

Accessibility and Nationalism: An Introduction

In 1984, as the city of Los Angeles prepared to host the Olympic Games, ten local artists were commissioned to paint murals along the city's freeways, among them Judith Francisca Baca. Baca's contribution, titled *Hitting the Wall: Women in the Marathon* and located on the Harbor Freeway (Interstate 110), honors women athletes of color. At its center is a racially ambiguous runner with strong, sinewy muscles, light hair and dark skin, crossing a finish line with arms outstretched. Behind her are two groups of women runners, one led by a woman in a wheelchair. By featuring women of different races and abilities, the mural invites viewers to imagine Los Angeles as a city of racial, gender, and corporeal equality. *Hitting the Wall* is not merely a celebration, however, for it also prompts critical scrutiny of the Los Angeles urban landscape in two ways. First, there is a subtle tension between the mural's content (an athletic triumph) and its title (the phrase *hitting the wall* is used by runners to describe feeling so overcome by fatigue that moving the body forward seems impossible). *Hitting the Wall* thus simultaneously represents the body in the moment of accomplishing an extraordinary feat of strength and at a point of extreme physical limitation. Second, there is a contradiction between the democratic

landscape depicted in the mural and the unequal one in which it was created.¹ The image of the athlete in the wheelchair, for instance, reminds viewers how rare it is to see disabled athletes competing alongside nondisabled athletes. Although the image of the disabled athlete is relatively small, then, it is crucial to the mural's political intervention, as it prompts viewers to contemplate the differences between the social world it depicts (one characterized by equality between women) and the unjust social world that, together, we continue to create and inhabit.

Hitting the Wall thus captures the core theoretical concern of *Accessible Citizenship*: the role of disability images in questioning the construction of political communities and scrutinizing the attendant decisions about who will (and who will not) be included within them. More specifically, this book argues that the corporeal images used to depict national belonging have important consequences for how the rights and obligations of citizenship are distributed. Bodily metaphors used to define nations are a subject of theoretical inquiry for disability scholars, certainly, but they are relevant as well for scholars in any field that takes seriously the issue of political belonging, including Chicana/o studies, border studies, and queer studies (to name those that most directly inform this project). For instance, border anthropologist Jonathan Xavier Inda observes that the "body of the 'illegal' immigrant has served as an important terrain of governmental struggle," resulting in efforts "to exclude the immigrant from the body politic" ("Value of Immigrant Life" 135). The image of the nation as a whole, nondisabled body whose health must be protected from external pollutants justifies the political marginalization not only of immigrants but also of citizens, including those with disabilities and diseases (whose bodies challenge the image of the healthy national body) and racialized and sexual minorities (whose claims to social and political rights are seen to imperil national unity). In other words, the representation of the nation as a whole, healthy body that must be safeguarded against pathogens or parasites has helped to create what historian Mae Ngai calls *alien citizens*:

persons who are “citizens by virtue of their birth . . . but who are presumed to be foreign” (*Impossible Subjects* 2).

Where scholars have, to date, focused on the consequences of the healthy, able-bodied images used to represent the political body, *Accessible Citizenship* examines instead cultural representations that conceptualize political community through images of disability. Such representations, I suggest, have the potential to reconfigure how we perceive the body politic and to transform what we imagine when we (to repurpose Benedict Anderson’s canonized phrase) imagine community. Beginning from disability theorist Tobin Siebers’s assertion that art is “the active site designed to explore and expand the spectrum of humanity that we will accept among us” (*Disability Aesthetics* 10), I consider texts that envision nationalism through images of nonnormative bodies and ask if they might expand the spectrum of citizenry that we will accept in our nations. Ngai notes that national sovereignty is often defined as the nation’s right to exclude, the “self-proclaimed, absolute right to determine its own membership, a right believed to inhere in the nation-state’s very existence” (*Impossible Subjects* 11); the cultural workers discussed in this study challenge us to consider how ideas about national identity might change if they were predicated upon inclusion rather than exclusion. Because the texts examined here refuse the ideal of the healthy, whole body as a paradigm for the nation or the citizen, they provide material through which to explore the ways in which images of disability might open up the idea of national belonging to critical scrutiny.

