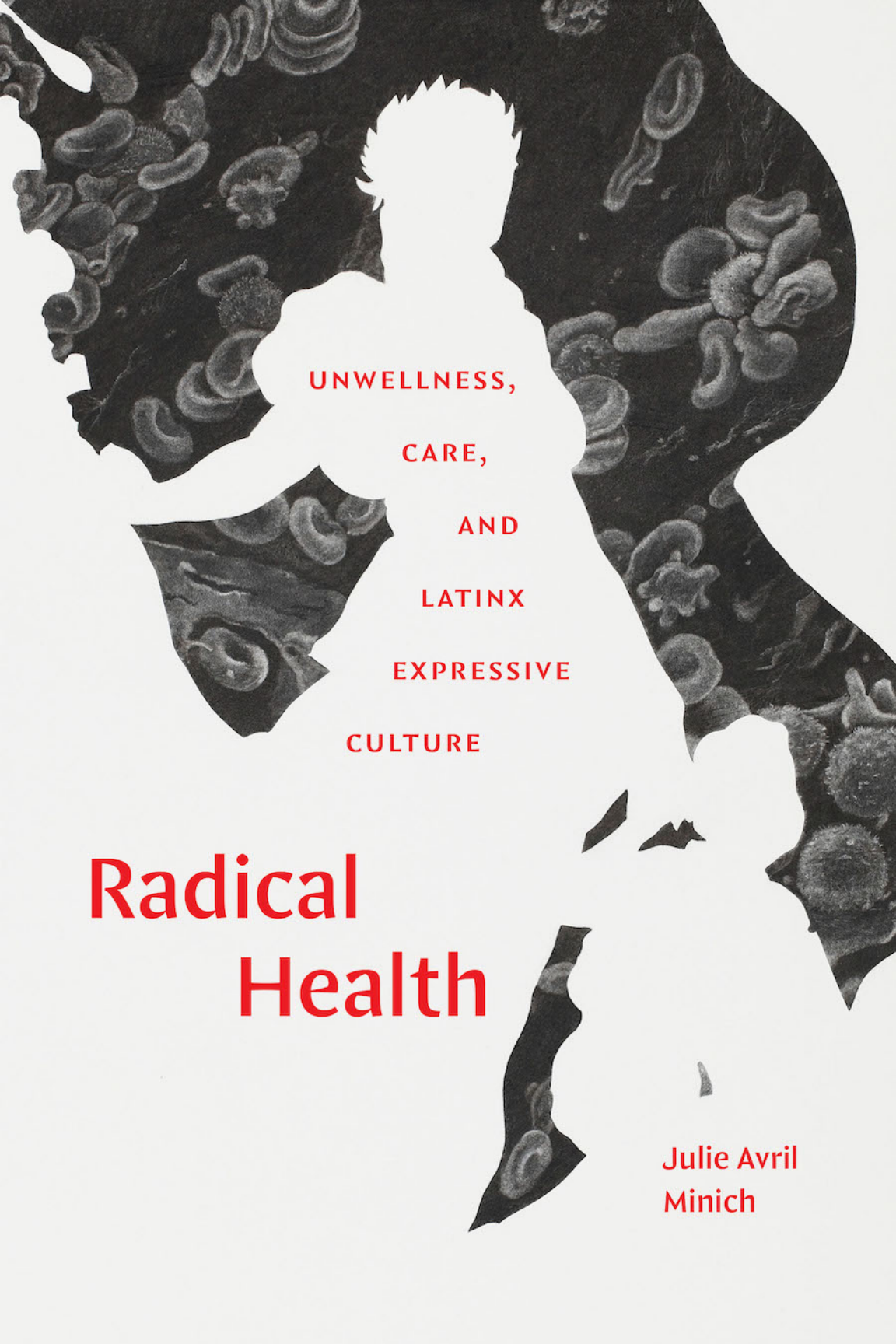




UNWELLNESS,
CARE,
AND
LATINX
EXPRESSIVE
CULTURE

Radical Health

Julie Avril
Minich

Introduction

Radical Health/Radical Unwellness

On September 9, 2009, President Barack Obama addressed a joint session of Congress to introduce what would become his signature legislative achievement: the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act (ACA). Knowing that he faced stiff opposition, Obama was careful to preempt his critics, declaring: “There are also those who claim that our reform effort will insure illegal immigrants. This, too, is false. The reforms—the reforms I’m proposing would not apply to those who are here illegally” (White House 2009). Representative Joe Wilson (R-SC), a critic of Obama’s proposal, could not contain himself. “You lie!” he shouted in an extraordinary breach of congressional etiquette that drew national attention. Wilson was censured by the House of Representatives and forced to apologize (Hooper 2009), and his outburst has been remembered as both an effort to sow disinformation and an expression of white resentment toward the first Black president of the United States. However, these characterizations—accurate as they are—miss another important truth: Wilson and Obama *agreed* on the exclusion of undocumented immigrants from a national health care plan (and coincided in their use of the pejorative descriptor *illegal*). Both Obama’s

speech and Wilson's response thus demonstrate how anxieties about race and citizenship saturate national conversations about health care.

Five years after the ACA's passage, the arrest of Blanca Borrego demonstrates the cost of Obama's acquiescence to anti-immigrant sentiment. On September 3, 2015, Borrego went to an appointment at the new office of her longtime gynecologist and presented proof of insurance through her spouse's employer. Asked for identification, Borrego (who was undocumented) offered a fake driver's license. She was then taken to an exam room where she was arrested by a sheriff's deputy who escorted her out of the facility (Schiller 2015). The fact that a health care worker felt compelled to call law enforcement on a woman seeking medical treatment using private insurance reveals the stakes of debates over who should—and should not—access care.

Borrego's entire family felt the impact of her arrest: her spouse quit his job in fear of deportation, while her teenage son (who had a work permit through the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals, or DACA, program) became the family's sole wage earner. Likewise, measures to terrorize undocumented immigrants reverberate throughout Latinx communities. In part this is because many Latinx people, like Borrego, belong to mixed-status families, but it is also (and more importantly) because the figure of the undocumented immigrant is a crucial rhetorical device in the racialization of Latinx people. Historians have demonstrated that immigration restrictions and border enforcement are not simply the result of racist biases but are mutually constituted with them (Hernandez 2010; Lew-Williams 2018; Martinez 2018; Molina 2014; Ngai 2004).¹ To understand the racialization of Latinx communities as intertwined with anti-immigrant sentiment, then, is not to conflate the categories of "Latinx" and "immigrant"—or even to suggest that all Latinx people identify with or as immigrants—but rather to note the critical function of anti-immigrant discourse in the social construction of *Latinidad* more broadly.

Yet even as Borrego's family and community felt the effects of her arrest, they also mobilized in response. As her son supported the family on a waiter's pay, Borrego's daughter took to the media in protest: "My mom is a good person. . . . She doesn't deserve what's going on" (Garcia-Ditta 2015). Like Borrego's daughter, Latinx cultural workers—writers, filmmakers, musicians, performers, visual artists—create narratives that counter the messages of a xenophobic and white supremacist national culture. This book focuses on one subset of this cultural production: art (especially literature) addressing the relationship between Latinx communities and the health

care system, advancing an ethic of radical health that embraces racialized, disabled, and otherwise devalued bodyminds.²

Why Health?

Radical Health: Unwellness, Care, and Latinx Expressive Culture argues that Latinx expressive culture can offer a powerful intervention in contemporary US health politics. First, it elaborates how certain Latinx artists expose ideologies of health as an engine of racism, following geographer Ruth Wilson Gilmore's famous definition of racism as "the state-sanctioned or extralegal production and exploitation of group-differentiated vulnerability to premature death" (2007, 28). In particular, I trace how these cultural workers critique notions of health as the result of personal behavior that render Latinx communities *radically unwell* by eliding structural determinants of health. Second, and more importantly, I explore the politics of *radical health* emerging from cultural artifacts that present health not as individual duty but as communal responsibility. This latter thread of my argument, which constitutes the bulk of my analysis, examines texts by Latinx artists who seek to elucidate the collective and societal aspects of wellbeing, presenting health as a political concern rather than a purely individual, medical one. Here I claim a role for artistic work and cultural studies scholarship in the effort to combat both health stigma and racial health disparities.

I use the word *radical* throughout this study to emphasize that my focus is not on *reforming* health care but rather on fundamentally *reimagining* what health means and how health resources are distributed. I use the word *health* to signal my commitment to the field of disability studies as well as to clarify my position within it. Disability studies, as Jina B. Kim has observed, partially owes its urgency to the fact that, in the contemporary United States, "disability, debility, and illness have emerged as primary arenas for racialized punishment" (2020, 266). At the same time, a tendency among scholars in the field to reject (rather than critically engage with) discourses of health, cure, and medicalization can leave it poorly equipped to address this concern.³ In fact, Black feminists Moya Bailey and Izetta Autumn Mobley highlight the long-standing critique by disability scholars of medical models of disability as one of the field's major barriers to advancing racial justice: "While certainly the medical model is a problematic trope, it may signal differently to communities that have tried for many decades to receive the most elementary care only to be refused. As uncomfortable as it may make

those of us engaged in the Disability Studies field, some communities are actually yearning for not only care but treatment and cure” (2019, 28). In titling this book *Radical Health*, I posit that a reassessment of health can contribute to what Kim (2017, 2021) calls a crip-of-color critique and what Sami Schalk and Kim (2020) call a feminist-of-color disability studies, terms that signal the need for scholarship that is both anti-ableist and anti-racist.

Crip-of-color critique is not merely a subset of disability studies that combines perspectives from ethnic studies with the insights of disability theory; it is a substantially new body of knowledge that reexamines what disability is, what disability studies does, and who disability theory is for. In other words, rather than merely diversifying the field or unsettling its long-acknowledged whiteness, crip-of-color critique remakes disability studies. The intellectual precursors to crip-of-color critique emerge not solely from disability studies but also from critical race studies, and most importantly from Black studies. For instance, the term *crip-of-color critique* is not simply a clever restatement of Roderick A. Ferguson’s now-famous phrase *queer-of-color critique*, but rather an extension of Ferguson’s effort to debunk “the idea that race, class, gender, and sexuality are discrete formations, apparently insulated from one another” (2004, 4), and to identify processes of racialization within cultural formations that present themselves as unrelated to race. Schalk and Kim insist that critical race theories must “inform work in disability studies as a whole even when people of color are absent as sites of analysis” (2020, 33). Similarly, Sony Coráñez Bolton (2023) has made the provocative move of claiming that the focus on colonized embodiment within Filipinx studies constitutes it as a mode of crip theorizing. Although the term *crip-of-color critique* is relatively new in the disability studies lexicon, the insistence that a focus on race and racialization fundamentally changes the field is not. In a foundational special issue of *MELUS* on race and disability, Jennifer C. James and Cynthia Wu urge disability scholars to consider “how disability has always been racialized, gendered, and classed and how racial, gender, and class difference have been conceived of as ‘disability’” (2006, 8). At the same time, and more pointedly, Chris Bell suggests that a disability studies intent on equating “visibility with inclusivity” (2006, 279)—that is, citing examples of disabled activists and scholars of color without committing to the intersectional analysis they demand—might more accurately be named white disability studies.

While disability studies scholars often locate the origins of the field in disability rights activism, scholars who align their work with crip-of-color

critique often look as well to activist work in which disability does not always present as the primary concern. In describing the activism that informs her theory of Black disability politics, for instance, Schalk notes that “the articulation and enactment of Black disability politics do not necessarily center traditional disability rights language and approaches, such as disability pride or civil rights inclusion, instead prioritizing an understanding of disability within the context of white supremacy” (2022, 5). Rather than disability *rights*, crip-of-color critique often emphasizes disability *justice*. As Mia Mingus (2011) defines it, disability justice means “moving away from an equality-based model of sameness and ‘we are just like you’ to a model of disability that embraces difference, confronts privilege and challenges what is considered ‘normal’ on every front.” For Patty Berne (2015), a “Disability Justice framework understands that all bodies are . . . caught in these bindings of ability, race, gender, sexuality, class, nation state and imperialism, and that we cannot separate them.” The activism that forms the theoretical base of crip-of-color critique, then, centers not just disability but multiple and mutually reinforcing systems of oppression; the embrace of interdependence over independence; and the desire for revolution over reform.

A survey of twentieth-century Latinx history demonstrates how ideologies of health and ability have shaped the social and political construction of Latinx identities and the racialization of Latinx people. For instance, 1904’s *Gonzales v. Williams*, the US Supreme Court case that established Puerto Ricans as “noncitizen nationals” and set the legal precedent for the second-class citizenship that Puerto Ricans still experience, was set in motion when immigration inspectors at Ellis Island noticed the visible pregnancy of Isabel González, deemed her “likely to become a public charge,” and placed her in detention (Erman 2019). Latinx history offers a record of how disability and health affect the US immigration system as well as how that system affects the bodies of migrants: Alexandra Minna Stern (1999), Natalia Molina (2006), and John McKiernan-González (2012) detail how Latinx migrants have been treated as vectors of disease, while Mary E. Mendoza (2017) and Seth Holmes (2013) demonstrate the debilitating living and working conditions that Latinx agricultural workers experience. Eugenic ideologies of health, meanwhile, subject Latinx people regardless of citizenship status to coercive sterilizations and reproductive abuse, as Laura Briggs (2003), Elena R. Gutiérrez (2008), and Natalie Lira (2021) show.

Responding to these histories, Latinx struggles for racial justice have often been organized around concerns of health and wellbeing. The activism

of César Chávez for the health and wellbeing of agricultural workers is memorialized in a national monument, a major motion picture, and the street names of several major US cities, but the health advocacy of the New York Young Lords, which organized hospital takeovers, offered testing for tuberculosis and lead exposure, and staged a Garbage Offensive to protest discriminatory city sanitation services, also merits close attention (Fernández 2020; Morales 2016; Wanzer-Serrano 2015). Schalk and Kim argue that such activist work should not be seen merely as an underrepresented object of analysis in disability studies but should be treated as an unacknowledged contribution to disability theory because it produces new knowledge about the intersection of race, gender, and ability.⁴

This study begins with texts published in the mid-1990s and extends to the contemporary period. In the United States, this period saw expanded opportunities for people with disabilities to participate in public life, a significant retraction of the social safety net, and vociferous debates over immigration policy—all of which come to bear on current public discourse related to the US health care system. The writers and artists whose work I examine reflect these social conditions in their work through their inclusive representations of diverse bodyminds, their concern for how ideologies of individual self-reliance prevent vulnerable people from accessing care and support, and their direct engagement with the consequences of border enforcement. The texts I analyze in this book thus capture and respond to these national conversations, offering not policy analysis but aesthetic renderings of the relationship between personal wellbeing and social climate. In particular, three laws from the 1980s and 1990s shape the political environment from which these texts emerge: the 1986 Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA), which formalized the status of approximately three million undocumented residents of the United States and created new immigration control infrastructure; the 1990 Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), which prohibited disability discrimination and guaranteed employment and educational opportunities for people with disabilities; and the 1996 Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA), which (as President Bill Clinton proudly proclaimed) “ended welfare as we knew it.” None of the texts I examine in this book directly mentions these laws by name, but they all respond to (and in some instances capitulate to) a social climate marked by scrutiny and resentment directed toward people who access increasingly scarce public resources and by the sense that people’s wellbeing is a matter of personal (rather than public or collective) responsibility.

