Washington, D.C. Calixto, the novel's immigrant protagonist, had witnessed the whole incident. In fact, he was no mere spectator, for the man who had fallen to his death was his coworker. The two of them were washing windows outside the eighth floor of a building when the rope that secured his companion broke. But when the police arrive to assess the situation, Calixto has no choice but to walk away, "unable to say a word about the tragedy." Yet what makes him "incapable of testifying" about the accident has only little to do with the language barrier. Instead, Calixto worries that "they would blame him for the death and he would end up in jail." More imminently, he fears becoming exposed and "deported for being undocumented," leaving his family with no one to care for them.¹ Calixto knows that as an illegal alien, speaking to the police could have far reaching consequences not just for himself but also for the family that relies on him for support. Thus, rather than risk being apprehended as an undocumented immigrant, he chooses to run away from the scene of the accident.

When Calixto is formally introduced on the second page of the novel, one of the first things we learn about him is that he is an illegal alien. The disclosure of his status,

¹ Mario Bencastro, *Odyssey to the North*, trans. Susan Giersbach Rascón (Houston, TX: Arte Público Press, 1998), 2.

however, happens with little fanfare. It is revealed simply as a matter of fact. Calixto is undocumented and he risks getting deported if he speaks with the police. Sparing the reader from any doubt, Bencastro makes illegality a fundamental part of Calixto's identity as an immigrant. Indeed, throughout the novel, we see that Calixto's illegal status, more than any other factor, shapes his experience in the United States. It is what forced him to take the dangerous job of washing windows for an employer that paid his workers a third of the usual rate and did not care to provide proper equipment because he hired undocumented workers. After the accident, it is what makes him take a job as a dishwasher because that is the only work he could get without a Social Security card or a green card.² As an undocumented migrant worker who sends most of his already meager earnings back to his family in El Salvador, he sacrifices his personal comforts and lives in a cramped one-bedroom apartment which he shares with twenty people, many of whom are also in the country illegally. In the so-called land of opportunity, Calixto's prospects seem rather bleak.

But beyond his unfortunate socio-economic circumstances, Calixto's life in America is also dramatically defined by his political powerlessness as an alien excluded from membership in the national community. His economic and civil rights are severely limited since any attempt to exercise them could result in his expulsion from the country. Much like Jasmine's fear of exposure and the powerlessness she feels against the stalker who threatens her, Calixto's inability to speak freely about the accident, his suspicion of the police, and his fear of deportation show just what it is like to live as an illegal alien under the shadow of immigration law.

² Bencastro, *Odyssey*, 5.

For Calixto and the other characters in *Odyssey to the North*, it is their position vis-à-vis the regime of law that not only defines their relationship to the nation but also determines much of their fate in American society. Time and again, we see immigrants come face to face with a figure of the law in one form or another. When Calixto and his fellow border-crossers first step foot on U.S. soil after their long journey, they are met and captured by border patrol agents and immigration officers who take them to a detention center. In Washington, D.C., Calixto's friends have a tragic confrontation with two police officers wherein they are arrested and, in the midst of the conflict, one of them is shot. In a separate plotline interspersed between Calixto's story, Teresa, another illegal immigrant, is ordered by a judge to depart the country after her petition for political asylum is rejected. In these and other scenes, we see that what undocumented immigrants encounter in America is not a benevolent and hospitable "nation of immigrants" but rather a strict and unsympathetic "nation of laws."

An idea that found its way in U.S. immigration discourse in the late twentieth century, the concept of "the nation of laws" was put forward by politicians as rhetorical justification for the implementation of harsh immigration laws that targeted undocumented aliens. As I discussed in the Chapter One, the image of the United States as a nation of laws has become an inseparable counterpart to the well-worn notion of America as a nation of immigrants. In this dual scheme, we as a nation continue to embrace immigrants and celebrate their contributions even as we uphold our heritage as a country that believes in the rule of law. Posed as complementary rather contradictory values, America, it has been said, "can be a lawful society and a welcoming society at the

same time.”³ This neat formulation, however, is thrown into disarray by the illegal alien who is at once both immigrant and law-breaker.

In Bencastro’s novel, the nation of laws emerges as the version of America in which illegal aliens are forced to live. Unlike *Jasmine* and *Typical American* which seek to reimagine a place for the illegal alien in the narrative of immigrant America, *Odyssey to the North* is more concerned about exposing the limits of the myth’s rhetoric of inclusion. Casting doubt on the exceptionalist idea of the United States as a welcoming nation of immigrants, the undocumented aliens in Bencastro’s novel bring into focus the law’s power to exclude and the violent consequences that such exclusion engenders. If in *Typical American* being undocumented is merely a temporary stop on the immigrant’s eventual path to upward mobility, assimilation and Americanization, illegality in *Odyssey to the North* is an interminable condition that results in social marginalization, economic stagnation and literal expulsion from the country. If in *Jasmine* illegality only threatens to upend the heroine’s American Dream, in *Odyssey to the North* illegality actually leads to one immigrant’s tragic nightmare (the deportation and death of Teresa).

Described by literary scholar Nicolás Kanellos as “a classical novel of immigration,”⁴ *Odyssey to the North* incorporates structural and thematic elements common to the genre. The immigrant’s journey to America, for example, figures prominently in the novel, as its title aptly suggests. Using the conventional old-world versus new-world trope, the book also highlights the differences between Salvadoran and

³ George W. Bush, Speech on Immigration (May 15, 2006), Reprinted in *The New York Times*, <http://www.nytimes.com/2006/05/15/washington/15text-bush.html> (24 September 2012).

⁴ *The Greenwood Encyclopedia of Latino Literature*, s.v. “Bencastro, Mario (1949-)” (2008). <http://credoreference.com/entry/abclatlit/bencastro_mario_1949> (27 September 2012).

American social and cultural practices. Similar to other immigrant protagonists, Calixto likewise feels alienated in his new environment and expresses a great deal of nostalgia for his home country. And as is customary with much of contemporary immigrant writing, the novel is structurally fragmented; it is told from different points of view and makes use of different narrative forms (letters, newspaper articles, court transcripts, etc.).

Yet while *Odyssey to the North* might be “classical” in the sense that it recounts immigrant struggles, it differs from other immigration stories in significant ways. According to Kanellos, Bencastro’s novel represents the distinct tradition of “Hispanic immigrant literature.”⁵ As explained previously in Chapter One, Kanellos’ definition of immigrant literature is rather narrow, encompassing only those texts that are written by “true” immigrants in their native language. More specifically, he defines Hispanic immigrant literature as “the literature created orally or in written form by immigrants from the Hispanic world who have come to U.S. shores since the early nineteenth century.”⁶ *Odyssey to the North* meets these criteria, having been written originally in Spanish by a Salvadoran immigrant who arrived in the United States in the 1970s.

In describing Hispanic immigrant literature, Kanellos outlines certain textual characteristics that are not unlike the generic features observed by William Boelhower and David Cowart in other immigrant novels.⁷ He identifies Alirio Díaz Guevarra’s *Lucas Guevarra* as “the first Hispanic novel of immigration.”⁸ Published in 1914, the

⁵ Nicolás Kanellos, *Hispanic Immigrant Literature: El Sueño del Retorno* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2011).

⁶ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁷ See discussion of the characteristics of the immigrant novel in Chapter One.

⁸ Kanellos, 1-2.

novel exemplifies the ethos and structure of Hispanic immigrant literature: A Hispanic immigrant arrives in an American metropolis with high expectations only to become disillusioned with the United States. Uninitiated in the ways of the city, the greenhorn is taken advantage of and abused by authorities and hucksters. Rejecting the materialism and the corruptive forces of the metropolis, the immigrant reaffirms his cultural identity and seeks a return to his homeland. Those who remain in the United States either die or become so corrupted that they can no longer be seen as representatives of their nation.⁹

Surveying immigration narratives from other ethnic and cultural traditions, one recognizes that these textual characteristics are not necessarily unique to Hispanic immigrant literature. However, for Kanellos, what distinguishes Hispanic immigrant literature as a separate tradition might have to do more with ideology than with thematic and formal elements. He argues that in contrast to the European immigrant literary tradition (i.e., the “Ellis Island writers” about which Bharati Mukherjee speaks), “Hispanic immigrant literature generally does not support the myths of the American Dream and the melting pot, which hold that the immigrants came to find a better life and implicitly a better culture and that soon they or their descendants would become Americans, thereby obviating the need for a literature in the language of the old country.”¹⁰

Kanellos is also particularly keen on differentiating Hispanic immigrant literature from “native texts” written by U.S.-born/-raised Latino authors (e.g., Richard Rodriguez, Sandra Cisneros, Julia Alvarez, Oscar Hijuelos, etc.), whose works he sees as reflecting a

⁹ Ibid., 3-4.

¹⁰ Ibid., 7.

distinctively American stance. He suggests that in their writings, native Latino authors in fact demonstrate an adept mastery of American literary conventions, following the traditions of U.S. ethnic autobiography, bildungsroman and the American Dream narrative. In contrast to English-language native Hispanic texts that “subscribe to,” “reinforce,” and “celebrate” notions of Americanization and the American Dream, Spanish-language immigrant literature, Kanellos contends, actively “opposes and deconstructs” them.¹¹

While I would argue that *Odyssey to the North* is not in fact entirely different from other immigration narratives (for it fits within the genre of the immigrant novel as theorized by Boelhower¹²), it is evident that the text reflects the ideological stance that Kanellos describes. Emerging from the tradition of Hispanic immigrant literature, Bencastro’s novel demonstrates not only a more critical attitude towards American society but also a great deal of skepticism about the American Dream. It warns against assimilation and espouses Salvadoran cultural nationalism. Moreover, it articulates the dream of a return to the homeland, although it is a hope that remains unrealized.

