The Portrayal of Migration and Mental Health Issues in Twenty-First Century Latina Literature[1]

Amaia Soroa-Bacaicoa
University of the Basque Country

Abstract. The aim of this article is to examine the portrayal of migration and mental health issues in selected works by Reyna Grande (2012), Diane Guerrero (2014), Julissa Arce (2016) and Karla Cornejo Villavicencio (2020). These twenty-first century Latina texts are analyzed by incorporating an interdisciplinary approach that seeks to observe simultaneously how this literature reflects reality and how migration and mental health are perceived by literary criticism. The first part of this paper will summarize the state of the art and provide the sociohistorical context of the literary texts, and the second part will address the key points of the literary analysis, that is, the impact of migration and undocumented status on the mental health of the protagonists and its implications for social belonging and the pursuit of the American Dream. The selected literary works are first-person narratives that deal with migration to the US and the multiple factors embedded in this process, and they also depict how these experiences may have an impact on the mental health of migrants. These texts are valuable contributions to the ongoing debate on migration and illustrative of the evolution of the DREAMer movement.

Keywords: mental health, migration, Latina literature, DREAMers.

1. Introduction

The aim of this essay is to analyze the portrayal of mental health issues in twenty-first century Latina narratives. Specifically, it examines the impact of migration on mental health in *The Distance between Us* (2012) by Reyna Grande, Diane Guerrero's *In the Country We Love* (2016) and Julissa Arce's and Karla Cornejo Villavicencio's *My (Underground) American Dream* (2016) and *The Undocumented Americans* (2020) respectively. This paper scrutinizes how Latinx families residing in the US are affected by migration and how this affects their emotional wellbeing, sense of belonging and social position, placing a special focus on the lives of women and children in migrant families. The mental health issues that are being considered for the present project are those related to migration, as explained in studies in clinical psychology, psychiatry and sociology.

Given the high prevalence and increasing awareness of mental health conditions among the global population, analyzing a body of works published in the last decade could make a relevant contribution to the ongoing conversations on mental health and migration. The authors chosen for this project have portrayed mental health issues in a relatively explicit way that favors the literary analysis and discussion of the prevalence of these conditions. In addition, these works, which could be labeled as memoirs (in fact, this term is included on the

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cover of Grande and Guerrero's books), keep a close connection with the world that we live in. Since literature could be understood as a representation of reality, it seems relevant to analyze how these works resonate with reality and, in particular, with studies conducted in sociology, psychology and psychiatry focusing on the mental health of migrants. These texts could be potentially inspiring for those who are undergoing similar experiences to the ones described in the selected books.

At a broader level, I seek to observe how cultural representations may have the potential to increase awareness of current social issues such as migration and mental health, which are highly stigmatized by society. Since they are global issues, the experiences and findings of this project could be transferred to multiple contexts such as the European one. Moreover, I seek to explore how these narratives contribute to a more diverse literary panorama that, far from including stereotyped and problematic stories, seeks to increase Latinx representation in literature and other cultural productions, thus giving visibility to a community that is often subjected to racial stereotyping and discrimination.

The first part of this paper will summarize the state of the art by providing the sociohistorical context of the selected literary works, focusing on Latinx migration to the US and the presence of mental health issues in the Latinx community, as well as outlining some of the main approaches to the study of mental health conditions in literary criticism. The second part of this essay will summarize the literary analysis of this project, focusing on three main points: migrating and living undocumented in the US, the portrayal of mental health issues that may arise as a result of migration, as well as the quest for social belonging and the achievement of the American Dream.