The first two laws, signed by Republican presidents, seem to enact policies to the left of the current political center in the United States; the latter, signed by a Democrat, constitutes the kind of decimation of safety nets typically attributed to politicians on the right. (Together, these laws demonstrate how far to the right both US political parties have moved in the past half-century.) The IRCA, for instance, has been retrospectively characterized as an “amnesty program” but also spurred anti-immigrant backlash (Abrajano and Hajnal 2015). Meanwhile, the ADA secured the right to work for disabled people but not the right *not* to work; as Sunny Taylor (2004) reminds us, it reinforced the idea that people with disabilities should seek employment rather than relying on public benefits.⁵ Finally, PRWORA both institutionalized the notion of “personal responsibility” that has figured so prominently in debates over the ACA and exacerbated the need for health care reform by severely limiting Medicaid eligibility.⁶ Public debates about these laws echo in those surrounding the ACA, which in addition to presenting the undocumented as unworthy of health care also reinforce the idea that people forced to rely on the state for life-sustaining resources are irresponsible and undeserving. For instance, during a 2017 push to repeal the ACA, Representative Jason Chaffetz (R-UT) suggested that the reason many people could not afford health care was their smartphone purchases: “Americans have choices,” he told CNN. “And they’ve got to make a choice. And so, maybe rather than getting that new iPhone that they just love and they want to go spend hundreds of dollars on that, maybe they should invest it in their own health care.”⁷

I rehearse this history because, as I finish writing this book in the immediate aftermath of Donald Trump’s White House occupancy and the ongoing devastation of the COVID-19 pandemic, it feels urgent to remember that this moment, while dire, is not exceptional. I began this book in 2014, the year most provisions of the ACA came into effect. At that time, I held an unequivocally critical stance toward the law: I considered its exclusion of undocumented immigrants both morally reprehensible and bad public health practice, and I opposed as well its promotion of an individualist approach to health.⁸ By the time I finished my first draft of this manuscript, things had changed dramatically. It was 2020, more than three years into Trump’s time in the White House; the future of the ACA was (and is) uncertain; increasingly draconian policies were being enacted against immigrants; and debates about public health measures to curb the spread of COVID-19 were fiercely underway. Indeed, in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, the idea of health as an individual responsibility has turned deadly, with a

prominent and vocal minority of the US population loudly and violently asserting its right to refuse public health precautions and endanger the lives of others. This book, then, which began as a polemic against the ACA, became an effort to expose and dismantle the racial animus that undergirds national conversations about public health and to illuminate how Latinx cultural workers have reimagined health and wellbeing.

Radical Health thus treats the work of contemporary Latinx cultural workers as a source of theoretical insight about disability, health, and wellbeing. It tells the stories not of the twentieth-century social actors, like Isabel González or the Young Lords, who contested racializing discourses of health and racial health disparities, but of contemporary Latinx cultural workers who have demanded access to health resources even as they have also sought to redefine health itself. My use of the phrase *radical health* captures how these cultural workers advance a critique of health (as a punitive ideology used to devalue and disparage people whose bodily practices do not conform to social norms) even as they seek to claim it.

Health as Racializing Ideology

To illuminate how the texts I study reimagine health, I first address the ideological function of health as an instrument of racialization. The aforementioned debates about the passage and implementation of the ACA are a useful starting point both because of the ACA's exclusion of undocumented immigrants and because of what these debates reveal about who is understood to deserve health and who is not. I am not, of course, the first to criticize the ACA, a law that historian Colin Gordon (2018) calls a "spectacularly imperfect solution to our healthcare crisis." There are many good critiques of the ACA; mine focuses on the law's designation of particular people as ineligible.⁹ The narrative that some people simply *had* to be excluded for the ACA to pass reifies the idea that the health of the nation depends on withholding health from certain populations.¹⁰ Of course, this idea is patently false. Health is not a finite resource that grows scarcer as it is made more widely available. If the COVID-19 crisis has taught us anything, it is that the *more* people within a community have access to health resources—including not just doctors and medicines but also paid sick leave, safe childcare, food security, and safe housing—the healthier everyone in that community can be. In an earlier assessment of the repeated failures to create a national health care plan in the twentieth-century United States,

Gordon (2003) faults not the overreach of activists who attempted to cover too many people (as common explanations have it) but reformers' willingness to compromise and leave people out. By accepting certain exclusions as necessary, advocates of "universal" health care affirmed "distinctions between deserving and undeserving citizens" (9), undermining not only their cause but public health itself. By declaring from the outset that undocumented people would be ineligible for benefits, advocates of the ACA effectively opened the door to further discussion of whether certain categories of people deserve health care at all—a conversation that has left the law itself precarious.

The flaws of a health care system that denies care to entire populations came dramatically to light in 2020 with the spread of COVID-19, even as the pandemic also laid bare the impulse to blame under-resourced populations for their poor health outcomes. In the United States, for instance, death rates in Black and Latinx communities have been blamed on comorbidities resulting from "unhealthy" lifestyles (like fatness and diabetes), rather than on unequal health care access, on the overrepresentation of Black and Latinx people among the essential workers most exposed to the coronavirus that causes COVID-19, or on patterns of residential discrimination that concentrate Black and Latinx people into high-density dwellings where social distancing is difficult. Meanwhile, once a COVID-19 vaccine became available, the (initially) lower vaccination rates in Black and Latinx communities were immediately attributed to vaccine hesitancy rather than to lack of access. When vaccines in the United States were in short supply, debates raged about whether certain categories of people (including fat people, smokers, and undocumented immigrants) should receive them, suggesting a widespread belief that certain people deserved to die of a preventable illness. Once the vaccines became widely available, vaccine mandates were framed as an imposition on healthy people, whose personal freedom to refuse vaccination was valorized above the lives of the vulnerable people that universal vaccination would protect. The toll of the COVID-19 pandemic—and the ways in which racialized death was normalized and rationalized—reinforces a pointed critique of the US health care system by the disability scholar Nir-mala Erevelles: "Why do some bodies matter more than others?" (2011, 6).

The idea that personal behaviors or beliefs are the primary cause of health disparities is linked to what the sociologist Robert Crawford calls *healthism*: "the ideology of individual responsibility for health" (1980, 367).¹¹ To be perceived as deserving health in a society that embraces healthism, one must care for one's body according to very precise social norms: avoiding tobacco

and other controlled substances, eating a diet deemed nutritious, wearing sunscreen, refusing to engage in risky sex practices, and exercising often. Meanwhile, those seen as undeserving often experience bodily conditions, erroneously believed to result solely from irresponsible personal choices, that have a disproportionately adverse effect in communities of color and among people of lower socioeconomic status: fatness, asthma, diabetes, sexually transmitted infections, addiction, high-risk or stigmatized pregnancies, mental illness, and some cancers and neurological differences.¹² Healthism pervades the political rhetoric of liberals and conservatives alike; it surfaces in Republican efforts to dismantle the ACA as well as in local ordinances (many sponsored by Democrats) banning the construction of new fast-food restaurants or dollar stores, out of the belief that such establishments promote “bad” food choices among the poor (Capelouto 2019; Chandler 2015; Ward 2013). It is not, I believe, coincidental that Obama, the president who finally did expand health care access, was tall, normatively attractive, and personally invested in performing health (he took pains to conceal his cigarette addiction and highlight his time on the basketball court when he moved into the White House)—nor do I think it coincidental that the signature charitable cause of his spouse, Michelle Obama, was an effort called *Let’s Move!* focused on individual health behaviors like exercise and the consumption of fresh, unprocessed foods.¹³

The notion that people are personally responsible for their own health also aligns with an idea long critiqued by disability scholars: what Robert McRuer (2006) calls *compulsory able-bodiedness*. McRuer defines compulsory able-bodiedness as the commonsense agreement that “able-bodied identities, able-bodied perspectives are preferable and what we all, collectively, are aiming for” (9). Compulsory able-bodiedness is often understood to describe the demand that people perform to their maximum ability at all times (taking the stairs instead of the elevator, even if it means exhaustion later; refusing necessary accommodations at work or at school to avoid the appearance of “preferential treatment,” etc.) and the emphasis of charities promoting the “search for a cure” rather than improvements to the quality of life for people with disabilities. But compulsory able-bodiedness is also at work in the mandate to protect one’s health at all times and at all costs. Under a system of compulsory able-bodiedness, behaviors that might foster a sense of wellbeing but are not considered “healthy” (like eating a piece of cake, smoking a joint, or having anonymous sex) are subject to shaming and punishment. Those unable or unwilling to consistently perform

normative health behaviors are seen not merely as responsible for their own ill health but as a burden on society, a drain on valuable resources, unworthy of care or protection, and ultimately disposable.

Radical Health interrogates how healthism and compulsory able-bodiedness justify the health disparities that affect Latinx communities. While the case of Blanca Borrego, criminalized for seeking medical care, represents the overt denial of care to Latinx people, healthism and compulsory able-bodiedness are more insidious: they present health concerns affecting Latinx communities, from HIV/AIDS to diabetes, as the result of pathologized personal behaviors or cultural attributes rather than structural inequities. There are echoes here of what the historian Alan M. Kraut calls “medicalized nativism” (1994, 3). Medicalized nativism, as Priscilla Wald observes, “involves more than superimposing a disease threat on an unfortunate group” (2008, 8); it also links disease to “dangerous practices and behaviors that allegedly mark intrinsic cultural difference” and that express “the destructive transformative power of the group” (8). *Radical Health* begins at the intersection of medicalized nativism with neoliberal notions of individual responsibility, where the “dangerous practices and behaviors” attributed to Latinx people are used to explain the health concerns affecting their communities and where racialized health disparities become an argument against (rather than for) universal health care.

Dominant ideas about health are not merely the result of racial bias; they can foment white supremacy. Sociologist Eduardo Bonilla-Silva identifies “the curious enigma of ‘racism without racists’” (2014, 4), a phenomenon in which purportedly race-neutral policies and ideologies produce racially unequal outcomes.¹⁴ Health, I argue, is one apparently race-neutral ideology that perpetuates racial inequality. When poor health is understood as the result of bad personal choices and not the systemic denial of access to health-sustaining resources, then entire communities are blamed for their illnesses, impairments, and deaths. Furthermore, when health is construed as the result of good personal choices (motivation, restraint, discipline), those experiencing illness are constructed as indolent, gluttonous, and negligent—adjectives with a long history in racializing discourse. In this way, health can function as both an outcome and a source of racial injustice. Therefore, while the phenomenon of “racism without racists” described by Bonilla-Silva operates across numerous sites, *health* is a particularly important one—and one that I believe has been underexamined as a key theme in Latinx aesthetic representations.

Radical Health

Against the racializing ideologies of health just described, this book examines the work of Latinx artists advancing a politics of radical health. I define *radical health* as a vision of health that simultaneously emphasizes its structural dimensions and refuses to treat it as a measure of human worth. Here I offer two distinct—even at times incongruous—lines of analysis. First, I address how Latinx expressive culture makes visible the context in which people make health decisions. In response to healthism, compulsory able-bodiedness, and the neoliberal policies they promote, the texts examined in the following chapters reveal factors beyond individual control—access to nutritious food, medical care and information, clean air and water, and cultural representations portraying one's life as valuable and worth living—that affect physical and mental wellbeing. Second, I emphasize how the texts I study present the value of Latinx lives independently of health status. These texts depict people who are HIV-positive, fat, diabetic, and otherwise labeled as unhealthy in ways that reject the stigma of unhealth. Latina fat activist Virgie Tovar (2015) exemplifies this latter strategy: “There are . . . those whose politics align largely with my own who are committed to pleading a case that my body is a failure that is ‘not my fault.’ . . . But I’m not interested in exonerating myself. And perhaps more importantly, there is nothing that needs exonerating.” From this angle, one might note that this book could just as easily be titled *Radical Unwellness* (which was, in fact, one of my early working titles), since some of the texts I examine offer such sharp critiques of the conflation of a person's social value with their health status that they can be read as an embrace of unhealth. Ultimately, however, I chose to put the word *health* in my title not to reaffirm its value but to signal my commitment to interrogating it.

At first glance, the fact that so many of the artists I study simultaneously critique the structural factors that lead to racial health disparities *and* celebrate the bodies shaped by these disparities might seem contradictory or even incoherent (and, as my discussion of individual texts will show, contradictions and incoherencies do arise). These contradictions, however, illuminate a larger theoretical conundrum. As crip theorist Alison Kafer asks: “How can we attend to ‘serious health problems’ while also deconstructing the stigma attached to those problems or even historicizing the very construction of such conditions as problems?” (2013, 159). Kafer's question is motivated by an effort to find coalition between disability and environmental justice activists, but given the systemic denial of health

care to poor people of color, it has much wider implications. Answering Kafer's question requires nuancing disability rights discourses that celebrate nonnormative bodies without critiquing the social conditions that produce them. Jasbir K. Puar, for instance, notes the limitations of disability scholarship and activism that is singularly focused on reclamation: "In a context whereby four-fifths of the world's people with disabilities are located in what was once hailed as the 'global south,' liberal interventions are invariably infused with certitude that disability should be reclaimed as a valuable difference—the difference of the Other—through rights, visibility, and empowerment discourses—rather than addressing how much debilitation is caused by global injustice and the war machines of colonialism, occupation, and U.S. imperialism" (2017, xvii). Erevelles pointedly asks: "How is disability celebrated if its very existence is inextricably linked to the violence of social/economic conditions of capitalism?" (2011, 17). And while the tension between disability pride and the effort to address health injustice may lack a definitive resolution, I believe it is urgent to work from that tension in a political moment when communities of color and the poor are uniquely vulnerable to disease and impairment even as such communities are collectively blamed and stigmatized for their ill health. This book therefore centers the work of artists who embrace debilitated bodies while critiquing systems of debilitation.

Although my methods are primarily those of the literary critic, I have found that attending to the vision of radical health offered by the texts discussed in this study requires citing scholars from outside literary studies as much as scholars from within it. Like literary critics Paula M. L. Moya and John Alba Cutler, I understand literary scholarship as fundamentally and necessarily in conversation with the work of other disciplines, particularly the social sciences, and I understand art of all kinds as an endeavor that is both aesthetic and ideological. In different contexts, Moya and Cutler have both demonstrated how the methods of literary criticism—including close reading, formal analysis, and theoretical engagement—serve as an intervention into pressing social concerns. Moya asserts that literary criticism has a necessarily sociopolitical dimension, as a "close reading of a work of literature can . . . serve as an excavation of, and a meditation on, the pervasive sociocultural ideas—such as race, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality—of the social worlds . . . within which both authors and readers live" (2016, 8–9). Cutler, meanwhile, argues that the work of social scientists is often more literary than acknowledged; within it, our social world "is never simply observed—it is produced and reproduced" (2015, 8).

In addition to drawing from literary studies, critical ethnic studies, and crip-of-color critique, I take inspiration from the rejection of respectability politics that characterizes queer-of-color critique. Respectability politics, as Juana María Rodríguez notes, allege “that in order to enter the fold of collectivity, be it familial or revolutionary, we must first be liberated of our sexual deviance and our politically incorrect desires” (2014, 11). Like Rodríguez, I am interested in bodyminds that “exceed the norms of proper corporeal containment” (2014, 2), but where Rodríguez focuses on the eruption of bodily excess in sexual practice, *Radical Health* examines it in medical scenarios, where the “politically incorrect desires” precluding entrance into the collectivity might include simple carbohydrates or sex without condoms (however vanilla that sex might otherwise be). As Lisa Marie Cacho observes: “Ascribing readily recognizable social value always requires the devaluation of an/other, and that other is almost always poor, racialized, criminalized, segregated, legally vulnerable, and unprotected” (2012, 17). To Cacho’s list of devalued others I add the *radically unwell*: the diseased, the disabled, the unhealthy, and the debilitated.