Instead of envisioning healthy bodies vulnerable to disease, the creators of these texts imagine their political communities as disabled bodies that exist interdependently and act in solidarity with other bodies. Furthermore, because these texts strive toward broader, more expansive, and more just conceptualizations of national belonging, they offer new ways to theorize both citizenship and the representation of disability. Moreover, they do so at times in spite (or even because) of their failure to fully substantiate the inclusive communities they seek. What the texts

I examine here offer—more than a unified or final vision of what a truly accessible form of political belonging might look like—is the beginning of a new framework for re-visioning nationalism and citizenship. In other words, my argument is not that the use of a new bodily metaphor constructs “better” nationalisms, but rather that the use of a different bodily metaphor enables us to ask different questions about our political institutions. This is an important distinction because, as performance scholar Carrie Sandahl notes, disability has long been marshaled in the service of cultural and political work that does not benefit people with disabilities: “Nondisabled artists in all media and genres have appropriated the disability experience to serve as a metaphor expressing their own outsider status, alienation, and alterity, not necessarily the social, economic, and political concerns of actual disabled people” (“Black Man, Blind Man” 583). While it is true that some of the writers and filmmakers included in this study do appropriate disability in ways that can occasionally be troubling, they do so not merely to express their own outsider status but instead to question how political communities define insiders and outsiders, and to link antiracist, feminist, and queer political struggles with struggles for disability rights. As a result, they provide a starting point for imagining accessible political communities.

Enabling Chicanismo

Accessible Citizenships examines Chicana/o literature and film produced after the initial wave of El Movimiento Chicano (or, roughly, from the 1980s forward). In these texts, disability images are used (with varying degrees of success) to expand, reinvent, and critique a range of nationalisms, including those produced and supported by the U.S. and Mexican states as well as Chicana/o cultural nationalism (exemplified in the concept of *Aztlán*).² Chicana/o cultural production constitutes a site of unique theoretical interest for investigating nationhood and citizenship because of the ways in which ethnic Mexicans in the

United States have, according to Ngai, been “racialized as a foreign people, an ‘alien race’ not legitimately present or intended for inclusion in the polity” (*Impossible Subjects* 138).³ The effects of this racialization are visible in texts as widely varied as those responding to the nationalisms of El Movimiento Chicano, those addressing the current human rights crisis on the U.S.-Mexico border, and those portraying contemporary Chicana/o identity as postnational or transnational. Furthermore, these texts, produced on both sides of the border by disabled and non-disabled cultural workers, incorporate disability to grapple with the meaning of citizenship in ways that reveal a marked theoretical coherence and demand a comparative analysis.

My focus on disability and Chicanismo as sources of important insights about nationalism and citizenship stems from a belief in the political value of subaltern or minoritized identities. This belief, however, is not universally embraced in either public rhetoric or scholarly discourse. Disability scholar Lenard Davis, for instance, writes against activism and scholarship grounded in identity claims: “Rather than ignore the unstable nature of disability, rather than try to fix it, we should amplify that quality to distinguish it from other identity groups that have . . . reached the limits of their own projects” (*Bending Over Backwards* 26). Davis’s critique stems from the fact that identity, once defined, can become normative. For him, the radical potential of disability scholarship and activism lies in the fact that disability—encompassing as it does an extraordinary range of physical, psychiatric, and cognitive attributes—constitutes an exceptionally capacious category that might resist the normalizing impulses of identity politics.