2. The sociohistorical and literary context of the project

2.1. Migration and mental health in the Latinx community

One in five people in the US has a mental health condition, but only half of them are receiving treatment (NIMH 2019). Among this population, women and young people have a higher likelihood to experience mental health issues (Mental Health America n.d.). Those with a mental health condition experience difficulties when seeking treatment due to social stigma, lack of resources and low insurance rates (WHO 2001). Mental health issues also affect Latinxs living in the US, a community of over 60 million people (US Census Bureau 2019), who are less likely to receive treatment for anxiety and depression owing to an overall lower socioeconomic status and insurance rates, as well as cultural and institutional barriers and social stigma (Ruiz 1985; Ruiz and Alarcón 1996; Guarnaccia, Martinez and Acosta 2005; Nadeem et al. 2007; Fontenot, Semega and Kollar 2018). Furthermore, those who migrate often experience an alteration of family structures and gender roles (Pessar 2005), and they tend to hold a worse social position in the host country (Capps et al. 2007). This factor may intersect with other social parameters and affect the mental health of migrants.

Migration and asylum laws have become increasingly restrictive, and the time to process petitions tends to be long. Due to all this, it is estimated that 11 million

people are undocumented in the US (Passel and Cohn 2012) and many of these migrants fear deportation, which has been on the rise in the twenty-first century. Nowadays, those lacking legal authorization are often referred to as "illegal." Originally a legal category, "illegal" has now a social dimension and is overused to designate and undermine both documented and undocumented migrants. In legal terms, lacking a residence permit entails deportability or the possibility of being deported, which makes those who lack legal status vulnerable, and it often leads them to endure poor work and social conditions (De Genova 2006). In addition, those who are undocumented tend to have lower social status and restricted access to services (Abrego and Lakhani 2015; Menjívar, Abrego and Schmalzbauer 2016). Undocumented status also leads to social "alienation," defined as "the process through which individuals come to be defined as 'illegal aliens'" (Coutin 1993, cited in De Genova 2002, 423). This gradual isolation affects the sense of belonging of the unauthorized population (Glenn 2011) and increases their stigmatization (Gonzales, Suárez-Orozco and Dedios-Sanguineti 2013).

Those who are undocumented often live in mixed-status families (Fix and Zimmermann 2001), where members have different legal statuses. In the US, 16.7 million people are estimated to live in this type of family (Mathema 2017), and those who are documented also experience the impact of the undocumented status of their relatives. This is known as "multigenerational punishment," a term coined by sociologist Laura Enriquez (2015, 939) defined as "a distinct form of legal violence wherein the sanctions intended for a specific population spill over to negatively affect individuals who are not targeted by laws." This results in restricted access to services, fear of deportation and ultimately "living in the shadows," that is, avoiding social interactions and becoming socially invisible. Thus, living in a mixed-status family may have a negative impact on one's wellbeing, especially among children (Fix and Passel 1999; Suárez-Orozco, Suárez-Orozco and Todorova 2008).

Studies have shown that children in mixed-status and migrant families are more prone to depression, developmental risks and underuse of social services (Ortega et al. 2009; Perreira and Ornelas 2011). In addition, the social stigma and potential deportation of their relatives often create great levels of psychological distress among children (Dreby 2012). However traumatic deportation can be, it has been described as "the tip of the iceberg" (Dreby 2012, 830), as the banishment of family members often entails multiple difficulties such as economic hardship and increased mental distress among children (Brabeck and Xu 2010; Dreby 2012; Allen, Cisneros and Tellez 2015).

The undocumented youth, often known as DREAMers after the DREAM Act (Development, Relief and Education for Minors Act) proposed by the Obama administration, have gained prominence in recent years. They belong to the generation that will take the lead when the white baby boomers retire (Menjívar, Abrego, Schmalzbauer 2016, 121), but their undocumented status often exposes them to deportation, racial discrimination and other tensions that may affect their emotional wellbeing (De la Torre and Germano 2014). While they could be expected to avoid public presence due to their legal status, they are politically active and promote self-advocacy within adverse contexts.