One salient example of how the effort to claim the value of some can devalue others is visible in some public health scholarship emphasizing the Latinx Health Paradox. Also known as the Hispanic Health Paradox and the Healthy Latino Paradox, this concept describes a phenomenon observed by public health researchers that Latinx immigrant populations tend to have better health outcomes than their socioeconomic status would predict. As originally theorized by the sociologist Rubén G. Rumbaut, the Latinx Health Paradox seems at first glance to challenge the “ethnocentric assumptions” (1997, 490) that position immigrants from Latin America as a burden on the US health care system. Yet there are reasons to be cautious about characterizing Latinx communities as “a super-healthy population with differing health promotion and services needs” (Vega and Amaro 1994, 40). Medical anthropologist Seth Holmes (2013) notes the vast intra-ethnic diversity within the category “Latinx” and observes specifically that migrant and seasonal agricultural workers—a category in which immigrants from Mexico and Central America are overrepresented—experience much poorer health status than nearly all other workers. And, most relevant to my argument, many researchers have noted that the Latinx Health Paradox relies on essentializing notions of culture and ignores structural factors that influence health (Castañeda et al. 2015; Viruell-Fuentes, Miranda, and Abdulrahim 2012). Scholars who invoke the Latinx Health Paradox tend to speculate about behaviors linked to cultural belief systems that offer health

benefits, but, as Edna A. Viruell-Fuentes argues, this approach “runs the risk of lending support to victim-blaming explanations for health outcomes” since the “idea of culture as a ‘source of dysfunction’ can easily flow from this line of thinking” (2007, 1525). The problems of leaning too heavily on discourses like the Latinx Health Paradox are also made visible in scholarship from adjacent fields, particularly Asian American studies scholarship examining the role of health in constructing a “model minority” identity (Lee 2021; Shah 2001).

Just as the focus on health distinguishes *Radical Health* from disability scholarship that takes a purely critical stance toward healing and cure, so too does my emphasis on crip-of-color critique differentiate this study from literary criticism rooted in a medical humanities approach known as narrative medicine. Developed by the physician-scholar Rita Charon, narrative medicine refers to “medicine practiced with these narrative skills of recognizing, absorbing, interpreting, and being moved by stories of illness” (2006, 3). While I share Charon’s interest in the subjective experience of health and unwellness, and applaud her efforts to integrate narrative theory into medical education, I believe that cultural texts have more to offer than the fostering of individualized compassion, empathy, and care; in addition, they offer a means of imagining our social world otherwise and a proposal for structural change.¹⁵

The texts examined in this book engage with health on both individual and structural levels, making visible the larger context in which people make health decisions but also revealing people’s individual (sometimes imperfect, always complicated) navigation of structural constraints. While the task of the social scientist is to note and describe this navigation, the task of the artist is to show us what it looks and feels like in practice, undertaken by people with messy desires, limitations, and flaws. Because the sustained analysis of cultural artifacts requires a simultaneous examination of both individual behaviors *and* larger systems, cultural criticism is an important resource for understanding health disparities. This is especially true because the individual threads of an argument in cultural studies scholarship don’t always align perfectly: different artists approach social concerns differently, and even a singular artwork may be characterized by internal incongruities whose convolutions mirror those of the thorny social issues it navigates. Thus, having elaborated my argument, I now turn to a work of art that illuminates the tensions within it: the performance manifesto *Your Healing Is Killing Me* by Chicana playwright and performance artist Virginia Grise.

PAUSE: Virginia Grise, *Your Healing Is Killing Me*

Your Healing Is Killing Me (YHIKM) follows the journey of an artist with severe eczema to find relief from her symptoms. As a chronic condition of unknown cause, linked to genetics but triggered by environmental factors and stress, eczema prompts the speaker to meditate on both the injustices of a capitalist health care system and the intergenerational PTSD (caused by migration, war, and sexual violence) that affects her family. The text, in other words, substantiates a lament from disability justice activist Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha: “Everyone I know longs for healing. It’s just hard to get. The good kind of healing: healing that is affordable, has child-care and no stairs, doesn’t misgender us or disrespect our disabilities or sex work, believes us when we’re hurt and listens when we say what we need, understands that we are the first and last authorities on our own bodies and minds” (2018, 97–98). YHIKM layers the speaker’s current life as a working artist with memories of childhood trauma and experiences with healers from *curanderas* to acupuncturists to dermatologists, showing that finding the “good kind of healing” requires her to address not just one physical ailment but longer histories: neoliberal economic policies that curtail possibilities of social mobility, making survival as a working artist tenuous; the Vietnam War and its effect on her father’s mental health; her mother’s and sisters’ migrations between Mexico and the United States; and her childhood experiences with sexual violence. The speaker tries numerous treatments, some of which help temporarily and many of which create new problems (like the steroid cream that induces dependency, rapid weight loss, and mood swings).

In addition to moving between personal and structural registers, YHIKM also engages the complexity of what Eunjung Kim (2017) calls “curative violence.” The text contains a staunch critique of capitalist influences in the health care system, detailing the barriers to treatment faced by a working artist with no health insurance, but its emphasis on finding a cure for the speaker’s eczema also places it in tension with what activist Eli Clare calls the “anti-cure politics” (2017, 60) of the mainstream disability movement. Another potential concern for some might be the treatment that the speaker ultimately finds for her eczema—bone soup, cooked weekly by her lover: “Bone soup builds immunity, helps with inflammation and digestion. Some say it even fights cancer. After all those visits to the nice lady doctor and the fancy dermatologist and the cynical acupuncturist, I found out that what I needed was right in my kitchen the whole time” (Grise 2017, 82). While the fact that the speaker finds a treatment option outside of a capitalist health

industry drives home the critique of profit-driven health care, the experience of receiving invasive and patronizing health recommendations (often in the form of “holistic” medicines or dietary changes) from well-meaning strangers is a common and frustrating experience for many people with disabilities and chronic illnesses. In other words, despite its benefits to the speaker of this particular text, bone soup may be as ineffective and harmful for some chronically ill people as for-profit medicine.

Yet as the speaker of *YHIKM* delves into the possible causes of and treatments for her eczema, she ultimately arrives at an exhaustive list of things that are killing her (that is, not only worsening her eczema but shortening her life), a list that covers medicine, the health care system, food production and distribution systems, economic inequality, white supremacy, the lack of a viable political left in the United States, gender roles, and more. While the desire for relief that permeates *YHIKM* and the cure that results might sit uneasily with some disability scholars and activists, Grise’s delicate negotiation of the need to balance critique of the health care system with investment in healing places her work firmly in conversation with scholars and activists like Eli Clare and Eunjung Kim, who seek to complicate how disability communities engage with cure.

It is important, then, to note that although the *plot* of *YHIKM* ends with a cure, the *text* does not. Here I refer back to my earlier point that while the plot of *YHIKM* follows the speaker’s journey to find relief for eczema symptoms, the monologues that make up the manifesto tell a comprehensive story of the speaker’s experiences with trauma, illness, and healing. After sharing her experience with relief from her symptoms via bone soup, the speaker offers a proclamation suggesting that even if *she* has found a solution that works for her, the structural problems that exacerbated her eczema remain intact:

Capitalism is toxic. No amount of body butter or eczema creams will act as a salve for its toxicity. As a system it cannot be fixed. The only way to defend ourselves against it is to destroy it. The only way to destroy it is to create something better. In the process, we must be willing to assess, to prepare, to study, to fight, but we must also be willing to listen to ourselves and each other, to change, to transform, to care for ourselves and each other. . . .

I am an artist. And as an artist, I believe that my greatest creative project is to imagine something, something better, where our dreams matter, where as a people we are free. (Grise 2017, 83)

This conclusion prompts spectators to understand health and wellbeing as concerns that demand political solutions even when individual symptoms are resolved. *YHIKM* further makes a claim for *art* as the medium through which people are able to imagine better ways of ensuring each other's wellbeing. While the writers and artists discussed throughout this book differ in their assessments of the health care system, the kinds of bodily conditions they address, and their strategies for combating the stigma of unwellness, their work is united by the effort to make an aesthetic, imaginative argument for a politics of radical health.

Latinx Expressive Culture (or “Latino Is Not a Politic”)

My engagement with Grise in the previous section requires that I end this introduction with some final comments about why I have specifically located my exploration of radical health in a group of interpretive objects that I label as *Latinx expressive culture*—a category that, as much recent scholarship demonstrates, merits some pressure. In fact, in *YHIKM*, Grise's speaker pointedly rejects *Latinx* as a basis for collective action (and, implicitly, as a basis for collective aesthetics as well), asserting that “Pan-Latino(ism) is killing me, as Latino is not a politic nor an ideology and does nothing to prepare us to defend ourselves against what is actually killing us” (2017, 57). Indeed, although I argue that a conceptualization of radical health comes into focus from the collective analysis of a range of contemporary Latinx cultural artifacts, not only do I seek to avoid imposing ideological uniformity on the texts I examine, I want to be clear that I don't even love (or agree with) them all equally. As just one salient example of the dissonance that surfaces between the writers and artists I discuss, chapter 2 (on diabetic representation) juxtaposes a piece coauthored by Grise, a committed prison abolitionist, against an autobiography by Supreme Court Justice Sonia Sotomayor, who began her career as a prosecutor. Of course, Latinx studies as a field has always understood *Latinidad* as what the political theorist Cristina Beltrán calls “a site of permanent political contestation” (2010, 9) and not as a descriptive category; some of the interdiscipline's most important work involves interrogating its very constitution. For instance, literary critic Ralph E. Rodriguez has argued against deploying *Latinx* “as a taxonomical and aesthetic category” (2018, 3) in cultural criticism, noting that even if such labels are “operational in social and political arenas,

that does not mean they have an aesthetic force” (12). Although mindful of these warnings, I have nonetheless used *Latinx* throughout this book because of the force that the term continues to hold in the field of public health. For me, using *Latinx* to denote a population often described in medical literature as “Hispanic” offers a way to bring into conversation cultural workers engaging with health care politics, as well as a means of negotiating between the function of the ethnic label to homogenize, categorize, and pathologize (on one hand) and the artistic and activist projects offering possibilities for redefinition, critique, coalition, and solidarity (on another).

The possibility of coalition and solidarity also means being accountable to the debts that Latinx studies owes to other ethnic studies fields. In this introduction, I have already noted the pivotal role of Black disability scholars in creating the theoretical infrastructure for the body of knowledge now described as *crip-of-color critique*. Like disability studies, Latinx studies owes a profound debt to Black studies, a debt to which Puerto Rican performance studies scholar Sandra Ruiz eloquently alludes when she reminds us “what Blackness unearths about life and death that other analytics might not ever understand about existence” (2019, 17). As I was researching the chapters that follow, the work of Black studies scholars on HIV/AIDS (Chris Bell), diabetes and metabolic disorders (Richard M. Mizelle Jr., Anthony Ryan Hatch), racialized gender violence (Beth E. Richie), and madness (La Marr Jurelle Bruce, Therí A. Pickens) has been essential for my thinking. In addition, scholars of Asian American studies (Nayan Shah, James Kyung-Jin Lee) have illuminated the discursive links among race, citizenship, migration, and ideologies of health. Ultimately, I find that health functions as what Molina (2014) calls a *racial script*—a racializing narrative that is enacted both in institutional settings and in mundane, everyday interactions; that draws its force from the way it connects to cultural representations and practices used to racialize different groups in different historical periods; and that is available for racialized groups to seize and repurpose (what Molina calls “counterscripting”). In other words, because health works as a racial script, racial health disparities experienced by Latinx people need not be exclusively identifiable as “Latinx concerns” nor be experienced in the same way by *all* Latinx people (or even racialize all Latinx people in the same way) for their racializing effect to matter.

The COVID-19 crisis in the United States helps to illustrate this point. When the novel coronavirus causing COVID-19 was first identified in the United States, it ushered in a wave of racist attacks on Asian and Asian

American communities that (as of this writing more than two years later) continue to escalate. This, in turn, fueled both a more generalized medical racism that prompted immigration restrictions and a broader anti-immigrant sentiment that also affected some (but not all) Latinx communities. By the late spring of 2020, the US-Mexico border was closed, and immigrants from Mexico and Central America were being specifically blamed for COVID-19 outbreaks in rural parts of the southern and midwestern United States. Health and Human Services Secretary Alex Azar attributed outbreaks in meatpacking facilities (Cancryn and Barrón-López 2020) to the “home and social” aspects of workers’ lives (not their working conditions), while Florida Governor Ron DeSantis described outbreaks in his state as resulting from immigrant agricultural and construction workers “packed in there like sardines” (Reston 2020) on the buses transporting them to their jobs. Azar and DeSantis did not just devalue the lives of the workers responsible for feeding the rest of the country during a period of disruption in the national food supply but drew from and recirculated the racial script blaming the crisis on Asians and Asian Americans to stigmatize Central American and Mexican immigrant communities, thereby normalizing the disproportionate caseloads and death rates in Latinx communities overall. Like the incidents recounted at the beginning of this introduction—which addressed the convergence of debates over immigration and health care policy—these stories about how a public health crisis heightened and fueled the racialization of diverse Latinx communities across the United States illustrate the need for a specific analysis of how diverse Latinx artists have created counterscripts to disrupt the systemic devaluation of the racialized unwell.

Finally—but importantly—there is the question of why I use the word *Latinx*, a term that has not been universally agreed on by all of the artists whose work I examine in this study (nor by the scholars I cite). As a fairly new term, one the Pew Research Center reminds us has yet to be widely adopted (Noe-Bustamante, Mora, and López 2020), *Latinx* has its detractors, some of whom I find more persuasive than others.¹⁶

For this reason, it is important to me to specify that I do not use *Latinx* prescriptively or exclusively, and when describing artists and characters who use other identity markers (like Chicana or Latino), I use those. However, I am also inspired by the way Claudia Milian invokes the X as a methodological invitation: “What are we doing with the ethical and political uncertainty of X?” (2019, 7). Answering this question fully, of course, requires its own book (which Milian has already written), but in considering how this project might engage it, I am drawn to the words of Roy Pérez:

I really like the “x” signifier as a reclamation of all kinds of erasure. By using the “x” we expose erasure and refuse it at the same time. I’m a nerd, so for me it invokes the X-men, one of our most culturally visible and diverse narratives about xenophobia and fascism. It’s also not lost on me that Black slaves, denied literacy and proper names, were compelled to sign “X” on their freedom papers. When we cross something out, the original remains doggedly just underneath. . . . All told, the “x” has a complex transnational history that is much more rich and full of resistance than a simple story of erasure suggests. I think it’s great to be enamored with these linguistic possibilities—Spanish-speaking cultures are all about linguistic play and appropriation. That itself is a kind of freedom. (deOnís 2017, 86)

Pérez’s invocation of the mutant superheroes the X-men, in particular, links the X to corporeal nonconformity. His invocation of something crossed out but still visible, remaining “doggedly just underneath,” reminds me of how ideas about health and race layer on top of each other. Jonathan M. Metzl defines health as “a set of bodily practices whose ideological work is often rendered invisible by the assumption that it is a monolithic, universal good” (2010, 9). I imagine health as an X that leaves that ideological work partially visible, lurking doggedly just underneath. As a disability studies scholar, moreover, I am mindful of the ways in which nonnormative bodies of all kinds often disrupt gender binaries—or, rather, of the ways in which the gender binary and compulsory able-bodiedness are mutually reinforcing. For these reasons, the X feels right for *this* book, written in *this* moment, although I remain open to the evolution of language and to the possibility that it may not be right for everything I write in the future.