Davis’s critique of identity is important, and not lightly set aside. Nonetheless, I emphasize in this project what Michael Hames-García calls “the possibilities of identity politics rather than its limitations” (*Identity Complex* xiv). I suggest that while the potentially normative impulses of identity claims constitute a reason to mobilize them carefully, they are not a reason to eschew them altogether. As Hames-García points out, it is

difficult (if not impossible) to engage in activist work without relying on norms of some kind, since claims “about justice, freedom, solidarity, and the like are by their nature ‘normative,’ that is, they make claims about what things should be like and how people ought to act” (*Fugitive Thought* xx). Indeed, one theorist known for the resistance to norms in her early work, Judith Butler, also concedes this point in her later work: “On the one hand, norms seem to signal the regulatory or normalizing function of power, but from another perspective, norms are precisely what binds individuals together, forming the basis of their ethical and political claims” (*Undoing Gender* 219). It is as a source of ethical and political claims that I invoke identity in this book and insist upon politically marginalized identities as a crucial position from which to reassess nationhood and citizenship.

By claiming disability as a minoritized identity, *Accessible Citizenships* builds upon work by disability scholars like Sandahl and Siebers, who assert the political and cultural value of disability identity. Siebers writes: “While people with disabilities have little power in the social world, their identities possess great theoretical power because they reflect perspectives capable of illuminating the ideological blueprints used to construct social reality” (*Disability Theory* 105). He, like the writers and filmmakers examined in this study, views disability identities as “critical frameworks for identifying and questioning the complicated ideologies on which social injustice and oppression depend” (105). One central hypothesis of this project is that disability images persist in texts that reevaluate the relationship between Chicanas/os and nation-state formations because the perspectives afforded by disability experience provide the kind of theoretical and political insights Siebers describes. Like feminist theorist Paula M.L. Moya, who argues that awareness of our social world depends upon our capacity to “acknowledge and understand the social, political, economic, and epistemic consequences of our own social location” (*Learning from Experience* 43), I contend that disability and Chicanismo, both marginalized

in dominant U.S. constructions of national belonging, provide vantage points from which to reassess nationhood and citizenship. Furthermore, these identities' theoretical importance derives from the fact that they have, in different but related ways and in different historical moments, constituted the subordinated specters against which dominant versions of U.S. national identity have produced and maintained the global hegemonic power of the United States.

Given the significance that this study ascribes to minoritized identities, it is important to specify that I do not define disability as a bodily condition or essence. I emphasize this because, although scholarly inquiry in the humanities now accepts race, gender, and sexuality as social constructs, it is still common to think of disability as a medical condition located in the body and not in the society that refuses to accommodate it. As a result, Davis asserts: "We should not go on record as saying that disability is a fixed identity, when the power behind the concept is that disability presents us with a malleable view of the human body and identity" (26). Nonetheless, as Moya points out, the fact that identities are malleable does not mean they lack material effects. She writes: "while identities are not fixed, neither are they random"; indeed, there is a "limit to the range of identities we can plausibly 'construct' or 'choose' for any individual in a given society" (*Learning* 45).⁴ More importantly, "the different social categories (such as gender, race, class, and sexuality) that together constitute an individual's social location are causally related to the experiences she will have" (39). In a very different context, sociologist Manuel Castells similarly describes identity as "people's source of meaning and experience" (*Information Age* 6). What Moya and Castells reveal is that the experiences that accrue to specific identities provide knowledge about the world and the way it works. Moya's work is especially important to this study because of her insights about the ways in which the identities of people who are socially and politically marginalized can provide particularly valuable information about the regimes of power that govern a society.

A more detailed discussion of Baca's *Hitting the Wall* will illustrate how political claims grounded in marginalized identities can promote a rigorous interrogation of the idea of national belonging. As stated previously, the mural was created through the 1984 Olympic Arts Festival, an event funded by the Olympic Organizing Committee (OOC) and designed to present Los Angeles as a cosmopolitan, egalitarian city—a model for the democratic ideal of equality that forms an enduring part of U.S. national mythology. As OOC Vice President and Olympic Arts Festival Director Robert Fitzpatrick describes it, the event was guided by the premise that “art is . . . an instrument of truth, an opportunity to put aside differences and rejoice in being alive” (“Olympic Arts Festival” 248). Certainly, the mural depicts a diverse group of women “putting aside their differences” through their shared participation in a rigorous athletic event; an interpretation of the mural that emphasizes this would not, therefore, be entirely inaccurate. Yet despite the OOC's vision of Los Angeles as a site of harmonious equality, the experience of many of its residents is quite different. Los Angeles is a highly segregated city; while Fitzpatrick might truthfully claim that the city's “identity lies in its diversity” (248), it is also important to acknowledge the tensions that accompany that diversity. These tensions, moreover, reflect larger struggles over national identity and political belonging.