Numerous DREAMers are recipients of DACA (Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals), a measure implemented in 2012 that grants temporary residency and a work permit, but no path to permanent residency. While the over 700,000 DACA recipients are less likely to live below the poverty line (Amuedo-Dorantes and Antman 2016; USCIS 2018), having no path to citizenship and the ongoing rescissions and attempts to block the program leave the lives of many in a limbo. This situation creates "anxiety, uncertainty and guilt" (Gonzales, Suárez-Orozco and Dedios-Sanguineti 2013, 1175) and mental health issues related to deportation and family separation among DREAMers. As research has shown, the rescission of DACA could have a profound impact on the mental health of DREAMers (Venkataramani and Tsai 2017). Moreover, being in a legal and social limbo leads them to question their identity and future prospects, as they are, in a way, "excluded from an American identity, though raised in this country" (Gonzales, Suárez-Orozco and Dedios-Sanguineti 2013, 1188). In view of the relevance of DREAMers in the US, contributing to social changes that improve the conditions of DREAMers as well as those in mixed-status families would be beneficial for the country as a whole. As Jorge Delva and colleagues (2013, 33) argue, "in the end, all citizens, not just undocumented immigrants stand to gain with more humane policies."

DREAMers have taken an active role on social media and across cultural productions to claim their belonging in the US and share their stories, as well as the suffering that they experience due to their legal and social condition. This discussion has permeated Chicana and Latina literature, where female authors have also overcome oppressive beliefs that questioned their identity and writing. Since the second half of the twentieth century, Chicana and Latina authors progressively gained prominence in the literary panorama by examining a wide range of topics and writing in multiple literary genres (Lomelí, Márquez and Herrera-Sobek 2000; McCracken 2017). However, it is worth noting that only a few contemporary Latina works have portrayed mental health issues. While most works in the twentieth century portrayed psychological distress as a consequence of certain events and in an implicit way, works written in the twenty-first century have portrayed mental health conditions as a central topic across multiple genres. Some of these works are *I Am Not Your Perfect Mexican Daughter* (2017) by Erika L. Sánchez, *Confessions of a Firework* (2016) by Angela Aguirre, *Corazón* (2017) by Yesika Salgado and *Juliet Takes a Breath* (2019) by Gabby Rivera. Mental health has also been depicted across other Latinx cultural productions such as TV series, podcasts and photography.

2.2. On migration, trauma and healing

The portrayal of mental health issues in literature has received considerable critical attention during the last decades. Particularly since the consolidation of Trauma Studies in the 1990s, scholars have expanded and criticized the original notion of trauma in favor of a definition that is more relevant to a greater proportion of society (Kirmayer, Lemelson and Barad 2007). One of the most notorious criticisms of Trauma Studies has emerged among Postcolonial Studies scholars, as they have advocated for a more open trauma paradigm that

overcomes the limitations that Trauma Studies poses in these contexts. In other words, the event-based notion of trauma originally developed by Cathy Caruth does not account for experiences occurring in postcolonial environments (Rothberg 2008; Visser 2018). At the same time, postcolonial scholars have rejected the exclusively individual and collective notions of trauma, arguing that both may occur and co-occur (Rothberg 2008). In addition, the postcolonial approach to Trauma Studies highlights the importance of assessing traumatic experiences within their sociopolitical contexts, to acknowledge and determine how power relations and oppression may contribute to the perpetuation of trauma (Dragulescu 2018).

The postcolonial approach to Trauma Studies resonates with studies on the mental health of migrants. Psychiatrist Joseba Achotegui has long studied the impact of migration on mental health, elaborating on the notion of migrant grief. According to Achotegui (2003), migrants undergo psychological changes as a result of migration, which often cause a continuous or ongoing type of emotional suffering. This type of grief is different from others, as the grieved element is not deceased, but is still present while distant in a migrant's life (Achotegui 2003). The effects of migrant grief may be aggravated by the lack of social support and high expectations often faced by migrants (Achotegui 2002). These high hopes set on migration are often influenced by the myth of the successful migrant, that is, the belief that hard work and inevitable suffering will eventually lead to success (Hron 2018). This myth can be highly problematic, as it not only normalizes suffering but it also takes for granted that migrants will thrive, which is not always the case (Hron 2018).