Overview

The chapters that follow cohere around close readings of aesthetic representations in order to foreground my argument that Latinx expressive culture can function as a public health intervention. I state this at the outset because, although I hope the pages that follow will be useful to readers from a wide range of disciplinary backgrounds, I also understand that close readings don’t always hold the same interest for those who don’t share my scholarly training in cultural criticism or literary studies. (I also recognize that readers who share my training may find some of the close readings too brief!) I use this method of close reading because, although I know that most of my

readers will be literary and cultural studies scholars, I also want to bring the artists and writers discussed here to the attention of others who share my interest in health justice, disability politics, and collective wellbeing. Because the chapters each examine a health-related theme as it is depicted in multiple texts, they can feel long. For this reason, I invite readers to skim, to bounce between sections, to pick and choose the analyses that most call to them. I have tried to write in such a way that makes this kind of fragmented reading possible—although, of course, I also welcome the reader who reads cover to cover. One of my goals is to see the texts I analyze here used more regularly in medical and public health training, and I hope that both my analyses and mode of organization (offering a series of short, stand-alone close readings instead of an extended analysis of a single text in each chapter) can help make that possible.

The first two chapters of *Radical Health* take a straightforward approach to the questions that guide this book, examining bodily conditions (HIV/AIDS and diabetes) that are overrepresented in conversations about Latinx communities and health. Chapter 1 examines Latinx cultural engagements with HIV/AIDS spanning the past three decades, from the 1990s until now, by Gil Cuadros, Jaime Cortez and Adela Vázquez, and Rafael Campo. Addressing the prevalence of HIV/AIDS in Latinx communities, these authors refute the myth that HIV/AIDS is a past-tense crisis and prompt us to reimagine the relationship between racial justice and health justice. Chapter 2 focuses on the representation of diabetes in the work of Sonia Sotomayor, Tato Laviera, Virginia Grise and Irma Mayorga, and ire'ne lara silva. I demonstrate how each of these artists refutes mainstream narratives about diabetes and represents the diabetic body as a site of love and political resistance.

The final two chapters take up an invitation by McRuer to imagine disability studies “more capaciously as an epistemological field that makes it possible to know about or intervene in any political or cultural issue” (2010, 164). They also move from an analysis of individual health conditions to a concern with public health. In these chapters, I examine how individualist approaches to health impact approaches to intimate partner violence and immigration policy, even though domestic abuse and immigration are rarely understood as health issues. Chapter 3 examines representations of gender-based and domestic violence in the work of Sonia Nazario, Alynda Mariposa Segarra (via their stage name, Hurray for the Riff Raff), Manuel Muñoz, Rigoberto González, and Angie Cruz to suggest alternate understandings of violence that enable more just solutions. Chapter 4 considers the call of public health scholar Viruell-Fuentes for further analysis of “the

health implications of immigration policies” (Viruell-Fuentes, Miranda, and Abdulrahim. 2012, 2102). It examines the health effects of contemporary immigration policy by addressing how Latinx writers (including Reyna Grande, Junot Díaz, Javier Zamora, and Karla Cornejo Villavicencio) have depicted the mental health effects of parent–child separations prompted by immigration.

Instead of ending each chapter with a conclusion that neatly ties together each argument, I end with a *remedio*. Here I use the Spanish word, often translated as *remedy* or *cure*, to think not only about the remedies that these texts imagine but also about the stakes of *remediation*, a word that is often used to refer to the reversal of damage but can also mean the translation from one medium to another. What does it mean, I ask throughout this book, to translate questions that are often seen as the purview of health professionals into an aesthetic medium? Why does it matter, in other words, that I have approached these public health concerns not through epidemiological investigation but through cultural criticism? Often my *remedios* take the form of meditating on the intellectual journey that brought me to a particular topic or the unanswered questions about it that continue to linger for me.

This is the especially the case with my final *remedio*, the book’s short concluding chapter, in which I describe the personal experiences that brought me to this project. In this final meditation, I make explicit how my own social location—as a white, crip ciswoman who is often assumed (and for a long time assumed myself) to be nondisabled—has shaped my relationship to the texts I analyze and to the ideology of health. It is a common gesture among white scholars like myself who work in ethnic studies to invoke experiences demonstrating allyship, solidarity, and common cause (often filtered through shared social class background, shared neighborhoods, childhood friends, etc.). I believe such gestures are necessary, but I also believe that it is important for us to understand their limits. In this *remedio*, I wanted to tell a harder story, exploring how white supremacy and ableism have shaped the white liberalism in which I was raised—and which led me to both Latinx and disability studies. I have struggled with the question of where to place this story in the book, whether to start or end with it. In the end, I have opted to begin with the texts that have given me the concept of radical health, to center the artists and writers who give me faith that health is a concept worth reexamining, a concept that can be radically reimagined. Yet as I insist throughout this book that radical health can be envisioned from conditions of deep unwellness, I offer in the final chapter an account of my own attempt to do so.

Mental Health and Migrant Justice

Family Separation and Reimagining Wellness

In May 2018, President Donald Trump made official a strategy his administration had been quietly testing for months, a “zero tolerance” policy to charge migrants with illegal entry and send them into federal detention without their children—*after* they complied with US law by presenting themselves at border checkpoints to request asylum. Thousands of children, some under six months old, were taken from their parents and placed into the custody of the US Department of Health and Human Services with no plan for family reunification (Dickerson 2019; Kates 2018; Kopan 2018). The international outcry was swift and intense, and on June 20, 2018, Trump was forced to sign an executive order ostensibly discontinuing family separations. While the official policy lasted only six weeks, migrant children continued to be taken from their parents (albeit via different legal mechanisms, prompting less outrage) throughout Trump’s term in office.¹ More importantly, the psychological damage has lasted much longer—indeed, it is still unfolding, among those reunited as well as among the hundreds (perhaps thousands) of families who remain separated.²

Accused of harming children, the Trump administration shifted the blame to migrant parents. In the immediate aftermath of the crisis, Trump's daughter and senior advisor Ivanka Trump sought to characterize asylum seekers as lawbreakers who put their own children in harm's way: "I am the daughter of an immigrant, my mother grew up in communist Czech Republic, but we are a country of laws. She came to this country legally and we have to be very careful about incentivizing behavior that puts children at risk of being trafficked, at risk of entering this country with coyotes or making an incredibly dangerous journey alone" (Klein 2018). A year later, Secretary of Homeland Security Kirstjen Nielsen, who had implemented the zero tolerance policy, reflected in a *PBS NewsHour* interview: "I don't regret enforcing the law" because "not to enforce the law would encourage trafficking, would encourage . . . children to be used as pawns" (Woodruff and Nawaz 2019).³ She used the word "heartbreaking," not to describe how migrants were treated under her watch, but rather to describe the actions of parents who bring their children on "a terrible, dangerous journey" (Woodruff and Nawaz 2019).

Of course, Trump and his allies are easy targets for a discussion of the psychological harms inflicted by US border enforcement policies, the topic of this chapter. However, the rhetorical move of impugning migrant parents for the maltreatment of children by US officials frequently goes unchallenged (and, in some cases, is even used) by self-proclaimed migrant advocates. For instance, the journalist Sonia Nazario, whose work is discussed in chapter 3, states as a motivation for her best-selling book *Enrique's Journey* the goal of helping Latina mothers to "understand the full consequences of leaving their children behind and make better-informed decisions" (2007, xxv).⁴ And a year before Trump's family separations, President Barack Obama rebuked his successor on Facebook for rescinding the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) order. While defending DACA recipients, Obama (2017) also implicitly vilified their parents, criticizing the move "to expel talented, driven, patriotic young people from the only country they know solely because of the actions of their parents."

The political gains achieved by asserting the virtue of child migrants are not insignificant. Ana Elena Puga and Víctor M. Espinosa explain: "Children are effective political agents precisely because they are perceived to be above or beside the point of politics. Moreover, because their existence heralds the future, their individually suffering bodies can help create social bodies and social policy organized around hopes for a better future" (2020, 237).

Public anguish over the treatment of migrant children forced Trump to end zero tolerance. Public support for DACA prevented Trump from rescinding the Obama-era policy.

And yet the move to secure migrant justice through the figure of the child deserves scrutiny as well. Children constitute such malleable political symbols that it is possible even for those as complicit as Ms. Trump and Secretary Nielsen to purport to act in their interest; no matter how intentional an act of state-sponsored child abuse, it can apparently be cloaked in rhetoric about protecting children.⁵ More importantly, as Obama's defense of DACA shows, assertions of the child migrant's innocence risk locating guilt in the migrant parent. Lee Edelman famously argues that the "sacralization of the Child . . . necessitates the sacrifice of the queer" (2004, 28); it might similarly be said that in immigration politics the sacralization of the child migrant (or student, or DREAMer) often seems to necessitate the sacrifice of the parent.⁶ Here it is instructive to compare DACA with another Obama-era executive order, Deferred Action for Parents of Americans and Lawful Permanent Residents (DAPA), which would have shielded undocumented parents of US citizens and permanent residents from deportation. Whereas DACA's broad appeal protected it from Trump's assaults, DAPA never went into effect: it was immediately challenged in federal court before being quietly rescinded by Trump when Obama left office. And whereas Trump's successor, President Joe Biden, claims to be making it a priority to preserve and strengthen DACA, efforts to revive DAPA have not materialized as of this writing. Meanwhile, an estimated 5.1 million US citizen children live with at least one undocumented parent who is vulnerable to deportation (Capps, Fix, and Zong 2016), and the fear of parental deportation has dire mental health consequences for children in mixed-status families (Human Impact Partners 2018).

Although migrant parents have been overlooked at best and maligned at worst by politicians and pundits, Latinx expressive culture reassesses their actions and circumstances and, in so doing, expands both the conversation around the wellbeing of child migrants and the political horizons of immigration activism. In the immediate aftermath of Trump's family separation debacle, the writer Reyna Grande (2018) published an editorial in the *New York Times* responding to Ms. Trump's comments about Central American parents: "No parent wants to uproot and risk his or her child's life. Unlike Ms. Trump's mother, my father was an economic migrant, too poor to qualify for even the most basic visa requirements. He was a maintenance worker with a third-grade education, and the only way to give his children a better future was to break the law." Grande thus refuses a logic that would affirm

her own innocence at her father's expense. Yet, in other writings, Grande also painfully details her parents' shortcomings and mistakes. Her memoirs depict the physical and emotional abuse she experienced as a child, by relatives in Mexico and by her parents in the United States; her father's violence and alcohol dependence; and her mother's neglect. Even as she vehemently critiques Ms. Trump for "putting the blame on immigrants" (2018), Grande does not idealize her own immigrant parents. Instead, she offers a nuanced portrait of parental figures who both experience and perpetuate trauma—a representation that, I argue in this chapter, offers a more powerful resource for imagining radical mental health than a simple claim to innocence. Like the cultural workers described in previous chapters, who both demand conditions for wellbeing while refusing to stigmatize unwellness, Grande denounces the psychological harms inflicted on her family because of US border enforcement policy while also working to destigmatize the mental health consequences of those harms.

Family separation and its psychic toll is a prominent concern for many Latinx cultural workers. Although the issue became a national flash point during the Trump years, US border enforcement has separated families since the late 1800s, when its first immigration restrictions took effect. According to the literary critic Marta Caminero-Santangelo (2016), undocumented migrations—including the family separations that often result—have become an increasingly prominent theme in Latinx literature since 1994, when President Bill Clinton launched the border enforcement initiative known as Operation Gatekeeper.⁷ In this chapter, I examine the work of four Latinx writers separated from their parents as children—Grande, Junot Díaz, Javier Zamora, and Karla Cornejo Villavicencio—to elaborate how each depicts family separation and its mental health effects. Although the texts examined here address geopolitical contexts that precede the Trump-era crisis, they offer necessary insights on its long-term effects. The writers examined in this chapter depict US immigration policy as a threat to the mental and physical health of *both* migrant children *and* their parents. I begin with texts that address pre-Gatekeeper migrations and move toward more contemporary contexts; as I do so, I also move from more straightforward depictions of migration (memoir, narrative fiction) to more experimental ones (poetry, creative nonfiction). Read together, these works offer an opportunity to consider how the notion of radical health I have developed throughout this book extends to literary engagements with mental health.

In the work of Grande, Díaz, Zamora, and Cornejo, migrant parents are often as traumatized as their children—and, indeed, their children often

suffer because of their trauma. The texts I have chosen to analyze in this chapter, then, take political risks as well as aesthetic ones. As a result, they offer an opportunity to engage with recent scholarship in Latinx studies reassessing inspirational aesthetics, as well as with mad studies scholarship treating trauma and other forms of psychiatric debilitation “not only as medical conditions but also as historical formations that have justified all manner of ill-treatment and disenfranchisement—even as they have also formed the basis for political identities, social movements, and cultural practices of resistance” (Aho, Ben-Moshe, and Hilton 2017, 293). For instance, Leticia Alvarado highlights representations that “cohere their aesthetic gestures around negative affects—uncertainty, disgust, unbelonging—capturing what lies far outside mainstream, inspirational Latino-centered social justice struggles” (2018, 4). Although building a political movement based around sympathetic figures—“kids who study in our schools, young adults who are starting careers, patriots who pledge allegiance to our flag,” as Obama (2017) put it—might seem efficacious, such a movement will ultimately exclude many it purports to defend. By representing migrant families in their full complexity, the authors discussed here offer what La Marr Jurelle Bruce calls a “mad methodology [that] primes us to extend *radical compassion* to the madpersons, queer personae, ghosts, freaks, weirdos, imaginary friends, disembodied voices, and unReasonable others, who trespass, like stowaways or fugitives, in Reasonable modernity” (2021, 10).⁸ The radical compassion that Grande, Díaz, Zamora, and Cornejo inspire is not merely a gesture of care toward their own parents, but the forging of an ethic of radical migrant mental health—one that both destigmatizes the effects of trauma and critiques the conditions that produce it. The texts examined here thus illuminate the need for immigration policy that accounts for the traumas that both compel and accompany migration.

Reyna Grande: American Dreams and Nightmares

In her second memoir, *A Dream Called Home* (2019), Grande recounts a conversation with her younger sister, Betty. A college student working to escape poverty and abuse, Reyna has traveled to her hometown of Iguala de la Independencia, Guerrero, Mexico, to convince fifteen-year-old Betty to return to the United States and stay in school. As Betty expresses her desperation to leave their mother’s home, Reyna says how sorry she is: “And I meant I was sorry about everything, how immigration and separation had

taken a toll on all of us, how even though our parents had emigrated from this very city to go to the U.S. to build us a house, they ended up destroying our home” (55). With this thought unspoken between the sisters, Betty asks: “Do you think things would have been different if they had never left? Do you think we would all be together as a family?” (55).