Acknowledging *Odyssey to the North*’s inherent ideological positioning, I suggest that the figure of the illegal alien plays a crucial part in the novel’s oppositional stance. More than just cast a critical eye on American society, Bencastro focuses on the undocumented alien to explore the impact that status has on the social, economic and

¹¹ Ibid., 12, 3.

¹² See William Boelhower, “The Immigrant Novel as Genre,” *MELUS* 8.1 (1981). In discussing the thematic and structural elements of the immigrant novel, Boelhower points out that the genre does allow for several different resolutions: assimilation, hyphenation, or alienation. One would place *Odyssey to the North* in the category of texts that end in alienation. It should be noted that Kanellos’ criteria for (Hispanic) immigrant literature differs from Boelhower’s with regard to the author’s use of native language and the author’s status as a “true” immigrant (vs. being a descendant of immigrants).

political dimensions of the immigrant experience. Even more significant, the illegal aliens in the novel serve as vehicles for a critique of American immigration laws and the institutions that effect their enforcement.

Mario Bencastro, “A Writer Who is the Product of the Salvadoran Civil War”

Born in 1949 in Ahuachapán, El Salvador, Mario Bencastro immigrated to the United States in 1978, just as the Civil War in his home country was beginning. Self-described as a “young writer,” a newcomer to the literary world, he actually began his artistic career as a painter.¹³ He started studying painting at the age of sixteen and by the 1970s he achieved considerable success, exhibiting his works throughout El Salvador and traveling frequently to the United States to participate in art shows.¹⁴ In 1978, the year he decided to “put down roots in the U.S.,” twenty-five of his paintings were featured in El Salvador’s National Exposition Hall.¹⁵ Despite his notable achievements as a painter, Bencastro soon turned his creative energies away from painting and directed them towards writing, a craft that he was only beginning to explore. He explains that as part of his evolution as an artist, he became increasingly concerned about the social problems in his country and wanted his work to reflect these realities. However, because his art was geometric and already completely abstract, he realized that depicting social realities in his work would necessitate a complete transformation of style that could take up to ten years.

Unlike most painters whose evolution takes them from the figurative to the abstract, he

¹³ Mario Bencastro, interview by Rhina Toruño-Haensly, *Currents in Comparative Romance Languages and Literatures, Vol. 183: Crossing Cultures: Hispanic Authors and the Challenges They Overcame in the United States* (New York: Peter Lang, 2011), 9.

¹⁴ Bencastro, interview with Toruño-Haensly, 3.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 3; *The Greenwood Encyclopedia of Latino Literature*.

felt that his transformation would force him to go in reverse. Thus, rather than change his painting style, he decided instead “to experiment with the written word.”¹⁶

Bencastro notes that his switch from painting to writing coincided with the *coup d'état* in El Salvador in 1979.¹⁷ Viewing the year as a pivotal moment in his life, it was then that he put down the paintbrush and took up the pen in order to write about the history and the political and social conditions of El Salvador. In 1989, a decade after his career change, Bencastro completed his first novel, *Disparo en la catedral*. Selected as a finalist for the Premio Literario Internacional Novedades-Diana, *Disparo en la catedral* was officially published in Mexico in 1990. The novel was followed in 1993 by a collection of short stories entitled *Arbol de la vida: historias de la guerra civil*. His second novel, *Odyssey to the North*, perhaps his most popular work in the United States, was published first in the English translation in 1998. The book was subsequently released in the original Spanish, *Odisea del Norte*, the following year. More recently, Bencastro wrote *Viaje a la tierra del abuelo* (2004), a book for young adult readers. In the United States, Bencastro has found a home in Arte Público Press, which has published both the Spanish original and English translations of his works: *A Shot in the Cathedral* (1996), *The Tree of Life: Stories of Civil War* (1997), and *A Promise to Keep* (2005; the English edition of *Viaje*).

Although Bencastro views himself as an immigrant in the United States, he does not let this part of his identity define who he is as a writer. Unlike Bharati Mukherjee, Gish Jen, Julia Alvarez and others who rode the multicultural literary boom of the 1990s,

¹⁶ Mario Bencastro, interview with Edward Waters Hood, *Alba de América* 21, no. 39-40 (2002): 566; translation mine.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 566.

Bencastro seems to have avoided much of the trappings of identity politics that have plagued authors who write about the immigrant experience. In the interviews he has conducted, there is little discussion as to whether he considers himself an immigrant writer, a Salvadoran-American writer, or an American writer. To be sure, he values very much his Salvadoran origins, but he seems less concerned about identitarian labels than other authors. Exhibiting perhaps a more transnational conception of identity that befits a Salvadoran immigrant in the United States, Bencastro says that he writes for everyone (“escribo para todo el mundo”).¹⁸

That multicultural identity politics does not figure largely into Bencastro’s self-conception as a writer may be attributed to the fact that he views his literary career not as a function of his ethnicity but rather as the result of a specific historical circumstance. More than once, he has described himself as “a writer who is the product of the [Salvadoran] Civil War.”¹⁹ Responding to the war that threw his country into turmoil, Bencastro’s first two books, *The Tree of Life* and *A Shot in the Cathedral*, explore the political, religious, military and civil unrest that gripped El Salvador in the 1970s and 80s.²⁰ In *The Tree of Life*, he assembles twelve stories that examine the ways in which the war drastically altered the fates of Salvadorans from all walks of life, from the disappearance of a photographer working for the Human Rights Commission to the Sumpul River massacre of 350 men, women and children who were trying to flee the country for safety. Using what Linda J. Craft describes as “an intriguing assortment of

¹⁸ Ibid., 576.

¹⁹ Ibid., 569; Bencastro, interview with Toruño-Haensly, 3.

²⁰ Linda J. Craft, “Mario Bencastro’s Diaspora: Salvadorans and Transnational Identity,” *MELUS* 30, no. 1 (2005): 151-52.

myths, magical realist tales, testimonies, historical vignettes, surrealist and lyrical fiction, and soap opera,” Bencastro deploys a variety of narrative forms to depict the social realities and terrifying atrocities faced by his compatriots during the civil war.²¹

In *A Shot in the Cathedral*, Bencastro uses as his backdrop the historical assassination of Archbishop Oscar Romero, a leader in the Catholic Church who spoke against government repression of the people and fought for human rights. Inspired by this important historical event, Bencastro creates a fictional story about the political and psychological transformation of Rogelio Villaverde. At first politically indifferent and looking out only for his own economic survival, Rogelio later commits himself to fighting for social change after he witnesses first-hand the violent efforts of the government to quash dissent and suppress the truth. Experimenting with a technique wherein he seeks to achieve a “balance between art and reality,” Bencastro incorporates historical texts such as Monsignor Romero’s homilies and radio addresses, letters, and newspaper headlines into the fictional plot.

According to Bencastro, *A Shot in the Cathedral* is “a novel of transition” in that it reflects not only his transformation as an artist but also the evolution of his social convictions.²² Indeed, the protagonist bears a striking similarity to the author himself. In the story, Rogelio is a painter turned writer, but instead of writing fiction, he works as a journalist for a newspaper. As a reporter working with the medium of the written word, he comes to the realization that he must engage the political realities he sees around him. Much like Bencastro’s own decision to write about the history and problems of his

²¹ Ibid., 152.

²² Bencastro, interview with Hood, 567.

country, Rogelio learns that the artist “has a responsibility to use his talent to implement social change.”²³

Although politics is a recurrent motif in his work, Bencastro insists that his stories are not so much political but rather historical fiction. Striving to preserve the literary value of his stories, he takes great care in addressing controversial issues in his works so that they would not be viewed as political pamphleteering.²⁴ For Bencastro, history serves both as an inspiration and a foundation for his writing. While the tragic murder of Monsignor Romero provided the historical framework for *A Shot in the Cathedral*, the mass migration of Salvadorans to the United States lent him a factual premise upon which to build his second novel. In fact, Bencastro cites the work of sociologist Segundo Montes on the Salvadoran population in the United States as one of the important factors that led him to write about the experiences of Salvadoran immigrants. Employing the same technique of intertextuality he used previously in his first novel, Bencastro incorporates a newspaper article that refers to Montes’ study in *Odyssey to the North*. With regard to reprinting the article “A Million Salvadorans in the United States” in the book, Bencastro explains that he included it “as a historical text and as a solid foundation for [the] novel.”²⁵

To be sure, Bencastro’s own experiences as an immigrant influenced his decision to explore the subject of immigration in his fiction. For him, Salvadoran immigration to the U.S. must be viewed and can only be understood in light of the civil war in his

²³ Barbara Mujica, review of *A Shot in the Cathedral* by Mario Bencastro, *Americas Magazine*, July 1990, <http://www.mariobencastro.org/shotBM.htm> (8 November 2012).

²⁴ Bencastro, interview with Hood, 568.

²⁵ Bencastro, interview with Toruño-Haensly, 5.

homeland. “Immigration,” he says, “is one of the greatest consequences of the war.”²⁶ As part of the great exodus, Bencastro understands his identity as an immigrant in relation to the civil war that caused the displacement. And because he, in effect, became a writer in the United States, it is no wonder that he considers his authorial career as a product of the civil war as well. Reading *Odyssey to the North*, then, we might consider Bencastro’s turn to immigration not as a departure from but rather an extension and continuation of his exploration of the repercussions of the war.