The OOC's vision of Los Angeles, which implies equality among its residents, leaves out the legacy of inequality that remains inscribed in the city's built environment. This legacy has been formed by events ranging from the 1959 displacement of the residents of Chavez Ravine to the 1913 anti-begging ordinance that was, according to Susan Schweik, designed to remove working-class people with disabilities from public view. In other words, the OOC's vision of Los Angeles is most easily adopted by those whose lives are unaffected by this history. If art is “an instrument of truth,” one might ask: *Whose truth?* Does Baca's mural reflect the OOC's truth of Los Angeles as a city defined by its diversity, or does it reflect the more complete truth of a site

formed by national and local efforts to manage and hierarchize diversity? I argue the latter, positing that Baca's mural does not merely depict the temporary "putting aside" of differences but forces viewers to consider the social transformation needed to create a world in which difference is not structurally linked to inequality.

For example, an undocumented woman without a California driver's license who depends on the city's cumbersome public transportation system might not share the OOC's view of Los Angeles as a site in which difference is valued. Viewing the mural, she might see the runners' freedom as a contrast to the barriers imposed by automobile-centric urban design on her life. She might see not a depiction of what Los Angeles *is* but what it *should be* (a place where women of color, with and without disabilities, possess the ability to move freely and are adequately represented in the public sphere). From her perspective, the mural might appear as a statement that the built environment of Los Angeles, which is inconvenient and unsafe for people (especially women) without cars, is unjust. If she navigates Los Angeles in a wheelchair, she might also appreciate the image of a disabled athlete even while critiquing the fact that the woman in the wheelchair is relegated to the background. Such a viewer might note the effort to be inclusive but still wish for more representations of women with disabilities in the public landscape of her city. As a result, from her perspective the mural might reveal something important about the society in which it was created and the position of people with disabilities within that society. In neither interpretation is the depiction of women "putting aside their differences" most salient; rather, both emphasize the mural's effort to imagine a more democratic city. Even as I invoke this hypothetical viewer, however, it is important to note that she might not ever see the mural at all. The art historian Shifra Goldman has critiqued the Olympic mural project because the placement of the murals along freeways has made them difficult to see, particularly for residents of the city who do not own cars and rarely travel by freeway; the placement of the

murals also resulted in dangerous working conditions for the muralists and their crews while the murals were being painted. The fraught context of its production, then, makes the political intervention of *Hitting the Wall*—and its claim for the right to free movement in public space—all the more important.⁵

The final point I wish to make about the political intervention made by *Hitting the Wall* has to do with its sophisticated reformulation of Chicana/o nationalism. This becomes apparent when we examine the mural as an artifact of Chicana/o visual culture. Drawing upon the iconography of Mexican cultural nationalism and inspired by the vibrant mural tradition of postrevolutionary Mexico, in which artists like Diego Rivera, José Clemente Orozco, and David Alfaro Siqueiros used murals to celebrate the everyday lives of Mexico's working people, Chicana/o artists in the United States began producing murals in the 1960s and 1970s as El Movimiento Chicano gained momentum. Many of these murals contained overtly nationalist themes, depicting Chicanas/os as the rightful occupants of Aztlán. At the same time, as cultural critic Richard T. Rodríguez points out, many images emerging from El Movimiento, including its murals, depict the heteronormative Chicana/o family as a stand-in for the nation, so that "Chicano/a cultural nationalism and notions of la familia continue to be codified by dominant articulations of masculinity" (*Next of Kin* 20). In particular, a mural entitled *La Familia* (1975), painted by the Royal Chicano Air Force (RCAF)⁶ art collective on a freeway pylon in San Diego's Chicano Park, exemplifies what Rodríguez identifies as a visual archive that reifies "la familia as a sacred institution in which gender roles are fixed in the name of tradition" (*Next of Kin* 54). The mural depicts a nuclear family consisting of a father, mother, and son. The father stands with muscled arms wide open (as in a crucifix) against a backdrop consisting of the United Farm Workers' eagle logo; his wife, considerably shorter, stands in front of him embracing their son, who stands in the foreground clutching a schoolbook. While the image celebrates the working-class Chicano family, the placement and size of the