Betty’s question—*did our parents do the right thing?*—haunts all of Grande’s published work, fiction as well as nonfiction, which explores themes of migration and loss. Grande was two years old when her father left Iguala for the United States and four when her mother followed, leaving her and her older siblings (Mago and Carlos) with their paternal grandmother, who neglected and abused them. When Grande was nine, her father returned for Grande’s older siblings, and Mago convinced him to take Grande as well, even though he correctly believed her too young to make the journey. (Because of Grande’s difficulty keeping up, the family was caught and turned back twice, finally crossing on their third attempt, with Grande carried much of the way on her father’s back.) While reuniting with her father improved Grande’s life in many ways—food security, education, medical care—it did not end the abuse, which her father (who also experienced abuse as a child) continued. These biographical facts help to contextualize the ambivalent grappling with the aftermath of migration that characterizes Grande’s writing.

One explanation for the mainstream success of Grande’s work, especially her memoirs, lies in the way her life story—brought to the United States as a child, first in her family to graduate from college, now a successful writer—seems to align with an American Dream narrative. After publishing two novels, *Across a Hundred Mountains* (2006) and *Dancing with Butterflies* (2009), Grande wrote the story of her childhood in Mexico, journey to the United States, and subsequent life in the United States in two memoirs, *The Distance between Us* (2012) and *A Dream Called Home*. These latter two books, in particular, received both critical acclaim and commercial success, and *The Distance between Us* was reissued in an edition for young readers (2016). Indeed, Grande’s publisher (Simon and Schuster) often presents her work as an American Dream story; the company website bills *A Dream Called Home* as the “inspiring account of one woman’s quest to find her place in America as a first-generation Latina university student and aspiring writer determined to build a new life for her family one fearless word at a time” (Simon and Schuster, n.d.). Yet Grande’s ambivalent representation of her parents sits uneasily with this marketing strategy, undermining what Alvarado calls the “recourse to assimilationist appeals for respectability”

(2018, 3) that American Dream narratives reinforce. For this reason, I read Grande's memoirs as a complex negotiation with the American Dream, registering the American Dream as a threat to migrant health and wellbeing even as they also reproduce it.

In an interview with Patricia M. García, Grande asserts two goals for her writing. First: "I want to inspire compassion and understanding towards immigrants . . . I feel that many times people are anti-immigrant because of ignorance, because they honestly don't know, because they haven't been exposed to the issue from a perspective that highlights the human cost and heartbreak" (García 2017, 195). Second: "I wanted to offer immigrant youth . . . a mirror in which they could see themselves" (197). Although both goals are politically urgent given the virulent anti-immigrant hostility of our cultural moment, it is worth asking how compatible they actually are. Consider, for instance, two passages from *The Distance between Us*. The first concerns a violent confrontation between her parents; a bystander intervenes and is accidentally shot with her father's gun: "Luckily for my father, the man did not die. Luckily for my father, he was allowed voluntary deportation, instead of getting thrown in prison. Within a week, he had managed to sneak across the border and resumed his life in the United States as if nothing had ever happened" (2012, 86). The second describes her mother: "Even though we had suggested that she learn English and find herself a better job, my mother insisted on living the way she had lived in Mexico or the way she had lived when she was still undocumented. She refused to learn English and how to drive a car. She refused to look for a job that could offer her benefits—such as medical insurance and a pension plan, and where she could finally get off welfare" (274). The first time I taught Grande's memoir, I was nervous about how it would be received; I have myself experienced intense emotional distress (as someone who grew up on public assistance) when students have made callous comments in class about lazy people living on welfare at US taxpayers' expense, and I worried about whether Grande's unflinching portrayal of her own parents could inspire conversations in class that would be harmful to students with life experiences similar to those she depicts.⁹ I mention these concerns not as a critique of Grande, but rather to suggest that even as Grande purports to imagine two kinds of readers for her work—the outsider to the immigrant experience and the immigrant youth—she ultimately privileges the second, prioritizing immigrant readers' need for complex stories about their lives even if they don't conform to the demands of respectability politics.

To explain the importance of this move, I'd like to highlight another passage from *The Distance between Us*, in which Reyna reads Sandra Cisneros's novel *The House on Mango Street* for the first time and is riveted by a chapter about a young woman with an abusive father: "When I got to the chapter titled 'Sally,' I broke down. I shook with an intense sadness and helplessness, and tears burned my eyes. . . . I reread the chapter and with every word I felt that Cisneros was reaching out and talking to me. I felt a connection to this author, this person, whom I had never met" (2012, 306). What Grande describes in this passage is what Alvarado calls "a shared sense of being . . . in negative relation to majoritarian publics" (2018, 6), a sense of affinity for Cisneros's character that emerges not from an inspirational story of overcoming but from shared fear and desire for escape. Grande never resolves her ambivalence toward her parents. Instead, she ends *The Distance between Us* with a scene at her father's deathbed, in which she confronts two versions of her father—"the violent, alcoholic one" (321) and "the one who taught me to dream big" (321)—and concludes: "*You made me who I am*" (322; original italics). Claudia A. Anguiano and Karma R. Chávez note that US immigration discourse is so conservative that "undocumented youth have limited resources available in the construction of their narratives" (2011, 83) and often tell stories implicitly affirming "that only immigrants with desirable characteristics such that they possess have earned the right to formally belong in the United States" (97). By refusing to edit out details about her parents that don't align with such rhetoric, Grande might sacrifice some of the "anti-immigration" readers she claims to court but prioritizes readers in need of a story that doesn't make belonging in the United States contingent on "desirable characteristics." As Cisneros did for Grande with the character of Sally, Grande offers the representation of her parents as a means of expanding what Anguiano and Chávez might call the "narrative resources" available to youth in similar circumstances.

Grande pairs critique of her parents with a structural critique of the geopolitical circumstances they navigate. As she tells García: "I have no qualms about criticizing Mexico and the Mexican government for its corruption, impunity, and violation of human rights. I also did not hesitate to criticize the U.S. government's role in the violence and poverty that is raging across my native country" (García 2017, 188–89). Here it is useful to contrast Grande with the aforementioned Nazario, who—as Puga and Espinosa (2020, 273) point out—urges migrant mothers not to leave their children while failing to address the "global economic and cultural forces that demand

cheap labor and vulnerable bodies.” Both of Grande’s memoirs mention the political context of migration, from the 1982 Mexican peso crisis, to the 2014 kidnapping of forty-three students at the Ayotzinapa Rural Teachers’ College in Iguala, to the repeated failures of the US government to enact the DREAM Act. They also depict in vivid detail the dangers that poverty poses to those who experience it; Grande describes vulnerability to dangerous accidents and health crises (including the scars on her sister’s face from a game of hide-and-seek gone awry, the scars on her mother’s hands from a workplace accident, her cousin Catalina’s death by drowning, and her own experiences with scorpion bites and roundworms). Although US border enforcement has made crossing the border an undeniably dangerous endeavor, it is also clear that staying in Mexico was neither economically viable nor safe for Grande’s family. In the epilogue to *The Distance between Us*, Grande writes about working as a teacher in the Los Angeles Unified School District and recognizing the effects of family separation in her students: “The cycle of leaving children behind has not ended. Nor will it end, as long as there is poverty” (2012, 320). The reason parents migrate, she makes clear, is not lack of judgment but lack of alternatives.

In this regard, the prologue to *The Distance between Us*, which invokes the Mexican folktale of La Llorona, is particularly significant: “My father’s mother, Abuela Evila, liked to scare us with stories of La Llorona, the weeping woman who roams the canal and steals children away. She would say that if we didn’t behave, La Llorona would take us far away where we would never see our parents again” (2012, 3). By invoking La Llorona—who infamously sacrificed her own children and is eternally punished for it—Grande might seem to be setting up a story of children abandoned or endangered by their parents. Yet, as Domino Renee Perez reminds us, La Llorona herself is “an avatar of social and cultural conflict” (2008, 13), one frequently repurposed by Mexican American writers for heterogeneous political ends. Grande, it turns out, uses La Llorona to introduce her story’s true villain: “Neither of my grandmothers told us that there is something more powerful than La Llorona—a power that takes away parents, not children. It is called The United States” (2012, 3). By beginning her first memoir in this way, Grande imbues the United States—and its American Dream—with the qualities of a traditional La Llorona story: grief, loss, betrayal. And although she ultimately ends the memoir by answering in the affirmative a question she asks repeatedly—“If I had known what life with my father would be like, would I have still followed him to El Otro Lado?” (322)—La Llorona’s signature themes nonetheless haunt the story Grande tells of her life in the United States.

In this way, Grande attempts to strike a difficult balance between affirming her parents' decision to migrate and not reifying myths of the United States as a land of opportunity. Whereas Nazario has been rightfully critiqued for her "contention that Latin American mothers should remain in their home countries, no matter how dire their economic circumstances" (Puga and Espinosa 2020, 245), Alicia Muñoz and Ariana E. Vigil note that Grande also takes a risk by portraying her younger self as invested in upward mobility through education and work: "For readers critical of US immigration policy and the social and racial stratification it causes, this 'buying into' the American Dream on the part of Grande can be perplexing" (2019, 233). It is important, then, to note that not only does Grande depict her life in the United States as marked by success and opportunity, she also depicts it as marked by harrowing scenes of domestic abuse: "The home that she inhabits in the US is ruled by fear—of [her father's] abuse and of their undocumented status" (A. Muñoz and Vigil 2019, 220). In her first memoir, Grande aligns the representation of her father with her life in the United States, and thus with economic advancement and social mobility, but the detailed descriptions of her father's abuse also mean that her perception of the American Dream is inevitably infused with violence: "When my father beat me, and in his drunken stupor called me a pendeja and an hija de la chingada, I held on to the vision of the future he had given me during his sober moments. I thought about that vision when the blows came, because the father who beat me . . . wasn't the same father who told me that one day I would be somebody in this country" (2012, 250–51). While this passage appears to differentiate the abusive father from the one who instills the American Dream, the rest of the book makes starkly clear that these two fathers are indeed the very same person.

In her second memoir, *A Dream Called Home*, Grande redirects this representation of the American Dream; here, it becomes a weapon she wields to enact revenge on her parents. Two scenes in particular illustrate this point. The first takes place at Reyna's college graduation. She has won an essay competition to honor her beloved teacher from Pasadena City College, Diana Savas, and is invited to read the essay at commencement: "As I spoke about my father's alcoholism, the abuse I had experienced at home, and the lack of support, what mattered most to me was honoring Diana. . . . I did not consider how it would affect my father, who despite his broken English, knew perfectly well what I was saying about him to the hundreds of strangers at the ceremony" (2019, 135–36). Afterward, Reyna notes "the pain so openly displayed on his face, a vulnerability I rarely got

to see” (136–37) and wants to apologize, but she finds herself unable to; instead, she relates that her father, despite his hurt and shame, shakes her teacher’s hand and thanks her. Another scene recounts how Reyna’s mother begins visiting her after she purchases her first home in South Central Los Angeles, befriends a neighborhood fruit vendor, and starts her own business selling used clothing, furniture, and household goods from Reyna’s front yard, causing Reyna to fret about the “curb appeal” (293) of her home. When her mother finds Reyna’s compost bin and mistakes it for trash, Reyna can no longer contain her irritation and forces her mother to go back into the trash to retrieve her kitchen scraps. It is Reyna’s younger sister who informs her of how this affects their mother: “Later that night when I spoke with Betty, the first thing she told me was that my mother had called her and told her I made her dig through the trash. ‘She was crying,’ Betty said” (299). Yet again, even as Reyna acknowledges to Betty that she has done “a shitty thing” (299), she does not apologize to her mother.

Although Grande unflinchingly depicts her parents’ abuse and neglect, she also details the abuse and neglect they experienced as children, and for this reason these scenes in *A Dream Called Home* of Reyna shaming her parents are difficult to read; her choice to emphasize her own refusal on both occasions to apologize heightens this difficulty. Grande does not depict these moments as the moral equivalent of her parents’ actions (they certainly cannot be described as *abuse* in the same way as her descriptions of her father punching her in the face), but they are clearly marked in the text as moments of self-critique. Furthermore, it is significant that these moments align with American Dream milestones: college graduation and the purchase of a home. Conservative rhetoric on immigration often indicates that the economic advantages of migration are “not worth it” because they entail family dissolution, thus presenting what Puga and Espinosa call “a false binary—family unity versus material security—and a false hierarchy—love trumps money—that recycles simplistic fantasies of poor-but-happy fictional families” (2020, 243). In these passages, Grande shifts this rhetoric: it is not her parents’ act of migration but her own internalization of the American Dream that separates parents and children.

Grande’s representation of her parents neither disavows them nor ignores their harmful actions. Instead, they exemplify Bruce’s radical compassion, which “persists even and especially toward beings who are the objects of contempt and condemnation from dominant value systems” (2020, 10). To conclude, I note that one of the mechanisms that makes possible this radical compassion is the Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA) of

1986, which took effect the year after Grande arrived in the United States and enabled her family to formalize their immigration status and eventually become US citizens. For this reason, Grande is able to travel across the US-Mexico border and to remain in close contact with relatives in Mexico, a fact that she highlights in both of her memoirs. This gives Grande access to her family history, which in turn has a significant impact on the shape of her narrative. For instance, in *A Dream Called Home*, Grande recounts the last time she saw her paternal grandmother alive, on the same trip to Iguala where Betty asks Reyna whether their parents should have stayed. The grandmother, who is experiencing dementia, begins pinching her arms and claiming to be eaten by maggots, and Reyna's aunt explains that when the grandmother was a child and infected with measles, she had to pull maggots out of her own open sores because her parents had no access to medical treatment. As Reyna says goodbye for the last time to the grandmother who first abused her father and then abused her, she decides "to think instead about that little girl who had to pull maggots out of her own flesh and, despite all odds, had found the will to live" (2019, 65). Because Grande places this story early in the memoir, the subsequent descriptions of her difficulties with her parents are always told to the reader in light of this story about the intergenerational trauma of extreme poverty. Yet while the IRCA makes it possible for Grande to return to Mexico and revisit this history, those who have migrated to the United States since 1986 do not have this option. As Marion Christina Rohrleitner notes, the IRCA is often remembered as an amnesty program for undocumented immigrants, but it also "initiated the militarisation of the U.S.-Mexico border" (2017, 42) in ways that have profoundly changed both the experience of those migrating afterward and the representation of migration in Latinx literature. In the remaining sections of this chapter, I examine representations that foreclose the perspective Grande offers, including the story of Junot Díaz's character Yunior, whose father eventually abandons him, and the post-IRCA migration stories of Javier Zamora and Karla Cornejo Villavicencio.

Junot Díaz: Reading Hopelessly

Like Grande, Dominican writer Junot Díaz and his most famous character (Yunior) are left behind as children when their fathers migrate to the United States; both also eventually join their fathers and become writers. Yunior is the narrator of three of Díaz's published books: a novel (*The Brief Wondrous*

Life of Oscar Wao [2007]) and two short story collections (*Drown* [1996] and *This Is How You Lose Her* [2012]). Unlike in Grande's memoirs, however, Yunior's father is not a significant part of his adult life; instead, Papi (as Yunior calls him) goes from being an overbearing (abusive, oppressive, philandering) presence in Díaz's work to simply disappearing after he abandons his family. And just as the trauma arising from Papi's domestic abuse and abandonment remains unresolved in Díaz's work, also unresolved are critical debates surrounding Díaz himself that focus on whether the author and his work deconstruct or perpetuate a damaging model of masculinity.

