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Guestworkers In Postwar America: A New History

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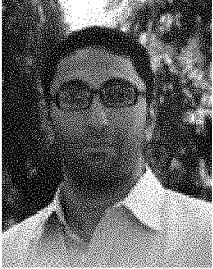
Kunal Parker, *Guestworkers In Postwar America: A New History*, JOTWELL (May 6, 2014) (reviewing Cindy Hahamovitch, **No Man's Land: Jamaican Guestworkers in America and the Global History of Deportable Labor** (Princeton University Press, 2011)), <http://legalhist.jotwell.com/guestworkers-in-postwar-america-a-new-history/>.

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Cindy Hahamovitch, *No Man's Land: Jamaican Guestworkers in America and the Global History of Deportable Labor* (Princeton University Press, 2011).



Kunal Parker

In the past decade, there has been an explosion of wonderful work on the history of immigration and citizenship law. Cindy Hahamovitch's *No Man's Land* ranks with work of Mae Ngai, Daniel Kanstroom, Kelly Lytle Hernández, and others. The book is essential reading for historians of twentieth century immigration. It offers a brilliant account of the forces that have shaped modern immigration law and of the way immigration law categories have acquired meaning "on the ground."

No Man's Land is a meticulous and detailed study of the post-World War II agricultural guest-worker program as it applied to Jamaican workers. Immigration historians have long been aware that immigration is a complex story of both "push" and "pull" factors, developments in the home country and those in the receiving country. However, most historians focus on just one part of this dyad and make formulaic or empty gestures in the direction of the other. Not Hahamovitch. *No Man's Land* pays serious attention to changing conditions in *both* Jamaica and the United States. The book operates on multiple scales. It situates the Jamaican guest-worker program in the larger geopolitical context of World War II and the Cold War; pays attention to horse-trading between the United States and Jamaica over the terms on which Jamaican workers would work in the United States; examines in considerable detail the conditions under which Jamaicans worked in different parts of the United States; discusses the efforts of American lawyers who sought to prevent exploitation of Jamaican guestworkers; and even focuses on the correspondence between Jamaican workers and their families back in Jamaica.

The book's contributions are multiple. *First*, it shows the intimate connections between employers' needs, domestic labor, and immigrant labor. Hahamovitch argues convincingly that the political and legal empowerment of African Americans around the mid-twentieth century made them less exploitable—and hence, less desirable—workers from the perspective of large agricultural employers in the South. Faced with the emergence of a less easily exploitable African American labor force, U.S. agricultural employers—especially large sugar growers in Florida—pressed the U.S. government for permission to hire immigrant labor. By dint of perseverance and organization, they managed to convince the government that they could not survive without immigrant labor, even though there was no shortage of domestic labor that could do the job on less exploitative terms. Temporary immigrant labor was attractive precisely because it could be controlled. If a worker displayed the least sign of defiance or resistance, he would be shipped back to Jamaica (often after a night in jail) and would not receive a visa to return. Jamaican workers fleeing desperate poverty were aware of these risks and thus intimidated into complying with onerous workplace demands and terrible living conditions.

Second, Hahamovitch offers a truly exceptional account—told from letters and recollections—of Jamaican workers' varied experiences in the United States in the immediate post-World War II decades. Jamaican

workers were not accustomed to, and were generally unlikely to put up with, the United States' intricate codes of racial segregation. In the North, where they were often treated well, Jamaican workers defied racist treatment in public and private establishments, often successfully. In such efforts, they were even supported by their employers. When they went to Florida, however, they experienced such oppressive institutionalized racism that their resistance—to the racism around them and to their working conditions—was much less successful. From the perspective of their white American supervisors, they were simply another category of exploitable black, their exploitability as blacks “enhanced” by their immigration status.. Living conditions were harsh, treatment brutal, and the cheating of workers rife.

Third, Hahamovitch devotes the last chapters of the book to efforts on the part of union organizers and legal services lawyers to organize and represent Jamaican guest-workers. She describes in detail the obstructionist and oppressive tactics used by agrobusiness in conjunction with local law enforcement.

The pleasures of reading *No Man's Land* lie in the great clarity of its argument and the easy quality of its prose. Often, particularly in the later chapters, the book reads like—and displays the conviction of—a fine piece of crusading investigative journalism. This is meant mostly as a compliment. Hahamovitch seems to have no doubt at all as to who the “bad guys” and “good guys” are and loses no opportunity to drive home her point. Although I might have wanted a bit more ambiguity injected into the narrative, I was entirely persuaded. At a time when the United States' population of undocumented workers is estimated to be approximately 12 million, and policy-makers are considering calls to create a system of temporary work visas to solve the problem of undocumented immigrant labor, Hahamovitch's work is a cautionary tale. Unless employers are subjected to appropriate oversight (something that U.S. immigration authorities have always been loath to do), temporary immigrant labor might represent a victory for employers, but might intensify the exploitation of domestic and immigrant labor alike.

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