Specifically, in the Latinx context, Chicana scholars have also theorized on the presence of trauma in their community, which bears resemblance to the notion developed in Postcolonial Trauma Studies. Gloria Anzaldúa, one of the leading voices in Chicana epistemology, conceptualized the US-Mexico as an "open wound" (2012, 25) (note that *trauma* is the Greek word for "wound") and regarded Chicana identity as a borderland and a displaced identity: "as a mestiza, I have no country, my homeland cast me out—yet all countries are mine because I am everyone's sister or potential lover" (Anzaldúa 2012, 102-103).

Chicana scholar Edén Torres (2003, 14) stated that Chicanxs experience "unresolved grieving" due to ongoing racial and class oppression, and lack of social acknowledgement of their pain. In addition, borrowing María Root's words, Torres (27) stated that Chicanxs live in a "culture of denial," as they have not been given the permission nor the conditions to grieve and to acknowledge their suffering. The lack of space to grieve of Chicanxs and Latinxs intersects with social parameters such as legal status, class and gender, and it has a direct connection with social power. As Fetta (2018, 13) contends, "a full display of emotion is conditioned by one's social position." This explains the overall little agency that Latinxs and undocumented migrants have been given in the media (Aldama 2013).

All in all, it could be stated that twenty-first century literary criticism is increasingly interdisciplinary, given the emergence of various approaches such as Narrative Medicine (Charon 2006) or Cognitive Literary Studies (Jaén and Simon 2013), which enhance the quality of medical and other professional practices and enrich literary criticism. As Roger Kurtz (2018) argues, the future of literary

studies is post-traumatic, as Trauma Studies have influenced and permeated the analysis of literature, making the study of trauma a truly interdisciplinary field.

3. The portrayal of mental health issues in Grande (2012), Arce (2016), Guerrero (2016) and Cornejo Villavicencio (2020)

Reyna Grande was born in Mexico, where she grew up while her parents were in the US. At age 9, Grande and her siblings migrated to Los Angeles to live with their father. She worked as a teacher at LAUSD and has written several literary works such as *Across a Hundred Mountains* (2007), *The Distance between Us* (2013) and *A Ballad of Love and Glory* (2022). Grande's *The Distance between Us* begins years after her father's migration, when her mother leaves for the US, and Reyna and her siblings stay with their grandparents while occasionally seeing their parents. The second part of the book narrates her migration to the US at age 9 and her new life with her father and siblings in Los Angeles. She describes the experiences that led her to become the first person in her family to earn a college degree, as well as her constant longing to be a united family and struggle to negotiate her identity.

Julissa Arce was born in Mexico, where she grew up with her grandmother and two older sisters, while her parents and younger brother lived in the US. At age 11, Arce migrated to the US, and became undocumented, but her sisters remained in Mexico. She is the author of *My (Underground) American Dream* (2016), which was adapted into a young reader's version in 2018, and *You Sound Like a White Girl: The Case for Rejecting Assimilation* (2022). Aside from writing, Arce is engaged in social justice, migrant rights and education. *My (Underground) American Dream* revolves around the lives of Arce and her family. While her academic performance was excellent, she became a victim of domestic abuse, and her undocumented status prevented her from completing the rites of passage and taking certain steps towards upward social mobility such as applying to college. After finally graduating from college and still undocumented, Arce began her professional career and became the vice president of Goldman Sachs at age 27. Her story revolves around her quest for the American Dream, but it also illustrates the deep impact of undocumented status and social exclusion on one's professional life and wellbeing.

Diane Guerrero is an actress born in New Jersey into a Colombian family. At age 15, she faced the sudden deportation of her parents and brother and found herself alone in the US. She has pursued a successful acting career and published her memoir *In the Country We Love* in 2016, which was adapted into a young adult book in 2018. Guerrero also collaborates actively with organizations supporting migrants and the Latinx community. *In the Country We Love* describes her first years growing up in Boston, when her parents struggled to legalize their status while fearing their deportation. The turning point in the memoir comes when her family is deported, as she finds herself alone in the US and decides to stay. This poses multiple challenges to the protagonist's financial security, career prospects and wellbeing. While narrating how she gradually overcame those difficulties, Guerrero describes growing up to pursue an acting career while processing the distance that remains between her and her family.