Even before 2018, writing about Díaz's fiction required addressing these debates; in recent years, this is even more the case. In April 2018, the *New Yorker* published an essay by Díaz entitled "The Silence," in which he detailed the experience of being raped as a child and its ongoing impact; before this publication, women and queer writers of color had already been telling stories about Díaz's aggressive behavior toward them—making unwanted sexual advances, dismissing their work, and bullying them—at readings and in writing workshops, but the stories received heightened attention after "The Silence."¹⁰ As Yomaira C. Figueroa-Vásquez notes, these accusations "add a critical dimension to how we read Díaz's work, and how we link the impact of his work and actions to the bodies and lives of women of color" (2020, 79), making it impossible to discuss Díaz's work without also discussing the controversy. Although a number of institutions with which Díaz is affiliated—including the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, the *Boston Review*, and the board of the Pulitzer Prize—investigated his actions and decided to maintain ties with him, the ethics of writing about and teaching his work remain thorny (Chasman and Cohen 2018; Flood 2018; Romo 2018). As the literary critic Maia Gil'Adí writes, in the most ambitious effort yet to grapple with the fallout from these allegations, the controversy prompts "the question of how literary scholars begin to think about the intersection of race and gender through an author who has been at the forefront of anti-sexist and anti-racist work while also seemingly performing in a manner antithetical to some of these progressive ideologies" (2020, 513).¹¹ The analysis I offer here—of the short stories "Fiesta 1980" and "Negocios" from Díaz's debut short story collection, *Drown* (1996)—is my attempt to grapple with the work of a writer who both theorizes trauma in his work and perpetuates it in his life. While many discussions of trauma in Díaz's work focus on sexual trauma, I address instead the trauma of family separation, arguing that Díaz offers an important entry point for

thinking about the denigration of migrant parents not despite but because of the concerns raised about Díaz himself.

My current thinking about Díaz's work is informed not only by Gil'Adí's call to reassess the idea that "texts by people of color are inherently political and promote social justice" (2020, 512), but also by Therí Alyce Pickens's mad Black theory, which asks scholars of race and disability to risk examining race and disability together without prioritizing the search for liberation in the texts they read. As Pickens reminds us: "The material conditions for celebration and agency require material resources not available to everyone, and mere knowledge of one's situation cannot be proxy for freedom from it" (2019, 35). When the controversy surrounding Díaz led me to put aside his work for several years, it left a gaping hole in my syllabi as well as in my plans for this book. As I have noted elsewhere, Díaz's work richly depicts the links between racial health disparities and the racialization of disability (Minich 2016); revising this argument in light of the publication of Jasbir K. Puar's fundamental book *The Right to Maim* (2017), I would now say that Díaz's work maps the dimensions of debility without an accompanying sense of disability pride. Teaching Puar's elaboration of debility without recourse to Díaz's vivid depictions of how environmental injustice, physical labor, and poverty are lived in the body is challenging, especially because undergraduate students do (still) respond so well to Díaz's writing, and the prospect of writing about family separation without recourse to a canonical text in Latinx literature felt diminishing. My earlier writing on Díaz focuses on the character of Rafa, Yuniór's older brother; I note that Rafa's death of cancer (which is linked to environmental contamination at the site of his first home in the United States) is never made redemptive, but I still give in to the desire for emancipation and social justice that Gil'Adí and Pickens regard so skeptically, holding out hope of redemption for Yuniór. Now, in light of the allegations against Díaz, I ask what it might mean to read his work without that hope.

Pursuing this line of inquiry feels risky. (For this reason, my language throughout this section is more tentative and speculative than in much of this book.) First, there is the risk of wading back into Díaz criticism. My prior writing on Díaz could be characterized as part of what Gil'Adí refers to as "a form of hagiography" (2020, 509). In attempting to nuance that writing now, I risk angering friends and fellow feminist literary critics who have come to Díaz's defense as well as friends and fellow feminist literary critics who point out that perhaps Díaz has already taken up enough space

in our writings and our syllabi and should be left alone (if not outright canceled). Second, there is the risk of asking why I still feel so compelled to teach and write about Díaz's work, even as I recognize his behavior as harmful. Here I find myself hailed by the questions posed by Dixa Ramírez (2018) in her response to the Díaz controversy: "I want to emphasize how many girls, Latina and otherwise, are taught that their bodies and thoughts do not belong to them. . . . How does this training shape our sense, even our sense as trained literary critics, of what literature matters? Even beyond which writers the biased literary and academic world celebrates, how does it shape what we *enjoy*?" Is the fact that I do—still—enjoy reading, teaching, and writing about Díaz an indication of my own internalized misogyny? Finally, I am about to commit a sin that literary critics are forever cautioning our first-year students against: conflating author and character. For I now see Díaz—both the Díaz of "The Silence" and the Díaz who has yet to offer an apology for his behavior that satisfies his critics and accusers—as a potential vision of what might happen to Yúnior after Díaz's books end.¹² My previous writing on Díaz clings desperately to the hope that "Yúnior, unlike Rafa, might find a different masculinity" (Minich 2016, 53); knowing now what I know about Díaz's behavior, I no longer have this hope. And yet, if I am invested in arguing here for Bruce's notion of radical compassion—particularly in the service of imagining a framework for enacting radical mental health—where better to go than to a character with whom I fear my own relationship is now permanently damaged?

My previous writing on Díaz has addressed the ways in which *physical* disability and illness have shaped the lives of writer and character. What I have not addressed is the fact that both Yúnior and Díaz also experience trauma symptoms, to which Yúnior rarely alludes directly. Indeed, Yúnior's suppression of his own trauma means that a much more defining feature of Díaz's work is the trauma inflicted on women; as Tiffany Lethabo King and others have observed, much of Díaz's work does not focus directly on his own trauma but instead "transfers (and projects) his experiences of rape and sexual violation onto the bodies of Black and Indigenous women" (2019, 48). I have chosen to focus on "Fiesta 1980" and "Negocios" because these stories are unique in Díaz's body of work for situating the physical effects of trauma on *Yúnior's* body ("Fiesta 1980") and for linking that trauma directly to family separation ("Negocios").

"Fiesta 1980" describes a party at the home of Yúnior's Tía Yrma, who has finally made it to the United States three years after Yúnior's arrival. The party is an ominous event for Yúnior, due to the fact that his family must travel to

it in the vw van that Papi has recently purchased: “Brand-new, lime-green, and bought to impress. Oh, we were impressed, but me, every time I was in that vw and Papi went above twenty miles an hour, I vomited. I’d never had trouble with cars before—that van was my curse” (1996, 27). The plot of the story follows the family preparing to leave, driving to the party, attending the festivities, and driving home, interspersed with Yunior’s memories of how he started vomiting and the times Papi had taken him to visit the Puerto Rican woman with whom he is having an affair. In the story, Yunior also describes his father’s physical abuse and his desire to be close to his father:

I met the Puerto Rican woman right after Papi had gotten the van. He was taking me on short trips, trying to cure me of my vomiting. It wasn’t really working but I looked forward to our trips, even though at the end of each one I’d be sick. These were the only times me and Papi did anything together. When we were alone he treated me much better, like maybe I was his son or something. (34–35)

Yunior’s vomiting is never explained but is simply narrated alongside the facts of his everyday life, being routinely hit by his father and forced to lie to his mother about the Puerto Rican woman. In this sense, the story aligns with Angela M. Carter’s (2021) understanding of trauma as an “embodied, affective structure [that] is specific, not to the horrendousness of an event or events, but rather to the debilitating sociopolitical responses and the overlapping attributes of instability that so often accompany it.” Yunior’s trauma cannot be explained by a single cause but arises from his father’s long absence in his childhood, from the coerced intimacy of concealing his father’s infidelity, from the physical and emotional violence perpetrated against him by his father and brother, and from the sexual and emotional violence perpetrated against him by other men. None of these histories are directly named by Yunior or his family in the text, even as their effects are evident and his entire family is focused on finding a remedy for his mysterious and apparently incurable vomiting.¹³

“Negocios” is Yunior’s attempt to imagine his father’s life during the years of their separation, when Papi arrived in the United States with the intention to overstay a tourist visa, struggled to make a living, and married another woman to secure the US citizenship that eventually enabled him to bring the family to New Jersey. Several critics, including me, have read this story as Yunior’s effort to extend compassion to Papi. Moving in a slightly different direction, Caminero-Santangelo argues that the story “fills in some of the explanatory gaps about how Yunior and his family got

from the Dominican Republic to the United States” (2016, 117)—specifically, how Papi’s infidelity legitimated the family’s migration. What is particularly compelling about Caminero-Santangelo’s interpretation is her observation that Yuniór “works hard to distinguish Papi’s situation from that of other (Mexican and Central American) undocumented immigrants, and instead insistently groups him with ‘legal’ Caribbeans” (117), thus suggesting a “profound anxiety (on Yuniór’s part, at least) surrounding issues of legality/legitimacy vis-à-vis the patriarchal nuclear family” (119). In this sense, Yuniór’s effort to extend compassion to his father also entails distancing himself from others. For this reason, I have come to believe that *Drown* instantiates “the dangers of desire for normative inclusion that will require repudiation of other objects if seeking out proper subject status” (Alvarado 2018, 9). Just as Yuniór famously disavows his own sexual and gendered abjection within intimate relationships, displacing it onto the women he treats so badly, he also disavows his own intimacy with the legalized abjection of undocumented status, displacing it onto migrants whose trajectories he differentiates from that of his family.

Although it is hardly a groundbreaking critical insight to suggest that Yuniór has intimacy issues, this fact has not been discussed in relation to migration and family separation. This is not to argue that family separation is “more” (or “less”) traumatic than Yuniór’s experiences with physical/emotional abuse and sexual violence but rather to note that attending to family separation *in addition to* the other sources of trauma in Yuniór’s life supports a theory of trauma that attends less to the traumatizing event and more to its consequences.¹⁴ As Deborah R. Vargas has argued, Yuniór’s intimate relationships—beginning with his father and extending to his lovers—are characterized by *surplus love*, or “the residue of heteronormative constructions of love as dual-partnered, monogamous, reproductive, and always aspiring to remain on normative time” (2016, 356). While Vargas’s focus is not on Yuniór but on his lovers, whom she refuses to treat as “mere victims of Yuniór’s and Rafa’s sexist misogyny, or as pure radical transgressors” (2016, 357), her analysis is apt for Yuniór as well, who never achieves normative domesticity and is neither purely a victim nor purely a hero. Yuniór’s efforts to “negotiate, reimagine, repurpose, and at times willfully fail to abide by” (Vargas 2016, 356) normative domestic arrangements certainly cannot be described solely in terms of radical transgression, with the liberatory implications contained therein, because they often involve hurting women in typically misogynist ways. Yet Yuniór is not only a man who treats his lovers as surplus, he is also the recipient of his father’s surplus love, a

love first made surplus when his father—due to the exigencies of US immigration policies—marries and has children with another woman. Yuniór thus embodies Pickens’s reminder that “mere exposure of oppression is not only not emancipatory but can also be detrimental, [that] demonstration and acknowledgement of one’s various intersecting socially marginalized positions does not equal political agency” (2019, 31). If Yuniór’s story fails to be emancipatory, it is because of the ways in which he insistently disavows his own abjection—his connection both to other migrant children who share the same disrupted relationships to their parents *and* to the lovers he treats as sexually object.

Many critical studies of Díaz’s work are affixed to the “recuperation and resistance” model that Pickens (2019, 25) critiques, recuperating Yuniór as a figure who exposes the global injustices of racial capitalism and therefore offers possibilities for resistance. Elda María Román has observed something different in Yuniór’s story. If we read Díaz’s books in chronological order, she notes, “there is a structural rise occurring over the arc of these texts; . . . together they constitute an upward mobility narrative, one of the most frequently occurring narratives in U.S. literature, and one that tends to get ignored or vilified in studies of Latina/o literature” (2017, 103).¹⁵ Román uses this observation to interrogate how the skepticism directed at upward mobility narratives in Latinx studies leads critics to overlook the insights they offer; as a scholar of disability studies (a field that is similarly skeptical of overcoming narratives), I wonder if Román’s insight might also lead us to interrogate how ignoring or vilifying the overcoming narrative can similarly preclude meaningful engagement. In the previous section, I elaborated how Grande at times replicates an American Dream story even as she also depicts that narrative as a source of migrant trauma. In the case of Díaz, I wonder if contrasting the “structural rise” of Yuniór’s story against his lingering trauma symptoms can prompt us to question the social mandate to overcome trauma. (In other words, is *overcoming* the only response people should have to trauma?) Furthermore, while many of Díaz’s defenders have insisted on a critical distance between Díaz and Yuniór, suggesting that Díaz uses Yuniór to illuminate and deconstruct misogyny, I wonder whether that critical distance is really essential for feminist engagement with Díaz’s work. (In other words, does Díaz *himself* have to be feminist for feminists to find reasons to read and teach his work?) Grande’s books are deeply compelling because she offers a model for reckoning with trauma, but perhaps what is most powerful in Díaz’s work is that he forces us to confront what happens when reckoning is withheld.

Of the many think pieces and hot takes to emerge from the Díaz controversy, one that I found particularly moving was an account by the journalist Karina Maria Cabreja (2018), who interviewed Díaz in 2016 and posed to him a series of “questions that stemmed from obsessing over every piece of literary work he’d ever published.” Cabreja’s account contains no salacious details or horrifying stories; instead, it is the relatively mundane story of a person approaching someone she admires and being treated dismissively: “Junot Díaz was not respectful to me. He was condescending, sarcastic, and mean; that’s the truth.” While many of Díaz’s defenders have pointed out that he was effectively raked over the coals for behavior that white writers of his stature routinely engage in, it is also true that his behavior—especially because it has been repeatedly directed to people who are feminine, queer, and/or disabled—isn’t behavior befitting someone we hold up as a champion for social justice. As with Yunior, whose story of success masks a violent disavowal of those whose sexual and legal abjection hits too close to home, many of us (me included) have been too tempted to read in Díaz’s work a successful model for dismantling the trauma of profound social injustice rather than a complex accounting of how it is possible to both critique and wield power.

Reading Díaz without succumbing to this temptation may also have implications for how those of us with US citizenship continue to grapple with the ongoing harm of family separation policies enacted in our names. Thousands of children and parents have been harmed in the interest of “securing our border,” and their stories will continue to unfold for decades. There will no doubt be stories of heroic overcoming, packaged to make us feel better about the abuse, and there will also be stories of traumatized people who go on to do ugly things, packaged to convince us that their suffering was inconsequential or even deserved. Reading Díaz through the lens of Bruce’s radical compassion—by which I mean both reading his character Yunior *and* reading Díaz himself as a writer “with a deep and intensely articulated self-awareness about misogyny who still somehow participates in it” (Loofbourow 2018)—enables us to exercise the critical tools we will need to probe both of these stories. Bruce reminds us that radical compassion “is a mode of care—not celebration, not romanticization, not endorsement, not enjoyment” (2021, 81). Bruce helps me to think that it is possible to care for Díaz—as a person whose traumatic experiences include family separation, physical and emotional abuse, and sexual violence, and as a writer who negotiates these experiences in his work—without celebrating, romanticizing, endorsing, or enjoying the ways in which he and his work

also inflict trauma. Caring for both Díaz and Yuniór—as well as for Díaz’s readers, critics, and accusers—means to seriously engage with his work in all its aspects: the ways in which it, as Figueroa-Vásquez beautifully puts it, “allows the reader to bear witness to the ways in which coloniality exerts power over and commits violence upon bodies deemed to be insignificant” (2020, 79), as well as the ways in which it (and he) exert that same power and commit that same violence.