family members' bodies both reinforce gender hierarchies. Furthermore, the future of the Chicana/o nation, embodied in the image of the child with a schoolbook, is gendered male.⁷

By contrast, *Hitting the Wall* embraces the possibility of a cultural nationalism without patriarchal gender politics. *Hitting the Wall* also features a person with muscular arms outstretched as the central image; the similarities between the body of the principal runner in *Hitting the Wall* and that of the father of *La Familia* are striking. Yet Baca's mural is both a tribute to the RCAF mural and a feminist reply to it; as striking as the similarities between the two works are the differences between them. The connotations of martyrdom implied by the crucifixion pose are replaced with a corporeal stance (still with arms outstretched) representing athletic triumph. The social hierarchy implied by the positioning of the family members is subverted as collective groups of runners take the place of the patriarchal family. Finally, the fit, strong, able bodies of the RCAF mural, while not entirely supplanted by disability images, are reframed by the inclusion of the runner in the wheelchair. Baca places herself firmly *within* the Chicana/o nation (employing its best-known art form and invoking one of its most canonized images) while also imagining that nation from a perspective that is explicitly informed by feminism and disability. In other words, she expands the body politic of Los Angeles and the dominant U.S. national narrative as well as that of Aztlán.

By discussing how Baca's mural produces different meanings for different viewers, I reinforce a point made by Moya and Ramón Saldivar, who assert that "every interpretive framework simultaneously illuminates certain salient facts about its objects of study even as it obscures others" ("Fictions" 3). The mural's cultural value lies in its ability to produce a multiplicity of meanings when viewed from different interpretive frameworks. At the same time, the mural also reveals certain frameworks to yield richer and more nuanced meanings than others. The perspective of the OOC—one that affirms, instead of challenging, the Los Angeles built environment—is not as complete as those

informed by disability activism or Chicana feminism. The latter perspectives turn a critical eye on the society in which the mural was produced and attend to Baca's position in activist Chicana/o visual culture. They illuminate how Baca—like other Chicana/o cultural workers—motivates viewers of her art to consider how the world might be made more just. These frameworks account for the ways in which the mural's utopian content hits the wall of the unequal social and political landscape in which it was made. Furthermore, because the mural invites interpretations grounded in both Chicana/o and disability studies, it reveals how the two critical frameworks might speak meaningfully to one another.

Just as I note a productive tension between the title of *Hitting the Wall* and its content, I now wish to explore the tensions contained in the title of this book: *Accessible Citizenship: Disability, Nation, and the Cultural Politics of Greater Mexico*. These emerge from the use of the following terms: *Accessible/Citizenship* and *Nation/Greater Mexico*. These terms are intended to provoke a set of questions. What does it mean to make citizenship accessible? Is it politically desirable to make it so? Is the concept so overdetermined by its own legacy of exclusion that finding a new institution through which to claim membership and rights in a political community might be more appropriate? What is the relationship between citizenship and nationalism? If citizenship is an institution that links an individual to the state, how might non-state-sponsored nationalisms—like Chicana/o nationalism—provoke new ways of thinking about political belonging? Finally, the terms *nation* and *Greater Mexico* also exist in tension, as the term *Greater Mexico* indicates a transnational community of people of Mexican origin that exceeds the geopolitical boundaries of a single nation-state. These issues are crucial for the project's overarching argument; therefore, the following two sections of this introduction will address them in detail by locating this study within current scholarly conversations about access to citizenship and about the idea of Greater Mexico.