Although Bencastro’s literary career was already well established with the publication of *A Shot in the Cathedral* and *The Tree of Life*, it was *Odyssey to the North* that earned him even greater recognition from the English-reading public. Becoming his best-known work both domestically and internationally, *Odyssey to the North* raised Bencastro’s stature as a Latino author and helped to make him “the leading novelist of Salvadoran immigration to the United States.”²⁷ And while English translations of his first two books were already in print in the U.S., it would not be inaccurate to say that the resurgent interest in Bencastro’s earlier works could be attributed in large part to the success of *Odyssey to the North*.

Addressing a theme familiar to, if not beloved by American readers, Bencastro’s novel about the immigrant experience enables him to reach an audience that would otherwise show little interest in his fiction about the Salvadoran civil war. Like many authors before him, Bencastro makes inroads into the mainstream by writing about immigration, for it is a story that carries much symbolic significance, speaking to the

²⁶ Bencastro, interview with Hood, 569; translation mine.

²⁷ *The Greenwood Encyclopedia of Latino Literature*, s.v. “Bencastro, Mario (1949-).”

interests and concerns of immigrants and citizens alike. Perhaps not anticipating the amount of attention that the book has gone on to receive, Bencastro has been surprised to learn that many professors were excited about the publication of *Odyssey to the North* and that they are using the novel in their courses.²⁸ That the book is being taught in colleges across the United States is itself a notable achievement, but even more remarkable is the fact that the novel has also been published in India (in its English version). With *Odyssey to the North*, Bencastro is beginning to reach an even larger global audience, extending his readership beyond the United States and Latin America.

To be sure, the novel's publication in India demonstrates the broad appeal of immigration stories. But the rising South Asian immigration to North America might also help to explain the interest of Indian readers in *Odyssey to the North*.²⁹ Like Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine*, Bencastro's novel gives Indian readers a glimpse of the socio-economic conditions of immigrants in the United States. From a practical standpoint, Bencastro, perhaps only half-jokingly, suggests that "the novel could also serve as a guide for immigrating to the U.S.," albeit using unauthorized and rather risky channels. He imagines "a multitude of Indians passing through Mexico with *Odyssey to the North* in hand, asking what the next stage of the trip is."³⁰ While it is highly unlikely that Bencastro is actually encouraging illegal immigration, his characterization of the novel as "a guide" speaks to his incorporation of very realistic details in the text, many of which

²⁸ Bencastro, interview with Hood, 568.

²⁹ See Reed Ueda, "The Changing Face of Post-1965 Immigration," *The Immigration Reader: America in a Multidisciplinary Perspective*, ed. David Jacobson (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 1998), 72-91.

³⁰ Bencastro, interview with Hood, 575.

were informed by facts and journalistic reporting on the routes undocumented immigrants use to come to the U.S.

According to Bencastro, it took him twelve years to write *Odyssey to the North*.³¹ Although immigration is not only a theme with which he is familiar but in fact also a reality that he has lived firsthand, he still conducted a great deal of research for the book. Intending to write a historical novel about the Salvadoran diaspora, he sought to gain an understanding of the larger Salvadoran immigrant experience that both encompassed and went beyond what he knew from personal experience. As an author, he explains that one must know history very well in order to experiment with it; for it is by being a diligent student of history that a writer is able to insert fictional characters that become part of the story.³² In his work, he strives to create what he calls a “communion” between fiction and history, whereby the two work with such harmony that the line between them becomes indistinguishable.³³

Indeed, reviewers and critics of *Odyssey to the North* often observe Bencastro’s skillful integration of history and fiction in the novel. Barbara Mujica, for example, points to the author’s inclusion of a true incident (alluded to earlier) involving the confrontation between a rookie policewoman and a Salvadoran man in the Mount Pleasant neighborhood of Washington. Commenting on Bencastro’s effective use of journalistic texts, she also contends that the newspaper clippings interspersed throughout the novel “add authenticity and immediacy to the narrative.”³⁴ Similarly, Edward Hood

³¹ Ibid., 568.

³² Ibid., 569.

³³ Ibid., 569.

³⁴ Barbara Mujica, review of *Odyssey to the North* by Mario Bencastro, *Americas* 51, no. 3 (1999): 62.

praises the way in which the novel “captures many dimensions of the political and social disasters that have motivated massive emigration from El Salvador to the United States.” Remarking on the interplay between the literary and the historical, he suggests that the novel’s “fragmented structure reflects the chaos faced by Salvadorans caught between the Salvadoran army, right-wing death squads, and the left-wing guerrilla movement.”³⁵

Both Hood and Mujica join critics Linda J. Craft, Arturo Arias and Michael Millar in viewing *Odyssey to the North* as a welcome addition to the corpus of U.S. immigration fiction, for the novel helps give voice to the over one million Salvadorans residing in the United States.³⁶ Bencastro himself seems well aware of the significance of his literary contribution, stating in an interview: “Many have written about immigration, but it seems that before *Odyssey to the North* a historical overview of Salvadoran emigration to the United States did not exist.”³⁷ More broadly, however, the book sheds light on the experiences of Central American immigrants, who, “despite [their] numerical presence,” remain “nearly invisible within the imaginary confines of what constitutes the multi-cultural landscape of the United States.”³⁸

³⁵ Edward Waters Hood, review of *Odisea del norte* by Mario Bencastro, *World Literature Today* 74, no. 4 (2000): 894.

³⁶ See Linda J. Craft, “Mario Bencastro’s Diaspora”; Arturo Arias, “Central American-Americans: Invisibility, Power and Representation in the US Latino World,” *Latino Studies* 1, no. 1 (2003): 168-187; Michael Millar, “Odyssey to the North: Salvadoran Identities – American Lives,” *Diálogo* 8 (2004), <http://www.mariobencastro.org/millar.htm> (8 November 2012).

³⁷ Bencastro, interview with Hood, 568; translation mine.

³⁸ Arias, 170.

Odyssey to the North and Central Americans in the Latino Cultural Context

The invisibility of Central Americans in the multicultural imaginary can be attributed largely to the homogenization of “Hispanic” or “Latino” culture in the United States, whereby the cultural differences among diverse Latin American groups are softened (if not erased) and their historical experiences conflated.³⁹ As Nicholas De Genova and Ana Ramos-Zayas explain, the creation of “Hispanic” as a pan-Latino label was itself a project of the American federal government. Responding to the “increasingly militant and often nationalist acts of cultural affirmation” by Chicanos and Puerto Ricans in the 1960s and 1970s, the state sought “to submerge the two major Latin American national-origins groups under the unitary and homogenizing ‘Hispanic’ label.”⁴⁰ By promoting a unitary identity that erased difference, the government could avoid dealing with the specific and often diverging political demands of different Latin American groups. Far from diminishing, the pan-Latin ethno-cultural category has become even more institutionalized in recent decades, emphasized and reinforced as it has been through census categories and official federal policies and practices (like the annual celebration of the National Hispanic Heritage Week/Month).

Beyond the state’s promotion of an amorphous Hispanic ethnic identity, mass market and media forces have also contributed to the proliferation of a homogenized Latino culture, as Arlene Dávila shows in her book *Latino, Inc.* According to Dávila, “the Hispanic marketing industry” has been instrumental in “the making and marketing of

³⁹ See Nicholas De Genova and Ana Ramos-Zayas, “Latino Racial Formations in the United States: An Introduction,” *Journal of Latin American Anthropology* 8, no. 2 (2003): 2-17; Arlene Dávila, *Latinos, Inc.: The Marketing and Making of a People* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2001).

⁴⁰ De Genova and Ramos-Zayas, 4.

contemporary definitions of Latinidad.”⁴¹ Through the process of Latinization in which Latinos or Hispanics “are conceived and represented as sharing one common identity,” the historical and cultural particularities of different groups are subsumed under a more generic, overarching pan-Latin identity.⁴² The result of this homogenizing process is twofold. On the one hand, the media- and market-constructed “Latino culture” transforms individuals and populations into a discrete and identifiable consumer group. On the other, “Latino culture” itself becomes a commodity that can be marketed and sold not just to Latinos but mainstream consumers as well.

Although markets, media, corporations, governmental and state institutions have exploited “Latino identity” for their own purposes, many Latin American groups in the United States have nonetheless come to embrace and internalize Latinidad/Latinismo, using the inclusive cultural identity to build coalitions and cultivate political influence. Deployed as a form of “oppositional political identity,” Latinidad can be (and has been) mobilized to achieve public visibility, exercise electoral influence, secure civil and citizenship rights, and preserve community interests.⁴³

Yet despite its potential power in the cultural and political realms, Latino identity continues to be a problematic category. While the concept has been rather effective in absorbing the growing diversity of Latin Americans in the United States, internal divisions and competing interests persist within the groups that have adopted the pan-Latin identification. For instance, defining the term itself is an important concern for

⁴¹ Dávila, 2.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 16.

⁴³ De Genova and Ramos-Zayas, 6.

cultural and political stakeholders. For all its inclusivity, the borderlines of Latino identity are simultaneously being redefined and safeguarded as questions arise as to who can lay “legitimate” claim to being “Latino.” In terms of cultural representation, certain Latino subgroups wield more power and have greater influence based on their numbers and/or historical presence in the United States. In the construction of Latinidad, the dominant narratives of Mexicans, Puerto Ricans and Cubans have tended to overshadow the narratives of “newer” Latinos like Salvadorans, Guatemalans and other Central Americans. As Arturo Arias points out, “Latino identity is often constructed...through the abjection and erasure of the Central American-American.”⁴⁴

Read in this larger context, Mario Bencastro’s *Odyssey to the North* can thus serve as a corrective to the invisibility of Central Americans in the U.S. Latino imaginary. But even as the novel gestures toward the similar experiences that link Central Americans together, it is important to remember that Bencastro himself emphasizes the specific historical basis for his work: Salvadoran immigration to the United States after the country’s civil war. Moving forward with our discussion and analysis of the novel, we must therefore bear in mind the text’s historical and cultural particularities even as we read it vis-à-vis broader frameworks such as Latino literature and U.S. immigration fiction.