To conclude this section, I’d like to emphasize the longing for his father that Yuniór expresses throughout *Drown*, but especially in “Fiesta 1980” and “Negocios.” In “Fiesta 1980,” Yuniór confesses: “Our fights didn’t bother me too much. I still wanted him to love me, something that never seemed strange or contradictory until years later, when he was out of our lives” (Díaz 1996, 27). In “Negocios,” Yuniór ends the story by imagining his father’s actions on the day he returns to the Dominican Republic to reunite with his family: “The first subway station on Bond would have taken him to the airport and I like to think that he grabbed that first train, instead of what was more likely true, that he had gone out to [his friend] Chuito’s first, before flying south to get us” (208). These lines, of course, explain Yuniór’s surplus love, as they record his own awareness of himself as the recipient of his father’s surplus love. And yet they also, in the wake of recent reassessments of Díaz’s work, suggest to me something about our reading practices as cultural critics: the ways in which we, too, sometimes become as enamored with the texts we analyze as Yuniór does with his father, inserting into them things we “like to think” instead of highlighting what is “more likely true.”

Javier Zamora: Mad Diaspora

The family separation depicted in Javier Zamora’s 2017 autobiographical poetry collection *Unaccompanied* is not the singular event of Zamora’s parents’ departure from El Salvador, but an ongoing process that begins before the poet’s birth with the Salvadoran Civil War.¹⁶ The separations depicted in the text thus proliferate and ricochet against one another: Javier’s grandfather (a military officer) brings the war home to his wife and daughters; Javier’s uncle Israel (a dissident) is disappeared after a death squad murders his fiancée; his father flees the war when Javier is two; his mother flees the war’s immediate aftermath when Javier is four; Javier leaves his grandmother at age nine to join his parents; deportations continue to separate his aunts and cousins. These separations reveal US and Salvadoran national

sovereignties as both destabilizing and destabilized by familial bonds; in this way, *Unaccompanied* instantiates recent arguments from María Josefina Saldaña-Portillo about US–Central American political boundaries and from Bruce about the intersections of madness and diaspora. Saldaña-Portillo argues that “Central American violence demonstrates the artificiality of bounded citizenship and its liberal promise of security within nation-state sovereignties, as refugees arriving at the US border requesting asylum make evident the contingent nature of our security on their insecurity” (2019, 1). Bruce, meanwhile, emphasizes how madness and diaspora both “transgress normative arrangements—of the sane and sovereign, in turn” (2021, 17). Whereas the previous sections focused on a myth of US cultural citizenship—the American Dream of overcoming—as a threat to migrant wellbeing, this section focuses on US citizenship itself as a maddening (both rage-inducing and psychologically damaging) political construction.

The structure of Zamora’s book reflects its subject: composed of six sections, all unnumbered and untitled, that move backward and forward in time, *Unaccompanied* suggests a permeability between Zamora’s present and his family’s past, as well as between Central America and the United States. The first and last sections consist of only one poem each: “To Abuelita Neli,” which opens the book, addresses the grandmother who raised Zamora and to whom he cannot return due to his undocumented status in the United States; “June 10, 1999,” which ends the collection and is named for the day of Zamora’s arrival in the United States, juxtaposes his current travels as a poet with memories of his migration. In between these poems are four sections, consisting of nine to twelve poems each, that respectively examine his physical and emotional movement between La Herradura, El Salvador, and San Rafael, California; his family’s experience of the war; his early childhood in El Salvador; and his arrival in the United States.

In interviews, Zamora stresses the relationship between the form of his poems and the circumstances that produce them. He tells the *New Yorker*, for instance, that the fragmented quality of a poem offers him a way to reconstruct events that occurred before his birth or that he cannot reliably recall, like the six weeks of his journey after crossing Guatemala: “The memories got more sparse at that point. . . . From Guatemala on, everything turned into poems” (Blitzer 2017).¹⁷ In a conversation with the poet-scholar Deborah Paredez, Zamora juxtaposes the brevity of a poem against the uncontainable experience of trauma, loss, and uncertainty: “The literal shortness of poetry, its ability to fit on one page, that ‘completeness’ of a first draft, spoke to me. . . . For me, a teenager suffering through the complexities of being

undocumented, this ability to finish something and ponder it and later revise it and revise it until I was happy with it, gave me a control I could not enjoy in my day-to-day life” (Paredes 2017). Both statements capture how the precarity of life in El Salvador, the migrant journey, and undocumented existence in the United States expose what Saldaña-Portillo calls “the artificiality of the promise of universal, democratic citizenship” (2019, 10). In effect, the individual poems of *Unaccompanied* offer the illusion of a singular event that coalesces into a defined narrative, but the way the poems come together reveals a much more disjointed set of partially remembered/partially reconstructed episodes, thus exposing the instability—political, economic, personal, and psychological—produced by US interventions in El Salvador.

The “historic and ontological role that Central American citizens’ insecurity has played in securing our security as US citizens” (Saldaña-Portillo 2019, 2) is evident in the evocation of US presidents throughout the collection. The first appears in the opening poem, “To Abuelita Neli,” which expresses the grief of being unable to visit his grandmother in El Salvador: “Today, this country/chose its first black president. Maybe he changes things” (Zamora 2017, 3). Because the collection was published in 2017—after Obama was dubbed the *Deporter-in-Chief* by immigration activists (Epstein 2014), after his failure to enact permanent policies to protect migrants, after the election of a successor who sought to obliterate even the symbolic achievements of Obama’s tenure in office—this line evokes not hope but disappointment, a reminder of what has *not* changed. The poem “To President-Elect,” from the second section, appears to address Donald Trump, but the titular president-elect is not named, reminding the reader that presidents of both major US political parties have overseen disastrous migration policies. This poem taunts the president-elect with the permeability of the southern border: “there’s a hole in the wall, yes,/ you think right now ¿no one’s running?” (2017, 15). The final line describes the speaker and his fellow migrants being picked up by a coyote network in southern Arizona, who greet the migrants by saying “*sobreviviste carnal*,” to which the speaker replies: “Yes, we over-lived” (15). Here a conjoining of English words (“over-live”) offers a too-literal translation for the Spanish word *sobrevivir* (“to survive”). Migrant life is thus depicted not as inspirational resilience but as excess, calling to mind what Bruce designates as the “mad diaspora” of racial capitalism: “a scattering of captives across sovereign borders and over bodies of water; an upheaval and dispersal of persons flung far from home; and an emergence of unprecedented dias-

poric subjectivities, ontologies, and possibilities that transgress national and rational norms” (2021, 2–3). Finally, the poem “Disappeared” consists only of a list of those responsible for violence in El Salvador, including Salvadoran and US politicians and institutions, and including the names of George H. W. Bush, Ronald Reagan, and Jimmy Carter. While the reference to Barack Obama is contained within a poem addressed to Abuelita Neli, “To President-Elect” and “Disappeared” are positioned alongside poems focusing on familial relationships. Thus, whether directly within the poem or through its positioning alongside other poems, each of these references to US presidents functions to disrupt familial relations, highlighting how migration and family separation result not from individual choices but from geopolitical relationships between Central America and the United States.

Many poems in *Unaccompanied* trace the impact of political institutions on intimate relationships. For instance, the poems about Javier’s grandfather (who is named formally, as *Don Chepe*, rather than with an affectionate name like Abuelita Neli, and who is one of the few relatives mentioned in the poems but not in the book’s acknowledgments) detail how the combat training he receives via US military aid affects his family, who are forced to endure the trauma he brings home. The poem “Nocturne” makes explicit the connections among the violence of US intervention in El Salvador, domestic violence, and migration, revealing that Don Chepe “chased us/ to this country that trained him to stay quiet/when ‘his boss’ put prisoners in black bags,/then pushed them from the truck” (70); Zamora ends the poem by concluding that his mother, his aunts, and he are “all running/ from the sun on his machete./The moon on his gun” (71). Contradicting migration rhetorics that attempt to draw a neat line between domestic and political violence, this poem reveals their interconnections. Meanwhile, poems that depict the speaker’s present-day romantic life demonstrate the way his undocumented status in the United States affects his intimate relationships. The poem “Vows,” a love poem, begins by describing the “brown girl [who] wanted fifteen thousand from me/to marry her” (69), a memory “that hurt me so much to never buy rings” (69); it goes on to describe the speaker’s pain at being permanently separated from his grandmother and childhood home before concluding with the speaker’s desire to lie next to his lover each morning and to “dive headfirst to know/what it’s like to swim in the middle of love” (69). This is a poem, then, about a speaker who loves in spite of political obstacles, but it is also about how love is indelibly and inevitably marked by geopolitical structures much larger than two intimates. These poems reveal how state intervention—whether through US

military aid to El Salvador or through immigration policies that regulate intimate relationships—is lived and felt in the most private of domains.

A poem that coalesces these concerns is “Cassette Tape,” which appears in the second section (describing the crossing). This poem consists of five stanzas: an “A” side with an opening stanza and then two more stanzas preceded by >> and << symbols to designate fast-forwarding and rewinding, and a “B” side with an opening stanza followed by another >> (fast-forward) stanza. The “A” side describes Zamora’s journey across Mexico, being cheated by coyotes, longing both for his parents and for El Salvador. The “B” side delves into the motivations for migration. Beginning with the axiom “*You don’t need more than food,/a roof, and clothes on your back*” (14), it deconstructs this, explaining emotional needs and the need to be free of violence: “I’ll add Mom’s warmth, the need for war to stop” (14). The >> (fast-forward) section in the “B” side depicts a scene between the speaker and his mother, in which she plays for him a song she plays for the child she babysits to help with speech development, only to begin crying: “*mijo,/sorry for leaving. I wish I could’ve taken you to music classes*” (14). The poem ends with his response: “*you can sing to me now*” (14). This poem mirrors both the structure of a cassette tape—with songs that narrate larger political themes interspersed with more intimate songs about interpersonal relationships—and the way family relationships themselves—marked by separation and then the immediate intimacy of reunification—can feel fast-forwarded and rewound. The final stanza, in which the speaker and his mother attempt to rebuild their relationship in the aftermath of separation, demonstrates poignantly the everyday moments of tenderness sacrificed during separation and the psychic pain for both parent and child that ensues from that sacrifice.

Unaccompanied also takes a skeptical look at the social and medical institutions in the United States tasked with the treatment of trauma. Where they are depicted in the collection, health professionals are either ineffective or harmful. For instance, in “*from The Book I Made with a Counselor My First Week of School*,” the counselor’s annotations on Javier’s drawings reveal her inability to comprehend his experience: “Next to what might be yucca plants or a dried creek: */Javier saw a dead coyote animal, which stank and had flies over it. . . . I just smiled, didn’t tell her, no animal, I knew that man*” (8). Meanwhile, “*Doctor’s Office Visit First Week in This Country*” depicts the experience of being sexually assaulted during a medical exam, an experience that—because his parents take him to the doctor—affects his relationship with his parents. The critiques of school counselors and health care workers in these poems are not simply a rejection of medicine

or therapy, but an insistence on their insufficiency (at best) or active harm (at worst) in a sociopolitical context in which migration experiences are systemically misunderstood and migrant lives systemically devalued. Like disability theorist Eunjung Kim, who understands medical intervention as “a transaction and negotiation that involves various effects, including the uncertainty of gains and the possibility of harm” (2017, 10), these poems stage medical and social interventions in the United States as forms of “curative violence” (10) rather than as sources of healing. In this way, they present a much more direct critique of American Dream narratives than either Grande or Díaz, showing how harms perpetuated because of US imperial dominance continue after migration.

Named for the date of Javier’s arrival in the United States, the poem “June 10, 1999,” which ends the collection, stunningly condenses the themes of the book and juxtaposes the events of the speaker’s journey, his life in the United States, and his grandmother’s life in El Salvador. Bruce proposes a side-by-side analysis of “diasporas of blackness and madness” (2021, 183), noting that black diaspora refers not only to the aftermath of transatlantic slavery but also to that of “persecution, war, sanctuary-seeking, fugitivity, exile, carceral relocations, itinerant labor, and wanderlust” (183) while mad diaspora addresses “the scattering of mad persons from their homes by vicissitudes of foolish ships, persecution, war, institutionalization, de-institutionalization, exile, fugitivity, dissociative fugue, carceral relocations, abandonment, and snaps and clicks, among myriad other sociopolitical and existential conditions” (183–84). Similarly, Zamora in this poem aligns the diasporic movement of Central Americans in response to US intervention in the region with “the scattering of mad persons.” The poem is thirteen pages long, subdivided into twelve smaller poems that are each designated with the Roman numeral “I,” so that even as the narrative of the poem moves forward as the reader turns the pages of the book, the events that comprise its plot do not move forward in linear time but instead leap forward and backward like the experience of a flashback. In this way, the poem both replicates a classic symptom of post-traumatic stress disorder and challenges an individual or medicalized notion of trauma, aligning with Ann Cvetkovich’s sense that “even if the PTSD diagnosis has certain strategic merits, it is wise to remain vigilant about the hazards of converting a social problem into a medical one” (2003, 45). Although the speaker of the poem is clearly traumatized, it is also clear that his trauma—war, crossing a militarized border, and family separation—is politically constructed, so that individual healing and therapy can never be enough. At the same time, the structure

of the poem also registers a deep cynicism about the possibility of political change. Recalling that the opening poem, “To Abuelita Neli,” questions whether the election of Obama will change anything, it is noteworthy that the final poem (and thus the book) ends with the speaker’s statement that “nothing has changed” (91). Indeed, what change there is has been negative; the poem’s fourth segment reveals that Javier’s parents—who came to the United States before Operation Gatekeeper militarized the border and forced migrants into dangerous desert crossings—didn’t anticipate how much more difficult his crossing would be, and ends with him telling his parents: “you couldn’t have known this could happen . . . no es su culpa” (82). In this way, the poem both directly addresses the discourses blaming migrant parents for the harms their children experience and also elaborates the responsibility of the US government for those harms.

Where Grande and Díaz respond to the scapegoating of migrant parents through a reassessment of the American Dream and its overcoming discourse, Zamora’s poetry shows that the blame placed on migrant parents deflects the rightful recipient of blame: US foreign policy and the rights and privileges of US citizenship. Grande and Díaz certainly critique the barriers to accessing US citizenship and showcase the costs of securing it, but ultimately the narrative structure of their texts follows what is called in contemporary political discourse a recognizable “path to citizenship.” Zamora, by contrast, inherits a migration story in which access to citizenship is denied at every turn. Indeed, the declaration in his opening poem that “there’s no path to papers” (3) becomes an organizing principle for the book itself: individual poems describe bounded events but do not add up to a clear narrative; the collection overall refuses a coherent path toward national belonging (in either the United States or El Salvador) and instead continually returns to the migration route. The final line of the collection—“nothing has changed” (91)—thus refers not only to the poet’s individual political status but to the ongoing geopolitical relationship between the United States and Central America.