Citizenship and Political Access

Theoretical inquiry in Chicana/o studies and disability studies demands a reassessment of citizenship as a political ideal. This is because both fields emerge from activist social movements aimed not solely at securing a more advantageous position within an unjust society but instead, and much more broadly, at large-scale social transformation. For Robert McRuer, the goal of the disability movement is nothing less than “a newly imagined and newly configured public sphere where full participation is not contingent on an able body” (*Crip Theory* 30). McRuer’s language echoes that of the Americans with Disabilities Act, which asserts that disability should not interfere with a person’s “right to fully participate in all aspects of society.” At the same time, McRuer’s notion of *access* extends well beyond the legal mandate of the ADA: “An accessible society, according to the best, critically disabled perspectives, is not simply one with ramps and Braille signs on ‘public’ buildings, but one in which our ways of relating to, and depending on, each other have been reconfigured” (*Crip Theory* 94). McRuer envisions a society that privileges interdependent relationships among its members instead of one that idealizes the singular political agent, interrogating the liberal emphasis on the independent subject that constitutes the foundation of Western democracy and remains the privileged subject of political rights. In other words, he presents for critical scrutiny the subject that is perceived as a viable candidate for citizenship. McRuer thus critiques a discourse of subjectivity that, as María Josefina Saldaña-Portillo writes in a very different context, “requires the subject to become an agent of transformation in his own right, one who is highly ethical, mobile, progressive, risk taking, and masculinist” (*Revolutionary Imagination* 9). Although Saldaña-Portillo is not a scholar of disability, her choice of words puts her work into conversation with McRuer. Saldaña-Portillo suggests that both neo-imperialist development projects and revolutionary resistance projects in the Americas are “animated by a particular theory

of subjectivity” (6) that privileges the individualism of the liberal citizen and relies upon a notion of “human perfectibility” (7). Both Saldaña-Portillo and McRuer, then, critique the ways in which the construction of citizenship rests upon a discourse privileging individualism and independence over collectivity and interdependency.

The fact that citizenship is so intertwined with the ideal of the sovereign individual is not the only reason scholars question its usefulness as a political goal. For Asian American cultural critic Lisa Lowe, the concept of citizenship has two additional flaws. The first is the fact that it is always predicated on exclusion, separating those who “belong” in a given national territory from those who do not. Lowe writes: “in a political system constituted by the historical exclusion and labor of racialized groups, the promise of inclusion through citizenship and rights cannot resolve the material inequalities of racialized exploitation” (*Immigrant Acts* 23). In this critique she is joined by anthropologist Renato Rosaldo: “Even in its late-eighteenth-century Enlightenment origins, citizenship in the republic differentiated men of privilege from the rest: second-class citizens and noncitizens” (“Cultural Citizenship” 27). Lowe’s second objection lies in the fact that citizenship is inherently tied to the state: “the civil rights project confronts its limits where the pursuit of enfranchisement coincides with a refortification of the state as the guarantor of rights” (23). For these reasons, Lowe determines that citizenship is at best a “site of contradiction for racialized Americans” (24).

The racializing logic of citizenship is deeply intertwined with a logic of able-bodied supremacy. Anthropologist Aihwa Ong observes that “liberal conceptions of citizenship” are often codified through “popular notions about who deserves to belong in implicit terms of productivity and consumption” (“Cultural Citizenship” 739). This results in a “human-capital assessment of citizens” that weights “those who can pull themselves up by their bootstraps against those who make claims on the welfare state” and results in a definition of citizenship as