In her study of U.S. Latino cultural texts, Ana Patricia Rodriguez observes that Central Americans are often depicted “as political refugees who, after fleeing locally

⁴⁴ Arias, 172. Arias uses the term “Central American-Americans” to describe Central Americans in the United States. Despite its “clumsiness” and “redundancy,” he proposes its usage as a kind of “‘performative contradiction’ that opens up the possibility for recognition of this as-yet-unnamed segment of the U.S. population” (171).

manufactured repression, death squads, and wars south of the United States, are redemptively transformed into U.S. Latino (im)migrants.”⁴⁵ Emplotted in the dominant Latino imaginary, Central Americans, she argues, “are forced into a labor migrant narrative” upon arrival in the United States, where they “become depoliticized, dehistoricized, and deterritorialized economic seekers, searchers for the ‘American’ way.”⁴⁶ Although Rodriguez specifically calls attention to a problematic tendency in Latino texts, her critique speaks to the larger issue faced by many scholars who study Central American immigrants in the United States. Migrating for both political and economic reasons, Central Americans do not fit neatly into conventional frameworks used to analyze the experiences of “typical” political refugees or economic migrants. Tackled by historians, sociologists, and political scientists as well, the task of navigating both the economic and political factors that influence emigration from Central America is a challenge not limited to literary representation.

We can appreciate the difficulty of narrating Central Americans’ experiences when we look at the discrepancy between the causes of their displacement and their historical reception to the United States. As Nora Hamilton and Norma Stoltz Chinchilla point out, many Central Americans left their home countries to avoid political persecution or to escape conditions of war and civil unrest; however, “their applications for asylum were routinely denied during the 1980s, and they lacked access to refugee

⁴⁵ Ana Patricia Rodriguez, “Refugees of the South: Central Americans in the U.S. Latino Imaginary,” *American Literature* 73, no. 2 (2001): 387.

⁴⁶ Rodriguez, 390.

assistance available to such groups as the Cubans and the Vietnamese.”⁴⁷ Unable to gain recognition as political refugees, they were absorbed into existing Latino immigrant communities and treated by the federal government as economic migrants. But unlike typical labor migrants, Central Americans “often carry the psychological scars resulting from war and persecution while confronting the social and economic challenges common to all immigrant groups.”⁴⁸

Offering a framework for analysis of Central American migration that takes into consideration the complex interplay between economic and political factors, Hamilton and Chinchilla take a structural approach based on the core-periphery model and the logic of global capitalist development. They suggest that Central American migration can be explained as the effect of several interrelated processes. First, the flow of capital from the core to the periphery (at both the national and international levels) results in structural changes that produce economic distortions, which in turn lead to the dislocation of labor. At the local level, economic disparities intensify class divisions, leading to conflict between the proponents of the dominant structure and those who oppose it. To control the conflict, the domestic state is forced to take action, often in the form of political repression. At the international level, capitalist penetration from the first world (core) to the third world (periphery) tends to go hand in hand with political penetration, which ranges from diplomatic influence to outright military intervention. Such intervention

⁴⁷ Nora Hamilton and Norma Stoltz Chinchilla, *Seeking Community in a Global City: Guatemalans and Salvadorans in Los Angeles* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001), 2.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 2.

often facilitates further conflict and unrest, creating politically displaced groups that are forced to seek asylum in other countries.⁴⁹

Using El Salvador as a case study, Hamilton and Chinchilla show how capitalist penetration greatly altered modes of production in the country, displacing subsistence agriculture with commercial forms of production. From the second half of the nineteenth century onwards, the country expanded coffee, cotton and sugar production for the purpose of increasing the export of these commodities in the global capitalist market. But this only resulted in the dispossession of lands and the displacement of local subsistence producers. Deeply involved in the project of establishing capitalism in El Salvador, the state passed legislation favoring private property, eliminated communal property, and suppressed rural and peasant uprisings that protested against the economic and social restructuring. As Hamilton and Chinchilla explain, the early period of capitalist development led to internal migrations within El Salvador and international migration to neighboring countries in Central America.⁵⁰

However, in the 1960s and 70s, the flow of U.S. capital into El Salvador increased through multinational corporations that invested in manufacturing.⁵¹ At the same time, U.S. military involvement also grew as the foreign government became more and more enmeshed in domestic conflicts. During the presidency of Jimmy Carter, the United States sent advisors and military aid to the Salvadoran government, which used the assistance not only to fight anti-government guerillas but also to repress and kill civilian

⁴⁹ Nora Hamilton and Norma Stoltz Chinchilla, "Central American Migration: A Framework for Analysis," in *Challenging Fronteras: Structuring Latina and Latino Lives in the U.S.*, eds. Mary Romero, Pierette Hondagneu-Sotelo, and Vilma Ortiz (New York: Routledge, 1997), 82-83.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 84-86.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 87.

protesters via the notorious death squads.⁵² Ironically, the Carter administration trumpeted the promotion of democracy and human rights in its overall foreign policy even as it backed and supported the repressive Salvadoran government.

El Salvador's long civil war resulted in the massive displacement of its citizens. Throughout the 1970s and onward, Salvadoran migration to the United States increased rapidly. Although some Salvadorans arrived legally, many more came as undocumented immigrants. Indeed, Salvadorans are second only to Mexicans in terms of the overall undocumented population in the United States.⁵³ And while some are able to remain undetected in the U.S., an ever-increasing number of Salvadorans are apprehended and deported, unable to gain political asylum. Legal or illegal, the diasporic trajectory of Salvadorans to the United States should come as no surprise and, in fact, seems like a very logical outcome. As Juan Gonzalez puts it, this can be seen as "intervention [coming] home to roost."⁵⁴

Taking into consideration a wide-range of push/pull factors, Hamilton and Chinchilla suggest that Central American immigration to the U.S. "can be correlated with deteriorating economic conditions, increased repression in their own countries...and perceived opportunities and 'indirect' labor recruitment in the United States."⁵⁵ Like Hamilton and Chinchilla, Ana Patricia Rodriguez sees Central American migration to the United States as a result of the intertwined forces of the exploitative global capitalist

⁵² Christopher M. White, *The History of El Salvador* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2009), 93, 99.

⁵³ See Hamilton and Chinchilla, "Central American Migration," 89; Bill Ong Hing, *Defining America Through Immigration Policy* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2004), 248; Ruth Ellen Wasem, "Unauthorized Aliens Residing in the United States: Estimates Since 1986 (September 22, 2011)," CRS Report for Congress, www.fas.org/sgp/crs/misc/RL33874.pdf (25 November 2012).

⁵⁴ Juan Gonzalez, *Harvest of Empire: A History of Latinos in America* (New York: Viking, 2000), 129.

⁵⁵ Hamilton and Chinchilla, "Central American Migration," 89.

economy and First and Third World geopolitics (particularly in the form of U.S. intervention). And it is this view that informs her critique of the oversimplified portrayal of Central Americans in the U.S. Latino imaginary. Thus, proceeding from the same basic premise, Hamilton and Chinchilla's multilayered approach to the study of Central American diaspora accords with Rodriguez's call for more nuanced representations of Central American immigrants in Latino literature.

For Rodriguez, the depoliticization and dehistoricization of Central American figures in dominant Latino migrant labor narratives can be remedied by texts which she identifies as "counternarratives." In these counternarratives, the Central American political *and* economic refugee "appears as a palimpsest – a trace of the violence of the New World Order, challenging the public relations narratives of the global economy and revealing the United States not as the home of equal protection but the guarantor of unequal distribution in all its entailments."⁵⁶ "Link[ing] the United States to domestic and foreign transgressions," the counternarratives produced by U.S. Central American and other Latino writers illustrate how "local social inequities and global interventions are imbricated in the push-and-pull factors that initiate multiple and disparate (desperate) diasporic experiences."⁵⁷

In her study, Rodriguez reads Helena Maria Viramontes' "The Cariboo Café," Carole Fernández's *Sleep of the Innocents*, Graciela Limón's *In Search of Bernabé*, and Francisco Goldman's *The Ordinary Seaman* as examples of counternarratives that

⁵⁶ Rodriguez, 390. Rodriguez describes the "New World Order" as an uneven economic structure in which the North (i.e., the First World) "is directly invested in the extension of global capital that devastates the human, material, and symbolic wealth of the South" (i.e., the Third World) (389).