Karla Cornejo Villavicencio: Mad as in Crazy/Mad as in Pissed Off

Karla Cornejo Villavicencio’s *The Undocumented Americans* (2020) is the most recent of the texts discussed here and is also the most direct in its analysis of migrant health. The book interweaves the stories of undocumented

people across the United States with Cornejo's own: she was born in Ecuador, left by her parents with relatives as a toddler, and flew to New York City five years later to reunite with them, ultimately graduating from Harvard and becoming a writer. All of the stories that Cornejo tells in *The Undocumented Americans* touch on migrant health in some way: the workplace health concerns of Staten Island day laborers; the 9/11 second responders who cleaned up Ground Zero and now live with cancer, lung disease, and PTSD; the lack of health insurance options for people who are undocumented; the effects of the water crisis on undocumented residents of Flint, Michigan; the trauma experienced by children whose parents are deported; and the effects of aging after a life of physical labor. Throughout, Cornejo discusses her own mental health, which she insistently links not only to her own experience of family separation but also to the conditions of precarity in which undocumented people live in the United States. In this way, she gives voice to the rage of those "subjected to heinous violence and degradation, but rarely granted recourse" (Bruce 2021, 7). Addressing the relationship between Black madness and Black rage, Bruce notes that "when black people get mad (as in *angry*), antiblack logics tend to presume they've gone mad (as in *crazy*)" (8). Cornejo, writing explicitly about both her fury at anti-immigrant policy and her mental health diagnoses, similarly seizes on this conflation of meaning and situates her book at the intersection of these two meanings of *mad*. For Cornejo, in other words, rage is a crucial mechanism for theorizing radical migrant mental health.

From the opening pages of the book, Cornejo is explicit about the impossible representational conundrum she must negotiate. On one hand, it is her status as both exceptionally accomplished and undocumented that initially gave her access to a public platform; on another, she shares the critique of Alvarado (and others) of the way calls for immigration reform often evoke "the revered, respectable, and protected figure of the student . . . despite its lack of applicability across the undocumented community and its limited implications for a diverse group identifiable under the umbrella of *Latinidad*" (Alvarado 2018, 3). Cornejo asserts in her introduction that DREAMers "are commendable young people, and I truly owe them my life, but they occupy outsize attention in our politics" (2020, xvi). Her goal, she continues, is to "step away from the buzzwords in immigration, the talking heads, the kids in graduation caps and gowns" (xvi–xvii) and to represent immigrants as everyday people: "Not heroes. Randoms. People. Characters" (xvii). The origins of the book lie in an anonymous article she wrote pre-DACA for the *Daily Beast* when she was about to graduate from

Harvard with no viable career options, an article that garnered the attention of agents who began begging her for a memoir: “I was angry. A *memoir*? I was twenty-one. I wasn’t fucking Barbra Streisand. . . . I didn’t want my first book to be a rueful tale about being a sickly Victorian orphan with tuberculosis who didn’t have a social security number, which is what the agents all wanted” (xiv). She has highlighted this representational challenge in interviews as well, telling Lucas Iberico Lozada:

DREAMER memoirs have their purpose. But that’s not what I set out to write. My book is a serious work of literature. When I’ve done interviews, people don’t ask me about literary things, people don’t ask me about formal things, people don’t often ask me about my influences or whether I have any training in writing or who I studied under or things like that. People just ask me about my parents leaving me in Ecuador, or what I do for self-care, things like that. It’s very clear that I’m being seen through a sociological lens. (Iberico Lozada 2020)

Rather than describing Cornejo’s book as a memoir, I classify it here as a chronicle, a genre theorized by the literary critic Monica Hanna with roots in US-based traditions of literary journalism and the Latin American *crónica*.¹⁸ According to Hanna, the chronicle’s journalistic aspects enable Latinx authors “to engage with and document the present, entering political discourse while entering their subjects into the historical record” (2016, 362) even as its subjective aspects reject “the notion of journalism (and historical interventions) as objective, instead highlighting subjectivity, selection, and interpretation” (362). Understanding Cornejo’s work through the collective lens of the chronicle thus emphasizes her politicized approach to migrant madness.

To understand how Cornejo grapples with the conflation of mental illness and rage requires examining her insistent use of the word *crazy* throughout the text. While casual uses of the term have been critiqued for their stigmatizing effects, Cornejo has defended her use of it, stating in one interview: “The way I define crazy is not just ‘mentally ill.’ It’s a radical term, the way that people with disabilities have used the word ‘crip’” (Iberico Lozano 2020). The word first appears in the book’s introduction and is from the beginning intertwined with anger:

By this point, I had been pursuing a PhD at Yale because I needed the health insurance and had read lots of books about migrants and I hated a good number of the texts. I couldn’t see my family in them,

because I saw my parents as more than laborers, more than sufferers or dreamers. I thought I could write something better, something that rang true. And I thought that I was the best person to do it. I was just crazy enough. Because if you're going to write a book about undocumented immigrants in America, the story, the full story, you have to be a little bit crazy. And you certainly can't be enamored by America, not still. That disqualifies you. (Cornejo 2020, xv)

At this point, a reader might assume that she means *crazy* in the colloquial sense: someone with an unusual perspective, perhaps, or someone prone to risk-taking. Yet even here, before Cornejo has identified herself as someone living with diagnoses of mental illness, the association between madness and rage is clear: Cornejo is angry about literature that reduces immigrants to suffering workers; this anger qualifies her to tell an untold story.

It is not until the third chapter of the book that Cornejo describes in detail the mental illnesses that establish her claim to the word *crazy*, and when she finally does so, she precedes the disclosure with a gorgeous description of her mother, who “is in the middle of a feminist awakening” (57), has become “a whole new woman, emancipated and bold” (58), and is “kind to you if you’re 1) my partner or 2) a formerly abused dog” (59). Here Cornejo appears to deliberately anticipate a reader who will link her mental illness to the fact that her parents left her in Ecuador and routes this reader through a loving portrait of her mother to arrive at a discussion of mental illness:

I’ve always been super casual when people ask me about my parents having left me in Ecuador. . . . I don’t feel anything about being left on the day-to-day but I am told by mental health experts that it has affected me. And I fought that conclusion. I denied it. I wanted to be a genius. I wanted my mental illnesses to be purely biological. I wanted to have been born wild and crazy and weird and brilliant, writing math equations in chalk on a window. Instead, therapist after therapist told me I had attachment issues related to my childhood. I left those therapists. Ghosted them. (59)

What is at stake in Cornejo’s rejection of her therapists is not just her desire to be “weird and brilliant” (although by the time a reader reaches this passage, she has certainly demonstrated that she is both). What is also at stake is her *mother’s* right to be “emancipated and bold”—that is, to be seen (by the reader and by therapists) as a complicated, interesting, and charming

person who deserves her daughter's love and the respect of her daughter's readers, rather than simply as a victim of circumstance and poverty who was forced to abandon her daughter.

By using the past tense to relate that she “fought” her therapists’ conclusions and ghosted them, Cornejo does implicitly give credence to their theory that she developed attachment issues in early childhood. However, she also underscores the role of the border enforcement policies that make life for undocumented people in the United States unnecessarily difficult: “But it’s not just those early years without my parents that branded me. It’s the life I’ve led in America as a migrant, watching my parents pursue their dream in this country and then having to deal with its carcass, witnessing the crimes against migrants carried out by the U.S. government with my hands bound. As an undocumented person, I felt like a hologram. Nothing felt secure” (59–60). In fact, while Cornejo devotes a single paragraph to the perspective of mental health professionals who note the impact of parental separation on her mental health, she devotes two full pages to the impact of the precarity she has experienced as a result of US immigration law. The treatment of migrants by the US government, she says, has made her feel crazy:

When I was growing up, and throughout the Obama administration, . . . I felt crazy for thinking we were under attack, watching my neighbors disappear and then going to school and watching the nightly news and watching award shows and seeing no mention. I felt crazy watching the white supremacist state slowly kill my father and break my family apart. I would frantically tell everyone that there was no such thing as the American Dream but then some all-star immigrants around me who had done things “the right way” preached a different story and Americans ate that up. It all made me feel crazy. I also am crazy. Pero why? (60–61)

It is here—in the discussion of the impact of US border enforcement on migrant health—that the two meanings of *mad* at play in the text collide. “It all made me feel crazy” denotes the experience of rage that Bruce describes, of those subjected to violence without recourse to justice, whereas the next sentence—“I also am crazy”—describes the fact of having received a diagnosis of mental illness.

Ultimately, Cornejo comes to reject the stigma of mental illness, portraying herself and others who have experienced parental separation as part of an “army of mutants”:

Researchers have shown that the flooding of stress hormones resulting from a traumatic separation from your parents at a young age kills off so many dendrites and neurons in the brain that it results in permanent psychological and physical changes. One psychiatrist I went to told me that my brain looked like a tree without branches.

So I just think about all the children who have been separated from their parents, and there's a lot of us, past and present, and some under more traumatic circumstances than others—like those who are in internment camps right now—and I just imagine us as an army of mutants. We've all been touched by this monster, and our brains are forever changed, and we all have trees without branches in there, and what will happen to us? Who will we become? (59–61)

Although it might be tempting to read this passage as an instantiation of “mad pride,” I argue that it resonates more closely with the work of scholars like Alvarado and Jasbir K. Puar who interrogate the political uses to which pride is often put. For Alvarado, an insistence on pride can “reinforce hegemonic norms by underscoring their desirability” (2018, 10), whereas for Puar disability pride in particular can efface “the biopolitical production of precarity and (un)livability” (2017, xxiv). Even as Cornejo sardonically undermines the pathologizing language of the psychiatrist who compares her brain to a “tree without branches,” she also characterizes the sociopolitical conditions that have shaped her brain as the touch of a “monster.” In the passages that describe Cornejo’s experience of mental illness (and particularly those that describe feeling crazy), *The Undocumented Americans* advances what I have been calling throughout this book an ethic of radical health: an insistence on destigmatizing pathologized bodies and minds without celebrating the injustices that produce them.

It is important to note, however, that this theoretical work has come at an emotional cost for Cornejo herself. In an essay published in *The Nation* just as I finished the first draft of this chapter, an essay that reflected on her life in the eighteen months since the publication of *The Undocumented Americans*, Cornejo (2021) writes of her own exhaustion with the topic it covers: “I have a dream, a total fantasy, of what it could mean to be an immigrant artist. In this dream, I am still me, nothing has changed, but I can write about literally anything other than immigration.” Of course, the topics that Cornejo goes on to fantasize about addressing in her work—queer bison, the rehabilitation of police dogs, bees—are available to her, but the unstated constraint is what publishers want and expect from her.

She also describes the process of hardening her own boundaries about what she will and will not discuss at events and in interviews: “For the first few months, I would deflect the inevitable questions about immigration policy or my early years in Ecuador before my family came to America with my signature loquacious demurring. Then I had my partner, a professor who doesn’t mince words, tell event organizers that I did not talk policy, particularly Donald Trump’s zero-tolerance policy, and I did not talk about my own childhood separation.” There is, of course, an irony in the fact that I—obviously a profound admirer of Cornejo—am including her work in a chapter about the very topic that most exhausts her. Yet I argue that what is most important to emphasize in her story—particularly as we grapple (as we will for a very long time) with the consequences of our government’s brutality toward migrant children—is her insistence on the political origins of her trauma and her refusal to locate that trauma solely in the migration story of her parents. Like Zamora, Cornejo places the blame directly on the US government.

Remedio

The family separations that occurred under the Trump regime are horrifying to many people. They are particularly horrifying to me because they coincided with my own experience of parenthood: in the summer of 2018, as stories about family separation dominated the news, I became pregnant with twins, and the insomnia of late pregnancy and sleep deprivation of early parenthood were accompanied for me by endless doom scrolling as media report after media report surfaced about the brutal treatment of children who had been taken into US government custody. While the stories I read throughout 2018 and 2019 have had a particularly indelible effect on me, it has also become increasingly urgent for me to reflect on the fact that although family separations during the Trump regime were uniquely cruel (and illegal), family separation itself was not unique to the Trump administration and has been codified into US immigration law in troubling ways.

The first time I encountered family separation resulting from US immigration policy in a literary text, the author was not Latinx but Haitian American; I was an undergraduate literature student in the late 1990s. The text was Edwidge Danticat’s novel *Breath, Eyes, Memory* (1995), a book that continues to shatter me every time I reread it. Although I do not offer

an extended analysis of *Breath, Eyes, Memory* in this chapter (I am not a Danticat scholar and primarily read her work for pleasure), I could not have written this chapter without it. The novel is the story of Sophie Caco, born after her mother is raped by a paramilitary officer during the brutal dictatorship of Haiti's François "Papa Doc" Duvalier and raised by a maternal aunt and grandmother when her mother moves to the United States. Once reunited with her mother, Sophie is subjected to sexual abuse by her mother, who lives with unresolved trauma stemming from her rape and who ultimately dies by suicide. The novel is a gorgeous and wrenching exploration of what it means to be free in the aftermath of intergenerational trauma and gender-based violence. For Sophie, reunification with her mother is itself a source of trauma, not only because it means being subjected to abuse but also because it entails separation from her beloved aunt, whom Sophie regards as a maternal figure for the first twelve years of her life. But the novel also treats Sophie's mother with compassion, offering a nuanced portrait of a woman living with unresolved trauma in the wake of violence inflicted on her by a political regime led by a US-educated politician who came to be embraced by the US government (despite concerns about human rights) as an anti-communist ally. Furthermore, the novel demonstrates how an immigration policy that requires total separation from one's homeland severs both Sophie and her mother from their best source of support and thus negatively affects their wellbeing.

I consider Danticat to be an important theoretical guide for my analysis. Her book is particularly important to read now not only because of renewed attention to the ways in which anti-migrant violence at the US-Mexico border targets Haitians as well as Mexicans and Central Americans but also because of her insistence on representing migrants—including and especially those who both experience and inflict brutality—in their full complexity. In a moment when even progressive immigration rhetoric has become dominated by biocentric platitudes like "children belong with their parents," Danticat demonstrates the need to advocate for migrant wellbeing and family unification, while also refusing to gloss over the fact that family itself is often a site of trauma. Although it does not address our immediate political context, then, *Breath, Eyes, Memory* offers characters whose perspectives are necessary for understanding our current moment. And I believe that it is the fact that I have been sitting with the lessons that Danticat offers in that novel for more than two decades now that I was able to arrive at the particular readings I do of the works of Grande, Díaz, Zamora, and Cornejo.

In this chapter, I have examined texts suggesting that migrant justice and radical mental health require much more than the reunification and idealization of the nuclear family. Although none of the texts respond to the way immigration policy and rhetoric shifted in the Trump and post-Trump eras, all of them address the long-term impacts of family separation and refute the move to hold migrant parents solely responsible for its harms. Yet they do so without idealizing migrant parents. Radical health, as I have defined it in this book, entails both refusing the cultural imperative attached to normative health behaviors and advocating for access to health-sustaining support and resources. The texts I have examined in this chapter offer the beginnings of a vision of radical mental health, as they simultaneously refuse to ignore the psychic harms perpetuated within heteronormative family structures and also situate that harm within a wider geopolitical context.