Karla Cornejo Villavicencio was born in Ecuador and migrated to the US as a child to join her parents. She is the author of *The Undocumented Americans* (2020) and has also written several essays on migration, mental health and her own experiences. Her account of becoming a Harvard graduate while being undocumented received considerable critical attention. *The Undocumented Americans* narrates Cornejo Villavicencio's migration from Ecuador to the US, and her life as an undocumented young person. Unlike the three aforementioned works that mainly revolve around the lives of the protagonists and their families, Cornejo Villavicencio combines her narrative with stories of undocumented migrants that she has interviewed across the US, giving visibility to multiple experiences of different ages and backgrounds that receive little critical attention and whose suffering is often dismissed.

These four narratives are valuable as they question stereotypes and prejudices against undocumented migrants and Latinxs living in the US. Scholar Sarah Bishop (2019, 30) has defined the stories told by undocumented migrants as "reclaimant narratives," which are "the experiential, partial, public, oppositional, and incondensable stories that marginalized individuals used to assert their right to speak and reframe audience understanding." Bishop (2019, 169) also believes that these stories contribute to the "self-making" of the undocumented. This is vital not only for the undocumented population but also for Latinxs, who have been a "mediated minority" (Aldama 2013, 3), and for those with mental health issues, who have also lacked agency and trust and have been spoken for.

The four works selected for the present paper revolve around three main themes: the impact of migrating and living undocumented in the US, the emotional suffering deriving from migration, and the quest for social belonging and the achievement of the American Dream.

3.1. The impact of migration and living undocumented in the US

The central topic of the selected works is migration and its impact on the protagonists, their families and communities. In all cases, the protagonists belong to mixed-status families, where at least one member is undocumented. Diane Guerrero was born in the US and is therefore a citizen, but Reyna Grande, Julissa Arce and Karla Cornejo were born outside the US and, when they migrate, they hold undocumented status. Their legal situation and belonging to mixed-status families determine their life and prospects in the US as, to a greater or lesser extent, they all live "in the shadows," avoiding social interactions in multiple contexts. This has a profound impact on the sense of belonging and wellbeing of migrants, as explained above.

Reyna Grande's narrative emphasizes how migration has altered family dynamics, leading to the physical and emotional separation of family members, which makes them feel "abandoned" (2012, 33), as they are called "orphans" (17). When her mother is about to migrate to the US to join her husband and build a family home, Reyna's sister states: "We don't need a house. We need Papi" (12), which shows how the children prioritize affective wellbeing over economic wealth. This can also be observed in her use of *Papi*, an affective word over *father*, and *house*, a more neutral term when compared to *home*. While the physical distance

is overcome when Reyna and her siblings migrate to the US and the family is partially reunited, the emotional distance remains.

Similarly, in Julissa Arce's case, the family is permanently separated, as her sisters remain in Mexico when she migrates to the US. In addition, due to her Mexican roots, she feels rejected at school (2016, 44). Arce comes to terms and feels the impact of her undocumented status when she is unable to complete rites of passage such as celebrating a quinceañera or applying to college because she lacks a Social Security Number (85). She expresses her powerlessness and frustration when she argues that "there was literally nothing I could do to change the situation I was in. There was no waiting line" (107). This statement also questions meritocracy and the popular belief that migrants should wait in line to legalize their situation.

Despite being a citizen herself, Diane Guerrero experiences multigenerational punishment (Enriquez 2015), as the undocumented status of her parents and brother has a negative impact on her life. From the beginning, Guerrero's family prioritize their legalization, which is regarded by the protagonist as "a path forward. A safe passage out of hiding. A passport from the underworld. The next chapter of our story" (2016, 41). Aside from the upward social mobility implied in this statement, Guerrero's use of *our story* illustrates how the undocumented status of her parents has deep legal and social implications for all relatives. Guerrero fears the deportation of her relatives and then sees her parents and brother being deported over a short time period. This leads her to live "in the shadows" and to feel alienated (Coutin 1993, cited in De Genova 2002, 423), developing a distance with society and becoming progressively invisible. The deportation of her parents occurs abruptly, leaving Guerrero little time to process and grieve the experience. She also sees the criminalization of her parents when they are at the detention center wearing an orange jumpsuit (2016, 91).