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 401.

challenge dominant discourses that obscure or erase the historical particularities that influence Central Americans' migration to and experiences in the United States.⁵⁸ By exploring political-military violence, trauma, U.S. intervention, economic exploitation and neocolonialism, these texts, Rodriguez argues, “rework discourses of war, revolution, displacement, immigration, structural adjustment politics, and (new) social movements” and call attention to the different “baggage” that Central American immigrants bring with them to the United States.⁵⁹

Exhibiting many of the characteristics described by Rodriguez, *Odyssey to the North* represents a counternarrative to common depictions of Central Americans as depoliticized labor migrants. As a novel that specifically explores the historical (political and economic) conditions that helped give rise to Salvadoran migration to the United States, Bencastro's work contributes to the growth of Latino literature while at the same time adding new layers of complexity and heterogeneity to the broader U.S. Latino cultural imaginary. But *Odyssey to the North* does more than just remedy the obfuscation or invisibility of Central Americans in Latino texts, a problematic issue observed by critics like Arias and Rodriguez. Read in the larger context of U.S. immigration fiction, the novel can be seen as a counternarrative to conventional stories that reinforce (often uncritically) American exceptionalist political culture. And at the center of Bencastro's counternarrative is the undocumented immigrant. As I will argue and demonstrate, the

⁵⁸ Among the authors Rodriguez includes in her study, Goldman, who is of Guatemalan descent, is the only Central American Latino. Viramontes and Fernández are both Chicana/Mexican American and Limón is Puerto Rican. Regarding the works of Viramontes, Fernández and Limón, Rodriguez notes that they “are among the first U.S. Latina literary texts to provide accounts of the immigration of Central American women to the United States and to propose a textual solidarity with Central American women during the critical period of the 1980s” (Ibid., 393).

⁵⁹ Ibid., 401.

figure of the illegal alien plays a critical role in exposing the exclusionary dimensions and violent aspects of immigration law that often get hidden beneath the prevailing and more positive image of the United States as a nation of immigrants.

Complicating the Labor Migrant Narrative

One of the facets of Salvadoran immigration that Bencastro explores in *Odyssey to the North* is work. Indeed, work is a running theme throughout the novel as finding employment and staying employed are ongoing concerns for Calixto and his friends. For an undocumented alien like Calixto, consistent employment is rare and jobs prove to be rather ephemeral. We learn this early in the story when soon after he runs away from the scene of the accident, Calixto realizes that he has just become unemployed. Given his circumstances, he is unable to return to the window washing job that “had taken him a month and a half of constant searching to get.”⁶⁰ In his case, the necessity of work is driven not only by the immediacy of his personal survival but also, and more importantly, by the basic welfare of his family in El Salvador who depends on him for support. Not surprisingly, Calixto promptly looks for a new job the day after the tragic incident. Though despondent, he is nevertheless thankful, for at the very least his own life had been spared.

Although Bencastro is very much interested in showing the challenges and obstacles undocumented workers face, he does not write Calixto into a typical labor migrant narrative that would transform him into a purely economic seeker. Whatever economic motivations he might exhibit as an undocumented worker in the United States,

⁶⁰ Bencastro, *Odyssey*, 4.

Calixto's very presence in the country cannot be divorced from the political exigencies that led him to immigrate in the first place. Indeed, as the novel unfolds, we learn that Calixto is forced to leave El Salvador because he is accused of being "an enemy of the government."⁶¹ Despite the fact that he is "not even involved in political things," he has been labeled a subversive and is being hunted down.⁶² While some readers unfamiliar with Salvadoran history might find this narrative premise questionable, it in fact speaks to the reality faced by many innocent civilians who became casualties of the right-wing government's senseless attacks on its citizens. "Forced to flee his country or face certain death at the hands of paramilitary death squads," Calixto's situation, Michael Millar argues, "reveals the suffering of tens of thousands of Salvadorans that were caught up in the violence of the Civil War."⁶³

Bencastro reminds readers time and again that Calixto's migration to the United States, like that of many Salvadorans, is a result of a complex history of global economic and political relations between the United States and Latin American countries. Gesturing toward what Juan Gonzalez has described as "the harvest of empire,"⁶⁴ Bencastro calls attention to the ways in which Central American migration is rooted in the colonial and economic imperial project of the United States. Among other things, U.S.-backed regimes, wars, direct military intervention, and global capitalist development have created extreme political and economic conditions that forced the displacement of Central Americans from their home countries.

⁶¹ Ibid., 10.

⁶² Ibid., 19.

⁶³ Millar, "Odyssey to the North: Salvadoran Identities – American Lives."

⁶⁴ Gonzalez, xiii-xix.

For instance, in the opening scene, while piecing together the identity of the victim, the police and paramedics observe that the man looks “Hispanic.” A bystander speculates that victim is probably from Central America and explains that many of them “live in this neighborhood,” coming to the United States to “[flee] the wars in their countries.” One of the paramedics guesses that the man is either Salvadoran or Guatemalan, and goes on to add that “they” (i.e., “Hispanics”) are now “coming from all over” – from Bolivia, Peru and Colombia. The paramedic then makes an ironic yet insightful observation, remarking: “We used to be the ones who invaded their countries; now they invade ours. Soon Washington will look like Latin America.”⁶⁵ By linking migration to instances of U.S. invasion, the novel suggests that the United States helped create the very conditions that would precipitate the unexpected Latin American “invasion” and the resulting Latinization of the country.

While the novel implicates U.S. intervention in the displacement of Central Americans from their home countries, it also hints at the ways in which the penetration of capital from the core to the periphery has produced glaring inequalities between the global North and global the South. In a brief but telling moment, Calixto notices a shirt in the display window of a clothing store and is shocked to see the price. He remembers that “in his country they made clothing like that.”⁶⁶ This time it is Calixto who experiences an ironic realization. In the United States, he cannot afford to buy a shirt that was manufactured in El Salvador. As an unemployed undocumented immigrant, Calixto continues to live in the conditions of the South even though he is now in the North. Thus,

⁶⁵ Bencastro, *Odyssey*, 3.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 5.

in the same way that immigration resulted in a Latin American “invasion” of the U.S., we might say that it also transported the global South to the global North.

In Calixto’s story, the political dimension of his displacement consistently bleeds into the economic realities of his immigrant life in the United States. This is evident both in his reminiscences and the very structure of the novel. The book’s central narrative, which revolves around Calixto, is divided into two parts: his present experiences in Washington, D.C. and the story of his journey to the U.S. Most of the present scenes take place at work, which is the locus of Calixto’s economic existence. There, in a hotel kitchen, Calixto and his fellow dishwashers converse about their experiences, frequently recalling the battles between the guerillas and the army, the bombs that destroyed their villages, and the dead and “disappeared” people that have transformed El Salvador into “one enormous cemetery.”⁶⁷ Interspersed between these scenes are chapters that relate a chronological account of his dangerous passage from El Salvador to “el Norte.” Shifting constantly between present and past, the novel never allows Calixto’s current economic circumstances to obscure or erase his real yet unacknowledged status as a political refugee.

It is interesting to note here that Calixto does not gain official recognition as a political refugee because he does not actually apply for asylum. When he and his fellow travelers finally cross the U.S. border and arrive in Silver City, New Mexico, they are apprehended by the INS and taken to a detention facility. There, a bond is set for his release and he is given a court date with an immigration judge who would determine whether he is to be deported or eligible for political asylum. After several weeks at the

⁶⁷ Ibid., 62, 151-52.

detention facility, Calixto's cousin, Juancho, pays his bond, enabling him to leave the detention center. Juancho also makes arrangements for Calixto's flight to Washington. Needless to say, once in Washington, Calixto never goes to Immigration Court for his hearing. To be sure, his ability to circumvent the law exposes some of the problems of US immigration policy and its enforcement.⁶⁸ However, in the context of the whole novel, choosing not to apply for political asylum turns out to be a good decision for Calixto. For as we will see later in Teresa's example, an unsuccessful asylum case can lead to tragedy.

That Calixto opts not to apply for political asylum does not, however, mean that he simply becomes a depoliticized migrant laborer once he settles in Washington. On the contrary, he becomes a different kind of "legal and political subject."⁶⁹ He becomes as an illegal alien, an "impossible subject" who poses a problem for the state, testing democracy's principle of consent, the regime of immigration law, and the boundaries of membership in the national community.

Immigrant Exclusion in the Nation of Laws

In *Odyssey to the North*, Bencastro challenges the notion of inclusivity that underpins the myth of immigrant America. Through the experiences of the characters in the novel –specifically Calixto, Juancho and Teresa – he shows how the usual symbolic avenues for inclusion into U.S. society and the prospect of becoming American are

⁶⁸ The practice of apprehending undocumented immigrants and releasing them back into the general population has been called the "catch and release" policy.

⁶⁹ Mae Ngai, *Impossible Subjects: Illegal Aliens and the Making of Modern America* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004), 4.

closed to the undocumented immigrant. Unable to escape the conditions of the global South, Calixto's economic marginalization excludes him from the American narrative of immigrant mobility. Despite his embrace of American ways, Juancho cannot overcome being seen as a foreign other, one who does not fully belong. Failing to secure even provisional membership via legal means, Teresa's unsuccessful petition for asylum results in her outright expulsion from the country.

A powerful yet flexible narrative, the myth of immigrant America can manifest in a variety of forms, which allows for different ways of imagining the process of immigrant inclusion into the nation. In what Bonnie Honig describes as the "capitalist version" of the myth, class mobility becomes a means by which immigrants are incorporated into the national community. "This version of the myth," she writes, "identifies citizenship with materialism, capitalist production, and consumption."⁷⁰ A testament to the American Dream, upwardly mobile immigrants earn their membership in part by shoring up the popular belief that the United States is a meritocratic society. If class mobility represents a kind of American citizenship, as Honig suggests, what are we to make of interminably poor illegal immigrants who do not have access to either legal or economic citizenship?

That Calixto's economic situation does not change drastically once he is in the United States is one of the reasons why *Odyssey to the North* refuses to be read as a conventional American Dream story. To be sure, Calixto exhibits traits common to many immigrants. He is a traveler with an empty stomach but a "soul full of hope."⁷¹ But Calixto's hope is tempered with realism and is often clouded by the injustices he

⁷⁰ Bonnie Honig, *Democracy and the Foreigner* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001), 81.