“the civic duty of individuals to reduce their burden on society” (739). Although for Ong this approach to citizenship aligns the institution with “the process of ‘whitening’” (739), there are important disability resonances to her critique as well, since the imperative to be “productive” rather than a “burden” is often used to portray people with disabilities as a drain on a society’s resources and, thus, as unfit for citizenship. Even the metaphor of “pulling oneself up by one’s bootstraps” is, after all, an ableist one. Furthermore, as Ong points out, such a construction of citizenship is heavily aligned with “neoliberalism, with its celebration of freedom, progress, and individualism” (739)—an economic model that not only relies ideologically upon an ideal able-bodied subject but that also, as disability scholars point out, produces physical impairment. Michael Davidson, for instance, reminds us that neoliberalism, “far from improving access to healthcare, medicines, and sanitation has increased disabilities and disease by privatizing healthcare, exposing workers to industrial waste, and denying access to cheap, generic drugs” (“On the Outskirts” 737). Neoliberalism, then, exacerbates the racializing and disabling effects of dominant constructions of citizenship.

The concerns of the scholars cited above point to the need for more substantive inquiry into the substance and significance of citizenship. Indeed, Lowe’s argument that recourse to citizenship ultimately refers us back to the state brings us to an unresolved paradox described by Hannah Arendt in the aftermath of World War II. As Arendt notes, the nation-state remains the only entity in our current social world that has the power to guarantee rights, making *human rights* indistinguishable from those of the citizen: “The Rights of Man, supposedly inalienable, proved to be unenforceable . . . whenever people appeared who were no longer citizens of any sovereign state” (*Origins of Totalitarianism* 293). Arendt argues that the loss of political status has “become identical with expulsion from humanity altogether” (297). This parallels a more recent observation from Latina sociologist Suzanne Oboler that “noncitizenship is paradoxically

a much more meaningful and immediate life experience in structuring perceptions of belonging than is citizenship itself” (“Redefining Citizenship” 22–23). From the viewpoint of the citizen, the concept of *human rights* appears as a given; from that of the noncitizen, for whom no state agrees to protect these rights, such rights appear nonexistent. This leads Arendt to conclude: “We are not born equal; we become equal as members of a group on the strength of our decision to guarantee ourselves mutually equal rights” (301). Citizenship, at present, remains the institution by which we “guarantee ourselves mutually equal rights,” yet its alliance with the state makes it a decidedly imperfect institution, one that leaves many out of its fold. In fact, it might be said that citizenship is the means by which we collectively decide *not* to guarantee equal rights to certain people (those deemed noncitizens). Precisely for this reason, the need is more urgent than ever to interrogate citizenship with the goal of expanding its accessibility or of replacing it entirely with a new mechanism for asserting political belonging and claiming rights.

If for Arendt the need to open citizenship to critical scrutiny arose from the dilemma of stateless people in the aftermath of two world wars, a pressing concern today is the number of undocumented migrants across the globe. In many cases, the undocumented migrant—who is often a citizen of a state but is prevented by political and economic forces from living within its territory and enjoying the rights it provides—is, unlike the stateless people Arendt describes, apparently made vulnerable by an *excess* of state affiliations. The state where she lives, works, and pays taxes refuses to guarantee her rights because her citizenship is perceived to lie elsewhere; the state that legally sponsors her citizenship fails to guarantee her rights because she has been forced to relocate her body and her labor. In response, scholars have theorized new forms of citizenship capable of accounting for subjects whose lives, labor, and civic obligations are not contained within a single nation-state. Two of the most influential are

Ong's notion of *flexible citizenship* and Rosaldo's concept of *cultural citizenship*.

Ong's theory of flexible citizenship emerges from an analysis of how individuals and governments respond to globalization by developing "a flexible notion of citizenship and sovereignty as strategies to accumulate capital and power" (*Flexible Citizenship* 6). Although she acknowledges *flexibility* as "the modus operandi of late capitalism" (3) and notes that late capitalism promotes an enormous power differential between "mobile and nonmobile subjects" (11), her theory remains most useful for describing subjects with a relatively high degree of mobility. By contrast, people with disabilities, people of color, those Ngai calls *alien citizens*, and the undocumented are not merely "non-mobile subjects" but are subjects actively *immobilized* by the disempowering and discriminatory sociopolitical landscapes they navigate. If, as Ong argues, "strategies of flexible accumulation have promoted a flexible attitude toward citizenship" (17), this "flexible attitude" is a double-edged sword. On one hand, a flexible attitude toward citizenship is a luxury enjoyed by those who live with the security that at least one state will sponsor their citizenship. At the same time, others live with the knowledge that the state has taken a "flexible attitude" toward the protection of their rights; for them, citizenship appears inflexible indeed.