Karla Cornejo Villavicencio combines her story of migration with those of other undocumented people who live in the US and who are not part of the DREAMer movement. These migrants belong to different generations and, as Cornejo states (2020, 160), live "in a place where [they're] not wanted." She declares that, despite the toll that migration takes and the contributions made to the US in particularly difficult situations, they are just seen as "illegal," "a burden" and as "workers" that are only valued for their productivity (138; 152; 13). As the author explains:

> I've heard them call us "undocumented workers" as a euphemism, as if there was something uncouth about being just an undocumented person standing with your hands clasped together or at your sides. I almost wish they'd called us something rude like "crazy fuckin' Mexicans" because that's acknowledging something about us beyond our usefulness—we're crazy, we're Mexican, we're clearly unwanted! but to describe all of us [...] as workers in order to make us palatable, my god. We were brown bodies made to labor" (13).

The author's disapproval of this euphemistic designation is due to the capitalist justification of migrants, as it is their productivity what legitimizes their presence in the US. Moreover, Cornejo Villavicencio denounces the dehumanization and essentialization experienced by this segment of the population through her use of "Mexicans" to designate all Latinxs, a common term in anti-Latinx rhetoric.

3.2. The portrayal of mental health issues

The impact of migration on emotional wellbeing has been long studied by mental health professionals, as well as by scholars across disciplines. If migration is a complex process that tends to have a negative impact on mental health, when those who migrate are undocumented, the process becomes even more complex and complicated. As mentioned above, within mixed-status families, relatives may experience the multigenerational punishment (Enriquez 2015), which tends to create distress on all family members. Perhaps the most detrimental implication of living undocumented is the possibility of being deported, which tends to create great psychological distress among families. Finally, mental health issues and undocumented status carry a considerable amount of social stigma, which is expected to contribute negatively to the undocumented and those with mental health conditions. All these points are made in the analyzed works, but the portrayal of mental health issues varies considerably.

In Reyna Grande's memoir, mental health conditions are portrayed in a less implicit way, perhaps owing to the fact that the story is focalized by a younger Reyna (Muñoz and Vigil 2019). After the migration of Reyna's parents to the US, their mother seems detached, which leads to feelings of abandonment and emotional distress among the children. Once they go to the US, Reyna and her siblings are victims of domestic abuse, as their father becomes violent with them. Towards the end of the story, after weighing all the positive and negative experiences that her family has endured, Reyna admits that "immigration took a toll on us all" (Grande 2012, 208), acknowledging the emotional pain that all family members have experienced as a result of migration. She also accepts what their parents have become and states the following:

> I wondered if during their crossing both my father and mother had lost themselves in that no-man's land. I wondered if my real parents were still there, caught between two worlds. I imagined them trying to make their way back to us. I truly hoped that one day they would (Grande 2012, 315).

Julissa Arce's emotional distress stems from multiple negative experiences such as her inability to complete certain rites of passage and steps towards upward social mobility that are expected from a person of her age and having an occasionally abusive father. Learning about her undocumented status is a great source of psychological distress for the protagonist, who feels dehumanized and rejected when being referred to as an "illegal (alien)" (Arce 2016, 60, 266). Her legal condition also shatters her expectations and affects her physical and psychological wellbeing. This does not end when she becomes a citizen, as she feels rejected by society (285).