⁷¹ Bencastro, *Odyssey*, 6.

experiences and sees. Arriving with his “head full of a whole bunch of fantasies,” Calixto soon learns that “things aren’t perfect here either.”⁷² In addition to his struggles with work and housing, he also notices that the Central American community is often unjustly harassed by the police. Even worse, he lives in constant fear of “la migra,” which has already raided the hotel where he works and apprehended one of his coworkers.⁷³ While he was able to escape the Salvadoran death squads by coming to the U.S., he remains wary of being arrested, this time by the INS. By immigrating, he trades a life-or-death situation for only a slightly less dangerous one. Not surprisingly, he feels disenchanted with the so-called land of the American Dream. As Linda J. Craft notes, Calixto’s “disillusionment reveals his understanding that the American ideal has not yet been realized, especially for people like him.”⁷⁴

For people like Calixto – in other words, immigrants whose opportunities are severely curtailed by their status as undocumented aliens – the promise of America seems desperately out of reach. In the United States, Calixto is unable to improve his socio-economic status regardless of how hard he works. He has no access to jobs that offer a decent wage because he does not possess the prized green card and the necessary Social Security card. Instead, he is forced to take precarious jobs in the informal economy. In fact, the dishwashing job that he eventually gets becomes available only because “the *migra* raided [the hotel] and arrested a lot of the employees.”⁷⁵ In this exploitative system, undocumented workers are dispensable, easily replaced by numerous others just

⁷² Ibid., 15, 9.

⁷³ Ibid., 30.

⁷⁴ Craft, 158.

⁷⁵ Bencastro, *Odyssey*, 6.

waiting in the wings. As Calixto well knows, “you have to work anyway you can, so you have to run the risk of being caught.”⁷⁶

In *Odyssey to the North*, Bencastro does not write the illegal alien into an immigrant upward mobility narrative. Unlike Bharati Mukherjee’s Jasmine and Gish Jen’s Ralph who make significant gains with respect to their socio-economic stations in life, Calixto experiences no class mobility in the United States. Instead of trading on the myth of the American Dream, Bencastro explores the condition of economic stagnation and offers a counternarrative to the immigrant success story.

While the theme of stagnation is evident throughout the text, Bencastro also illustrates it structurally by juxtaposing episodes from Calixto’s current life in the United States against scenes from his trek to the north. As mentioned previously, most of the present scenes are set in the workplace. In the U.S., Calixto and his friends are literally stuck in the hotel kitchen. Moreover, in these chapters, the narrative effectively comes to a standstill and no action takes place to move the story forward. This is because Bencastro writes these chapters more like a dramatic play, establishing a scene and giving some stage directions but focusing almost entirely on dialogue. For example, Chapter Three begins as follows:

(In the kitchen of a hotel restaurant. Calixto, Caremacho and Juancho chat while they wash dishes.)

I came to the United States because the situation in El Salvador got too dangerous.

Me too. All things were so difficult that it was impossible to find work.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 30.

Caremacho, do you remember what happened in our neighborhood?

Of course!

(Calixto appears quite intrigued.) What happened?

Well, after Quique, a friend of ours, was killed, the situation got real dangerous, and everyone was afraid.⁷⁷

Although these conversation scenes in the hotel kitchen shed light on the characters' thoughts and feelings and even relay information about their pasts, they do not exhibit any narrative momentum. In contrast, the chapters that describe Calixto's voyage are dynamic, fast paced and full of action, as the passages below illustrate:

Following the orders of the guides, the travelers abandoned the shelter and went out into the street. Awaiting them were several rental cars which took them to the bus terminal, where they boarded a big, comfortable bus, the kind usually used by tourists.

At about six o'clock in the afternoon they arrived at the Guatemalan border.⁷⁸

Two hours after Calixto and his companions entered the station, a group of travelers was detected by immigration agents. The alarming whistles accompanied by desperate screams were heard again. There was a commotion just a few yards away, and they saw how a large number of women, men and children ran haphazardly in all directions trying to escape.⁷⁹

Five hours from the border, two hours after going through Silver City, the travelers were intercepted by a patrol car, which turned on its siren and flashing lights...

Several agents rushed back and forth, making sure the travelers were properly handcuffed, and then ordered them into other vans in groups of seven.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 8.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 49.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 84.

They were captured around one o'clock in the morning and taken to a station at which they were transferred to large buses with bars on the windows.⁸⁰

Placed in between and read alongside the kitchen episodes, the voyage scenes serve only to highlight how Calixto's life seems to come to a halt once he arrives in the United States. As we have seen in *Jasmine* and *Typical American*, the geographic movement of the immigrant protagonist often bears a direct correlation to his/her mobility along the socio-economic ladder. For instance, Jasmine escapes the "ghettoes" of Flushing, makes her way through Manhattan, and eventually lands in Iowa, all the while undergoing a dramatic transformation from dependent immigrant, to working woman, to middle-class banker's wife. Similarly, Ralph climbs his way up from the basement of a Chinatown meat store, to an apartment in Harlem, to a beautiful house in Connecticut, leaving his past as an indigent immigrant to become a self-made entrepreneur.

Unlike Ralph and Jasmine, Calixto makes no such progress in America. For all the geographic movement he accomplishes on his "odyssey to the north" – traveling from El Salvador to Guatemala to Mexico to Texas and finally to Washington, D.C. – he reaches his final destination only to land in a hotel kitchen and get stuck there as a dishwasher. Calixto's narrative of stagnation explodes the idea that upward mobility is attainable for every immigrant who is willing to work hard. Perhaps in "the nation of immigrants," where immigrants are valued and perseverance is rewarded, hard work might be enough. But in "the nation of laws," hard work proves insufficient. To succeed in the nation of laws, you need your papers, too.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 125.

While having proper documents is necessary to secure a job that might lead to class mobility, it is not required for individual cultural transformation. Unlike Calixto who feels unwelcome in the United States, Juancho tries hard to adapt to his new life and desires to assimilate to American society. He makes an effort to transform himself in ways that show he is acculturating to American ways. He buys new shoes, changes the way he dresses, and now prefers all things American. To complete his new identity, he even changes his name and insists on being called Johnnie. In the United States, Juancho Molinos becomes Johnnie Mills. He adopts a “when in Rome” attitude and tells his friends that they, too, should “get with the times.”⁸¹ Criticizing his friends for being nostalgic for some idealized vision of El Salvador, Juancho refuses to be like “all those people who live here but keep thinking they’re back there.”⁸²

In the novel, Bencastro casts Juancho as a contrasting figure to Calixto. Like Calixto, Juancho also emigrates from El Salvador. But as Juancho himself puts it, “I didn’t come to the United States out of fear, but because I was tired of going hungry, of constantly looking and never finding even one damn job.”⁸³ If Calixto represents the political refugee, Juancho is more of a conventional economic migrant. He buys into the culture of materialism and wants to live the American Dream. He purchases a Trans Am and even gets himself a “little *gringa*,” a white American girlfriend. Exhibiting the characteristics of what Ana Patricia Rodriguez calls the “depoliticized economic seeker,” Juancho concerns himself only with his personal financial improvement and the

⁸¹ Ibid., 137.

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Ibid., 9.

acquisition of material possessions, which he believes will bring him happiness. He asks Calixto: “Isn’t that what we’re here for? To work hard and buy all we want, and be happy? If not, where’s the progress and happiness we came here looking for?”⁸⁴

Of course, Calixto wants to make progress too, but unlike Juancho, he is not convinced that money can buy happiness. From his perspective, Juancho’s embrace of American consumer culture has led to a confusion of values. He tells his friend, “Getting ahead is one thing; going crazy buying unnecessary things is another. They don’t sell happiness in fancy department stores.”⁸⁵ Through Calixto, Bencastro voices a critique of the material seductions of the American Dream which turn hard-working immigrants into heedless consumers who fill their lives with useless things they think will bring them contentment.

At the heart of the Calixto and Juancho’s friendly debate is the question of identity. Whereas Calixto fears losing his Salvadoran self in the United States, Juancho seems rather eager to give it up. Time and again, Calixto declares his love for his country and his people. Unlike Juancho who is “not Salvadoran anymore,” he sees himself becoming “more Salvadoran” every day.⁸⁶ He asserts: “[It’s] one thing to make progress, have a job, live better, but your home is always in your heart. I could live away from my country for a hundred years but I’ll never renounce it.”⁸⁷ Despite the boldness of its tone, there is in fact more to Calixto’s statement than just a mere re-assertion of his Salvadoran identity. As Linda J. Craft suggests, “This seems to be Bencastro’s affirmation of

⁸⁴ Ibid., 138.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

ethnicity and identity amid the pressures and empty promises of assimilation.”⁸⁸ If Calixto feels more Salvadoran every day, it might be because attaining an American identity seems like an impossibility for an undocumented immigrant like himself who is relegated to the margins of society.

Indeed, Calixto views Juancho’s transformation with a great deal of skepticism. Giving his friend a big reality check, he says, “You can change your name but not your peasant face.”⁸⁹ As Calixto well knows, the peasant face of the immigrant remains a marker of difference and foreignness in the highly racialized society of the United States. As part of the immigrant Latino community, he experiences discrimination and receives unfair harassment from officers of the law. He sees this first-hand in the incident at Mount Pleasant Park where several of his friends are arrested and one of them gets shot by the police. In the context of such injustice, Calixto cannot help but feel that Juancho’s attempt to assimilate is nothing more than a futile endeavor. Adopting a new name, wearing new clothes, owning a nice car and having an American girlfriend do not change the fact that he is a brown undocumented immigrant who must run away as soon as the INS agents come.