To address how people assert their rights when states flexibly deny them, Rosaldo has developed the concept of cultural citizenship. For Rosaldo, the exercise of cultural citizenship entails "using public space to claim public rights and recognition" ("Cultural Citizenship" 36); the concept encompasses a range of everyday activities through which people claim political and social belonging within the national territory they inhabit. William V. Flores and Rina Benmayor describe why the concept of cultural citizenship is so crucial: "immigrants who might not be citizens in the legal sense or who might not even be in this country legally, but who labor and contribute to the economic and cultural wealth of the country, would be recognized as legitimate political subjects claiming rights for themselves and

their children, and in that sense as citizens” (“Introduction” 11). An understanding of cultural citizenship, then, illuminates not only the economic and aesthetic contributions of marginalized groups, but their political contributions as well.

The most important of these political contributions may be an enriched understanding of the concept of rights, which results in an enriched concept of democracy. In a later, solo-authored essay, Flores extends Rosaldo’s work to suggest that benefits from the exercise of cultural citizenship extend beyond immigrants. He notes that when groups historically denied citizenship—including women, people of color, and people with disabilities—claim rights, their claims actually result in the creation of new rights: “These new rights not only extend participation but reframe the context of that participation in terms of the needs of the new citizen groups” (“New Citizens” 88). In this way, civil rights struggles benefit society as a whole, not just the specific group of people they seek to liberate, because they make available to everyone an expanded framework for conceptualizing rights. For instance, current efforts by undocumented immigrants in the United States to establish cultural citizenship can broaden the idea of basic rights to include the right to labor outside one’s nation of origin or the right to live in the same territory as one’s children or life partner. Michael Bérubé makes a similar point when he reminds us that the rights of people with disabilities “were invented, and implemented slowly and with great difficulty” (“Citizenship and Disability” 55). For Bérubé, the claiming of rights by minoritized groups makes possible a new understanding of democracy: as we seek “to extend the promise of democracy to previously excluded individuals and groups,” he writes, we discover that “our understandings of democracy and parity are infinitely revisable” (56).

In titling this book *Accessible Citizenships*, my goal is to bring to the concept of citizenship (or political belonging) this sense of “infinite revisability” that Bérubé sees as essential to democracy. Citizenship in this study functions as a way of making the distribution of rights more equitable, not as a fixed relationship to

a defined nation-state. In this sense it functions analogously to what Butler describes as norms that are “useful” to social transformation: “norms that no one will own, norms that will have to work not through normalization or racial or ethnic assimilation, but through becoming collective sites of continuous political labor” (*Undoing Gender* 231). More than simply adding another term to the rapidly proliferating theoretical lexicon on citizenship, then, I bring together a set of texts that help us think rigorously about the idea of citizenship—juridical citizenship, cultural citizenship, and all of the flexible and inflexible citizenship forms that marginalized people with and without legal status must navigate—and about the kind of body politic we wish to inhabit. These texts offer not a new “kind” of citizenship but a new set of questions with which to approach citizenship in order to maintain it as a site of “continuous political labor.” As Arendt writes: “Human dignity needs a new guarantee which can be found only in a new political principle, in a new law on earth, whose validity this time must comprehend the whole of humanity” (ix). I leave open the question of whether this “new political principle” might include a reformulated, accessible version of what we presently call *citizenship*, or whether the institution itself must be eradicated in order to create a more accessible means of guaranteeing human dignity for the whole of humanity. As my textual analyses in the body chapters of this book will show, the cultural objects I examine offer diverse answers to this question, even as they all begin from the premise that the body politic in its current shape is unjust and must be redefined.