Mental health issues are portrayed in a more explicit way in Diane Guerrero's work, as her constant preoccupation with the potential deportation of her relatives becomes difficult to cope with. However, the turning point in Guerrero's emotional wellbeing comes when her relatives are deported, and she is forced to make a living on her own in the US. Even after the deportation, the protagonist becomes hypervigilant and worried, leading her to a progressive breakdown that is felt due to the overwhelming pressure to succeed. She experiences anxiety and depression and even contemplates suicide, but she then starts a progressive

recovery. Guerrero describes not only her own emotional distress but also her brother's suffering as an undocumented young person living in the US, whose mental health depends on his legal status: "my brother fell into an emotional slump. He couldn't see a future for himself in this country; it's nearly impossible to dream big when you don't even have your legal papers" (2016, 21). She also criticizes how access to mental healthcare is also determined by socioeconomic status, which, as explained above, tends to be low among undocumented migrants: "Emotional Wellness is a First World luxury" (37).

Karla Cornejo Villavicencio also provides an explicit account of the negative impact of migration that is inscribed in her body and has affected her mental health negatively. She reflects on her undocumented status as a condition leading to attachment issues that also impacted her sense of protection: "As an undocumented person, I felt like a hologram. Nothing felt secure. I never felt safe. I didn't allow myself to feel joy because I was scared to attach myself to anything I'd have to let go of" (Cornejo Villavicencio 2020, 59-60). In addition, Cornejo Villavicencio expresses her vulnerability and that of her parents and other undocumented migrants who are ageing and who have "no safety net" (149), as they are not covered by insurance at vital moments. It is also worth noting how Cornejo Villavicencio illustrates that, in moments of collective grieving, the suffering of the undocumented does not seem to be worth as much. In other words, it seems that undocumented workers are not allowed in the general collective grieving of the US population: "because the antithesis of an American is an immigrant and because we could not be victims in the public eye, we became suspects. And so September 11 changed the immigration landscape forever" (40).

In addition, Cornejo Villavicencio conceptualizes the psychological distress of children of migrants the following way:

> 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 [...] 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 there (61).

Aside from explaining the deep impact of family separation experienced by children of migrants, her use of "mutants" evokes the term "alien," giving it a new dimension, as she frames the host country as the one who alienates migrants by turning them into mutants, thus questioning the pejorative use of *alien* to designate migrants.

3.3. On the achievement of the American Dream

As explained above, being undocumented and belonging to a mixed-status family determine the lives of those who migrate to a great extent, as well as their vision of the American Dream. Even if the families of the protagonists prioritize achieving legal status, they are faced with multiple difficulties that hinder legal status and the achievement of their own versions of the American Dream. For

these protagonists, this dream is linked to upward social mobility and pursuing higher education. At a personal and emotional level, the American Dream also represents the potential family unity that has been interrupted by the migration of relatives to the US, and a way of taking care of their parents after the sacrifice they made when they migrated.

However, all these authors expose the limitations of the American Dream. In all cases, family unity is not achieved, despite being one of the central objectives of all of them. This distance between relatives happens both at a physical and an emotional level, and in some cases, it remains permanent. In addition, all authors question the romanticized version of this dream, which is directly linked to the myth of the successful migrant (Hron 2018). As Bishop (2019) notes:

> the tale of the United States as a Promised Land for those seeking a better life permeates national consciousness. But a close inspection makes clear that the branding of the United States as a nation of immigrants only makes space for a particular kind of immigrant—and a particular narrative—and leaves others out of the story altogether (49).

As seen in these works, the protagonists and their families strive for a better future in the US but, despite their efforts to legalize their situation, their undocumented status hinders their future prospects. Not only do these texts portray a not-so-idyllic American Dream, or characters who do not achieve it, but they also illustrate the suffering that is behind becoming successful in the US. In other words, instead of being exclusively narratives of self-made women, they also show how their parents and other relatives do not fulfill their dreams partially or completely, in order to demystify the idea(l) of the good and successful migrant. These stories also question the prejudices against parents who migrate with their children and are undocumented, stating that children have "no fault of their own" (Bishop 2019, 74), a statement that rejects the parents and their willingness to thrive. In addition, it is also shown how many Latinxs, despite being or becoming citizens, do not feel like they belong to the US or are still rejected by society. This resonates with recent views and feelings studied in sociology (Flores González 2017).