In many ways, Juancho illustrates the paradoxical predicament of the undocumented immigrant. He sacrifices his Salvadoran identity for an American identity that he ultimately cannot have. Despite his claim that he is now “from here,” he remains subject to arrest and deportation the moment he is apprehended by *la migra*.⁹⁰ Toward

⁸⁸ Craft, 160.

⁸⁹ Bencastro, *Odyssey*, 137.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 138.

the end of the novel, we learn that Juancho breaks up with his American girlfriend. Calixto notices that he is depressed and offers him an assessment of their relationship: “I think the problem is that you fell in love with her, but she didn’t fall in love with you. And it doesn’t work that way.”⁹¹ Read metaphorically, Calixto’s statement also describes Juancho’s relationship to the United States. He is an undocumented immigrant who becomes enamored with a country that, sadly, does not love him back.

If both cultural assimilation and economic integration fail as a means for the symbolic incorporation of undocumented aliens into “immigrant America,” as demonstrated by Juancho’s and Calixto’s experiences, the novel shows that the law represents an even greater, if not harsher, literal barrier to immigrants’ inclusion into the national community. In *Odyssey to the North*, Bencastro provides a clear illustration of how immigration law and its enforcement function as gate-keeping apparatuses for the state. He dramatizes the legal process of immigrant exclusion in the deportation and political asylum hearing of Teresa, an undocumented immigrant from El Salvador. Written and presented as court transcripts, the chapters that tell Teresa’s story are interspersed throughout the book, interrupting the main narrative that revolves around Calixto. Although Teresa’s plot does not actually intersect with Calixto’s, Bencastro uses the interruptive scenes to great effect, reminding the reader that Calixto could easily suffer the same fate as Teresa. For if he were ever arrested by INS agents or were he to apply for political asylum, Calixto would no doubt find himself in a similar court, his life in the hands of an immigration judge.

⁹¹ Ibid., 180.

As Teresa's story unfolds, we learn that she fled El Salvador because her life was in danger. Her husband, who received military training in the United States and served in the Salvadoran army, was forced to leave service because he was threatened by guerillas. Consequently, however, he was hunted down by the military for being a deserter. As she testifies to the judge, "he was in danger from both sides."⁹² By association, she, too, became a target. Moreover, Teresa herself had aided the guerillas by giving them water, but not by choice. She explains, "If we denied them the water, they would kill us."⁹³ But by helping the guerillas, she risked being labeled as a subversive, which would result in their arrest and, very likely, their execution by the right-wing death squads.

Caught between a rock and a hard place, Teresa and her husband hire a *coyote* to smuggle them into the United States. From the court scenes, it is uncertain what becomes of her husband. However, we learn that Teresa finds employment in the United States for a short time before she is eventually apprehended by the immigration agents. During the court proceedings, Teresa is pressed by the judge to provide evidence that proves she would be persecuted if she were to return to El Salvador. She explains that her husband's military involvement and her run-in with the guerillas put her life in danger. But unconvinced by her testimony, the judge denies her application for asylum. He grants her request for "voluntary departure in lieu of deportation as an alternative remedy."⁹⁴

Through Teresa's story, Bencastro demonstrates the violent and tragic consequences of immigration law, particularly as it affects Salvadoran immigrants.

⁹² Ibid., 127.

⁹³ Ibid., 80.

⁹⁴ Ibid., 176.

Again, he shows how the United States is not an innocent bystander in the Salvadoran conflict, which led to the massive displacement of that country's citizens. Despite training soldiers on behalf of the U.S.-backed regime, the United States divests itself of any responsibility towards Salvadorans who seek refuge, turning a blind eye to the repercussions of U.S. military intervention. Moreover, Bencastro's depiction of Teresa's asylum hearing speaks to the United States' discriminatory policy toward Central American refugees, particularly Salvadorans and Guatemalans, whose right-wing governments maintained friendly ties with the U.S. As Bill Ong Hing points out, the United States applied different approaches to refugees from various Central American countries, often based Cold War politics. Because the U.S. opposed the left-leaning government of Nicaragua, many Nicaraguans who fled their country were granted asylum and were deported at much lower rates than Salvadoran and Guatemalan refugees.⁹⁵

As we see in Teresa's case, immigration law and refugee policy work in tandem to discourage and prevent Salvadorans from gaining asylum. Citing the Immigration and Nationality Act, the judge rules that she does not fit the definition of refugee, "which requires her to show persecution or a well-founded fear of persecution in her homeland on account of race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group or political opinion."⁹⁶ Arguing that the testimony she provided applies more to her husband than herself, the judge denies the possibility (and indeed, reality) that political persecution extends beyond the individual and affects entire families. He says, "The evidence appears, frankly, to establish a case for the husband more than for the

⁹⁵ Hing, 246.

⁹⁶ Bencastro, *Odyssey*, 175.

respondent. There is no testimony that the respondent was ever threatened for any of the reasons established by the Act while in her native land.”⁹⁷

Instead of acknowledging Teresa as a refugee, he depoliticizes her and characterizes her as an economic migrant. Although much of the hearing revolves around the political circumstances that led her to flee her country, the judge focuses on her improved economic conditions and the better wages (one dollar a day versus \$3.35 per hour) she received while working in the United States, noting the “obvious” “economic motivations” of her emigration.⁹⁸ By casting Teresa as an economic migrant, the judge is able to use immigration law, as opposed to refugee policy, to make her more easily deportable. Under immigration law, Teresa becomes nothing more than a lawbreaker who deserves to be expelled from the United States. As an illegal alien, she has no place in the national community because she violates the rule of law that governs American society.

In the novel, we see the rhetoric of “the nation of laws” deployed in full force in Teresa’s deportation hearings. The judge completely forgoes any allusions to the myth of immigrant America, making no mention of the contributions of immigrants to society or the immigrant foundations of the country. Witnessing Teresa’s deportation hearing, one cannot help but think of another juridical exercise, the naturalization ceremony, wherein the United States is celebrated as a “nation of immigrants.” Side by side, the naturalization ceremony and deportation proceedings throw into sharp relief the contradictory narratives produced by immigration law. Whereas the former enacts the

⁹⁷ Ibid., 175-76.

⁹⁸ Ibid., 176.

symbolic inclusion of immigrants into the national community, the latter effects their literal exclusion (i.e., expulsion) from the state.

At the end of the novel, Teresa's fate is revealed in a newspaper article:

“Body of Dead Woman Found”

The remains of a woman have been found near Cantón El Jocote, San Miguel. Local authorities identified her as twenty-one-year-old Teresa de Jesús Delgado. According to information gathered from neighbors, the deceased had recently been deported from the United States for having entered that country without legal documents. It is believed her death was due to political retaliation.⁹⁹

Taken as a whole, *Odyssey to the North* offers a counternarrative to the prevailing exceptionalist myth of immigrant America. As a critique of “the telos of immigrant settlement, assimilation, and citizenship,”¹⁰⁰ Bencastro presents an alternative trajectory, one more likely to be followed by undocumented immigrants: displacement, marginalization and deportation. Teresa's death at the end of the novel represents perhaps the most extreme consequence of deportation. But even excluding death, the devastating and tragic outcomes of immigration law are evident: economic exploitation, social vulnerability, disrupted lives, families torn apart. For undocumented immigrants who have no place in the nation of immigrants, these are the realities of living in the nation of laws.

⁹⁹ Ibid., 188.

¹⁰⁰ Ngai, 5.

Epilogue

On May 18, 2007, Tam Tran, Marie Nazareth Gonzalez and Martine Mwanj Kalaw gave a testimony before the U.S. House of Representatives' Subcommittee on Immigration, Citizenship, Refugees, Border Security, and International Law. As part of the Congressional Hearing on Comprehensive Immigration Reform, the three students spoke about their experiences as undocumented immigrants and voiced their support for the passage of the Development, Relief and Education for Alien Minors Act, also known as the DREAM Act.¹ Despite their precarious status, the three young women came forward in order, as Tam put it, “to give voice to thousands of other undocumented students” whose own personal stories would be not be heard in the halls of Congress.²

Although the students came from diverse cultural backgrounds and the circumstances that brought them to the United States differ, their stories share a common theme: being undocumented aliens has dramatically shaped each one's life in America. The daughter of Vietnamese refugees, Tam was born in Germany, where her family initially fled. They relocated to California when she was just six. In the United States, their application for political asylum was rejected and they were subsequently ordered deported to Germany. However, because Germany does not grant birthright citizenship, Tam was also rejected by the German government, leaving her stateless and without a national identity, stranded in the United States. Having lived in the U.S. most of her life,

¹ U.S. Congress, Committee on the Judiciary House of Representatives, “Comprehensive Immigration Reform: The Future of Undocumented Immigrant Students,” Hearing before the Subcommittee on Immigration, Citizenship, Refugees, Border Security, and International Law, 110th Congress, 1st session, May 18, 2007.

² *Ibid.*, 14.

she fears becoming “a perpetual foreigner in a country” that she has always considered home.³

Marie came to the United States from Costa Rica with her family when she was just five years old. Although they arrived legally, they fell out of status and were anonymously reported to immigration authorities. They were soon ordered to leave the country and return to Costa Rica. Through the advocacy of her state representatives and senators, Marie, a promising young student, was granted temporary permission to remain in the country. Her parents, however, were not allowed to stay. Only in high school, Marie has already been separated from her family. Although she is thankful for the deferral of deportation which allows her to continue her education, she knows that “at any moment [her dream] can be taken away.”⁴

Like Marie and Tam, Martine was also ordered to leave the United States. Brought to the U.S. from the Democratic Republic of the Congo at the age of four, Martine has lived in New York for 22 years. Although Martine’s mother had been granted a green card, neither she nor her stepfather filed papers on her behalf. Orphaned at the age of 15, Martine’s “immigration nightmare” began in college when, in an attempt to obtain a social security card for a campus job, she found herself instead in deportation proceedings. Martine is one of the fortunate ones, however. Through the help of her lawyer, her application for status adjustment was approved.⁵

³ Ibid., 14-16.