Reyna Grande achieves her own version of the American Dream, as she becomes a citizen, holds a university degree, and has a successful career as a writer. However, she describes the deep toll that migration has taken on her and her family, and the inability to fulfill her parents' dream, which was building a house, a family home (2012, 157). Aside from that, Grande rejects the claim that migrants must fully assimilate to the host culture, and states how her identity is shaped by both Mexico and the US As she explains:

> The United States is my home; it is the place that allowed me to dream, and later, to make those dreams into realities. But my umbilical cord was buried in Iguala, and I have never forgotten where I came from. I consider myself Mexican American because I am from both places (320).

Similarly, Julissa Arce pursues an education and an impressive career while still being undocumented. Even if she succeeds in the material dimension of the American Dream, she feels "sick and tired of living in this golden cage" (2016, 220), which illustrates how material abundance comes at the expense of affective

deprivation. In addition, she also acknowledges the suffering experienced for many years and the rejection she has felt by society even after becoming a US citizen, as "some people still want me 'to go back to where I came from'" (xi).

Diane Guerrero's career as an actress, podcaster and author is well known, but she also admits that, due to the deportation of her relatives and the suffering behind it, hers is not a completely happy ending after all:

> My story represents all that should be celebrated about America. Only here could the daughter of immigrants grow up to succeed in the competitive and exciting world of acting. And only here could a girl like me be invited to have a conversation with the President. I will always cherish those opportunities. And yet my experience in this country also reflects a reality that's still tough for me to face (2016, 247).

The toll experienced by Guerrero and her relatives is caused by structural factors, which is the reason why the protagonist urges those residing in the US to take action and reflect upon the suffering of migrant families.

Finally, Karla Cornejo Villavicencio pursued an education at one of the most prestigious institutions while still being undocumented. Despite having achieved the American Dream, the author reveals how her progress has taken a toll on her parents, who were the original dreamers. This is why she questions the romanticized version of the Dream and the myth of the successful migrant attached to it, and she claims to have a different American Dream: "the twisted inversion that many children of immigrants know is that, at some point, your parents become your children, and your own personal American Dream becomes making sure they age and die with dignity in a country that has never wanted them" (2020, 148).

4. Concluding remarks

This essay has analyzed the impact of migration and undocumented status on the mental health of migrants in the works by Reyna Grande, Julissa Arce, Diane Guerrero and Karla Cornejo Villavicencio. These narratives portray the stories of four Latina women living in mixed-status families whose parents migrated to the US in search of a better life. All of them succeed in their own version of the American Dream, despite not being exactly the one that they had hoped.

All families strive for upward social mobility by focusing on legalizing their situation, pursuing an education, and achieving material success, but factors such as legal status, ethnic prejudices and low social position compromise the achievement of these objectives and affect their sense of belonging to the US negatively. Put differently, they reveal the toll that migration takes on all family members at multiple levels, including family separation and mental health issues.

By doing so, these authors question the "good" ("legal," worthy of the American Dream) vs "bad" ("illegal," deportable, not deserving the American Dream) migrant dichotomy, revealing that, all migrants, despite their legal status, strive for similar objectives. In other words, they question the validity of the dichotomic labels of the "good" and "bad" migrant, as they do not illustrate the stories and efforts behind these categories.

These narratives continue to broaden the multimodal community of undocumented migrants and allies that use their "reclaimant narratives" (Bishop 2019, 30) to gain agency and assert their belonging to the US. As Bishop has noted, these works provide "cultural citizenship in the face of their lack of legal citizenship" (and I would add, also when legal citizenship is attained) to their authors (2019, 4). Moreover, these works may serve as counternarratives to the often stereotyped, dehumanizing and criminalizing media portrayals, by illustrating the deep impact that migration has on one's emotional wellbeing, and the mental health of mixed-status families in particular. They also show how psychological wellbeing is linked to multiple social parameters such as low socioeconomic or legal status. Thus, these works are valuable contributions to the ongoing debate on migration and could have potential pedagogical implications, as they could be used in educational contexts to help raise awareness of mental health issues, break stereotypes and question prejudices against migrants both within and beyond the US.

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