⁴ Ibid., 8-11.

⁵ Ibid., 11-14.

In their testimonies before Congress, the students expressed a great desire to “give back” or “contribute” to the country they call home. Grateful for the opportunity to obtain an education in spite of their status, they want to be productive members of society – but as real members, without the stigma of what Martine calls the “scarlet letter ‘I’ for ‘illegal immigrant.’”⁶ Yet, six years after the hearings, comprehensive immigration reform has still not passed, and the DREAM Act, for now, remains just a dream for many undocumented youth. However, by coming forward to tell their stories, undocumented aliens are changing the national discourse on immigration, making their voices heard, and challenging Americans to reconsider their beliefs about who belongs and who does not belong in the United States.

The experiences described by the three young women are not unlike those of the undocumented immigrant protagonists of *Jasmine*, *Typical American* and *Odyssey to the North*. Like Ralph in Gish Jen’s novel, some do eventually gain permanent resident status and even citizenship, opening up new doors and opportunities to succeed or to fail. Others, like the Bharati Mukherjee’s heroine, continue to seek and strive for the American Dream knowing that at any point it could all be taken away. Still others, like the characters in Mario Bencastro’s novel, live in perpetual socio-economic marginalization or face outright deportation.

Like the personal stories of Tam Tran, Marie Nazareth Gonzalez and Martine Mwanj Kalaw, the novels of Mukherjee, Jen, and Bencastro compel readers to confront one of the most complex and contentious problems of our time. It is worth remembering that all three novels were published even before Congress first took up the DREAM Act.

⁶ Ibid., 11.

In his/her own way, each author took up the question of illegal immigration as it manifested during his/her contemporary moment. But presaging many of the issues that define the current debate, the novels are even more relevant today. Though not undocumented themselves, each author imagines the immigrant experience from the perspective of illegal aliens, whose voices, up until recently, have largely been absent (or perhaps more accurately, disregarded and unheard) in the public cultural and political discourse on immigration.

As writers of fiction, Mukherjee, Jen, and Bencastro engage the question of illegal immigration through the genre of the immigrant novel, a cultural tool historically used by many newcomers (and their descendants) to articulate not just the struggles, fears and doubts but also the dreams, hopes and victories that attend the often strange and unpredictable experience of immigration. Participating in a literary tradition that has yielded narratives that are at once similar and diverse (a familiar story told in different ways), the authors avail themselves of existing conventions – observing some and reworking or even violating others as they rewrite the immigration story to feature perhaps the most unconventional of all protagonists: the illegal alien.

However, as I have attempted to show in this dissertation, the figure of the illegal alien does not fit neatly into the traditional narrative structures of the immigrant novel. Illegality poses a problem for both the Americanization and American Dream plot, for example, because its consequence – deportation – threatens to thwart the telos of these narratives. By revealing the limitations of the genre's conventions, the undocumented alien also exposes the ways in which stories privilege the legal immigrant as the iconic subject of the immigration narrative.

In Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine*, we see how illegality consistently troubles the narrative despite the story's own tendency to gloss over the issue. In the novel, Jasmine's illegal status becomes a looming specter that threatens the world she has built around her precarious American identity. As an illegal American, Jasmine embodies the incongruity experienced by many undocumented immigrants who see themselves as American and yet have no legal basis or claim to such an identity. In the novel, Jasmine – who in many ways prefigures the “Dreamers” of the present day – only serves to highlight the fact that having legal status is equally important as one's cultural transformation in crafting an American identity.

Interestingly, what *Jasmine* fails to acknowledge, *Typical American* makes very explicit. In Gish Jen's novel, illegality becomes a problem that demands resolution. For if Ralph is to become a “typical American,” which is the implied narrative end, he must gain legal status and avoid being deported. By depicting a stark contrast between Ralph's desperate life as an undocumented immigrant and his life of promise as a permanent resident and citizen, the novel shows the critical role that status plays in limiting or expanding an immigrant's possibilities in the “land of opportunity.” Moreover, *Typical American* offers adoption as an alternative metaphor for reimagining symbolic kinship with the national family. But as we have seen, adoption reinforces the benevolent discourse of immigration which often masks U.S. practices of exclusion.

These practices of exclusion and their consequences are laid bare in Mario Bencastro's *Odyssey to the North*. Rather than minimize or solve the problem of illegality, Bencastro deploys the figure of the illegal alien as a means to critique U.S. immigration policies and their violent enforcement. By breaking from the traditional

Americanization/ American Dream storyline, the novel is able to explore different, if more troubling, outcomes. In the process, it recasts America as “a nation of laws” rather than “a nation of immigrants.” In the nation of laws, undocumented immigrants suffer marginalization and exploitation and experience the most extreme form of exclusion in deportation.

By reimagining the immigration story from the perspective of undocumented aliens, *Jasmine*, *Typical American*, and *Odyssey to the North* shed light on the complexities and contradictions of illegality. Offering various degrees of critique, they call attention to the limitations of dominant cultural narratives as vehicles for incorporating immigrants into the story of America. For in these traditional narratives, the illegal alien is almost always left out. Among the three authors, Bencastro submits the harshest criticism of U.S immigration policy and the government’s treatment of undocumented aliens. However, short of suggesting the complete dissolution of immigration laws (which he does not do), his novel still leaves us with the problem of illegality, which comes to seem like a tragic but permanent and inescapable conundrum. Does literature offer us a way to envision a system of immigration that preserves laws yet moves away from using categories like legal and illegal or documented and undocumented? Perhaps.

Midway through Roberto Quesada’s *Never through Miami*, Elías, the protagonist, attends a special seminar on immigration. The event is occasioned by an unspecified national emergency that triggers a federal crackdown on illegal immigration: “Times were hard. Large-scale deportations of immigrants were being announced. Laws were

changing with chilling speed. Latin Americans were the most pregnant target.”⁷ At the seminar, an ambassador from Ecuador delivers a striking speech that holds everyone’s attention. With broad historical gestures, he takes his listeners through the evolution of humans and civilization, beginning with a joke about bacteria and closing with a serious discussion of immigrants and their place in the current world order, one that has been divided into superpowers and third world countries. Speaking about the historical development of the modern sovereign state, the ambassador explains that the construction of borders, which sought to delimit the reach of a particular authority over a specified geographical territory, resulted in the curtailment and even the “annihilation” of human beings’ “inherent right to mobility and relocation.” He goes on to suggest that the creation of sovereign states and the introduction of immigration laws curbed migrations, which are “spontaneous, natural, legitimate movements.” Quoting Gabriel García Márquez, the ambassador harks back to a time before the existence of borders, “when people were happy and undocumented.”⁸

Although this scene is a minor episode in Quesada’s novel, it challenges us to reconsider the modern conceptions of immigration, which revolve around the principle of national sovereignty. In U.S. immigration, the juridical categories “legal” and “illegal” are based on whether or not an individual is in violation of a nation’s sovereign space. For many immigrants, illegality begins at the border, where national sovereignty is first breached. An immigrant is “illegal” because he has neither the permission to enter nor the right to be present in the territory of the United States.

⁷ Roberto Quesada, *Never through Miami*, trans. Patricia J. Duncan (Houston, TX: Arte Público Press, 2002), 82.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 87, 88.

Through the ambassador's speech, Quesada proposes a radical rethinking of immigration. Yet he is not alone in making such a proposition. Indeed, the idea of migration as a human right is echoed in artist Favianna Rodriguez's visual project "Migration is Beautiful." Drawing inspiration from the migratory patterns of monarch butterflies, she uses the image of the butterfly to suggest that human migration, too, is a natural phenomenon. Couching immigration in terms of human rights, she asserts that all people should have "the ability to move freely." Through her work, she aims to counter prevailing notions that immigration is something to be feared, resisted or restricted. Instead, by using the symbol of the butterfly, she challenges people to see migration as something beautiful, a thing to be appreciated.⁹

Quesada's novel and Rodriguez's project, of course, raises very important questions. What if immigration were not based on national sovereignty and borders but rather on "the inherent human right to mobility and relocation"? "If migrations are understood as legitimate individual and collective rights," as the novel suggests, does that mean there cannot be any immigration laws or that national borders must cease to exist?¹⁰

If we understand migration as a human right, immigration laws would serve a completely different purpose than they do now. Rather than emphasize national sovereignty and restrict entry, immigration laws would instead become vehicles for the exercise of human rights. Moreover, national sovereignty and territorial borders will remain relevant and indeed play a critical part. In an immigration system where mobility and relocation are treated as rights, sovereign states become the very guarantors and

⁹ A documentary about Favianna Rodriguez's work, also titled "Migration Is Beautiful" (2012), was produced by John Carr and Z.S. Grant for Pharrell William's "i am OTHER" initiative.

¹⁰ Quesada, 88.

protectors of these rights. Relatedly, borders cease to be a place where violations of sovereignty occur or where “illegal” subjects are produced. Instead, they become a site where an individual’s humanity *and* human rights are affirmed. Here, there are no legal or illegal immigrants, only humans exercising their right to migrate, following their impulse to move “in search of a better life.”¹¹

¹¹ Ibid.

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