

# Invisible People's Felt Lives, with a Dash of Gonzo

*The Undocumented Americans*

by Karla Cornejo Villavicencio. New York: One World, 2020. Hardcover, 208 pp., USD\$26.

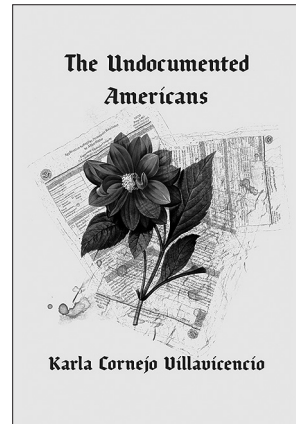
Reviewed by Lisa A. Phillips, SUNY New Paltz, United States

When Karla Cornejo Villavicencio was fifteen years old, her father, an Ecuadorian immigrant, grew depressed about how he was being treated at his restaurant job. He had an abusive new manager who called the delivery men “wetbacks and spics” and threatened to alert ICE. Having just watched *All the President's Men* for the tenth time, she telephoned the restaurant and told the owner she was a newspaper reporter who had received a tip from a customer about racist abuse in the kitchen. Would he comment? He begged her not to write the article. “It’s a pretty good story” (135), she mused. The ruse worked. The new manager was fired. Her father’s mood lifted.

The injustices in the lives of undocumented immigrants, particularly in the Trump-era cauldron of racism and vulnerability, remain a powerful story. In *The Undocumented Americans*, Cornejo Villavicencio finally tells it. Her youthful mission to save her father from despair matures into an adult quest to portray the lives of undocumented immigrants, her own included, to stave off the blunt dualistic thinking of a nation that perceives them as either demon-criminal-lazy resource drains or preternaturally hard workers, martyring themselves to exploitative, precarious working conditions so the next generation can thrive.

Using a participatory reporting method that evokes what cultural anthropologist Renato Rosaldo calls “deep hanging out” (Clifford, 1997, 56)—participatory, informal immersion in a culture—Cornejo Villavicencio creates nuanced and empathetic accounts of day workers on Staten Island; Ground Zero cleanup workers still contending with the physical and emotional impact of the chaotic 9/11 recovery effort; and families in Flint, Michigan, who cannot get clean water without a state ID. In Miami, she takes readers inside the world of underground pharmacies and healers serving the undocumented community. In New Haven, Connecticut, where she is pursuing a PhD at Yale, she bonds with two teenage girls whose father is in sanctuary in a local church, one of the few places ICE will not forcibly enter.

Cornejo Villavicencio no longer has any use for the hard-boiled reporter persona



that emboldened her as a teen. She states from the outset that because she is an undocumented American herself, “it feels unethical to put on the drag of a journalist” (xvi). Yet she resisted writing the memoir literary agents clamored for after she published an anonymous essay in the *Daily Beast* on being an undocumented soon-to-be Harvard graduate. *The Undocumented Americans* is a powerful hybrid of first-person, creative nonfiction grounded in thorough reporting. She threads the narrative with reflections on her own life as a DACA recipient with a complicated upbringing. When she was a toddler, her parents left her in the care of her relatives for years while they built their lives in the United States, the abandonment leaving a lasting imprint on her psyche.

Her style is a heady combination of punk-rock rage, poetic speculation, and mad pride. “Y hermanxs, it’s time to fuck some shit up,” she announces in the book’s introduction. Other terms of engagement include her translation method, which is literary, not literal, and meant to capture nuances of character, mood, and intellect. She uses pseudonyms and rips up her notes once she has used them to ensure her sources’ safety and keep their trust. She warns readers that she is “just crazy enough” for the task of writing the book, 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 be crazy” (xiii–xvii).

Cornejo Villavicencio means this literally. She lists her multiple mental illness diagnoses and points to extended parent-child separations and time in immigrant detention camps as traumas that cause “permanent psychological and physical changes” in the brain (61). She uses her condition to bond with her subjects, exchanging confidences about symptoms and medications.

But she is also referring to the literary connotations of crazy: passionate, impractically determined, uninhibited. On a trip to Florida to explore how undocumented immigrants, who cannot purchase health insurance, cope with illness and healing, she purchases antipsychotic medication without a prescription at an underground pharmacy and participates in a Haitian “vodou cleansing” (82) meant to protect her undocumented friends and family members from deportation. Out drinking with the women who have guided her through this furtive world, they glibly swap stories in her presence of the hazards of housecleaning—toxic chemicals, psychological abuse from employers, the hazard of deportation from a misstep as quotidian as inputting the wrong PIN number into a home security system, and nightmares about concentration camps. When “Sweet Home Alabama” comes on the bar radio, one of the women loudly sings along, drawing the stares of several white patrons. Nervous, Cornejo Villavicencio imagines one of them rising from his perch, gunning her group down, and walking over their bodies. She fights back her fear by embracing the irony of her companion’s love for a Southern rock classic about homecoming. She joins in the singing and spontaneously pours a drink over her head: “The girls cheer and I let out a bloodcurdling scream. My first ever” (94).

While writing this review, I toyed with the phrase “Latinx Gonzo” to describe the brash center-stage presence of Cornejo Villavicencio’s narrator. But the phrase does not seem quite right, given the vast difference in what is at stake in each writer’s

work. Hunter S. Thompson's Gonzo journalism revels in the performative and in the game, with points scored for theatrical exposure of hypocrisy, gritty sexual and violent detail, a flash of fiction to catalyze his facts, and the bravado of relentless immersion—he rode with the Hell's Angels until they stomped him to the ground to get rid of him. Cornejo Villavicencio and her subjects, in contrast, spend their days resisting being stomped to the ground. Her barstool scream may be catharsis, or performance for the sake of a dramatic story, or both. In any case, the outcry has a clear message: *We should not have to hide or be afraid. Sometimes we are outrageous because our lives are outrageous. Go ahead and stare.*

When Cornejo Villavicencio engages in fictive speculation—another Gonzo trademark—her aim is to awaken the reader to what is unknowable about undocumented lives, not to goad with satire, as Thompson did. Her chapter profiling Latinx day laborers on Staten Island focuses on their willingness to do volunteer clean-up work after Hurricane Sandy hit in 2012, despite risks to their own health and safety. The first responders hoped—in vain, as it turned out—the community's gratitude would make them less vulnerable to exploitation by their employers. The chapter concludes with a detailed imagining of the final hours for a homeless alcoholic who drowned in a basement in the storm. None of the other laborers wanted to talk about who he was, so Cornejo Villavicencio recreated him as a man who found solace in his last moments with a wounded stray squirrel. She describes how he stroked the squirrel as the water rose, because “no creature should have to die alone” (29). She thus blesses him with a humanity readers would not otherwise see in a news brief about his death or a rote count of storm fatalities.

*The Undocumented Americans* was published in late March 2020, as the globe shuttered doors and borders against the COVID-19 pandemic. Immigration injustices, like many pressing issues, fell off the public's radar. There is a real worry that the unfortunate timing may have diminished the impact of this short but mighty book, which has the potential to transform writing about immigration in the way that *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* transformed writing about poverty. Like James Agee, Cornejo Villavicencio insists on the necessity of the literary in portraying the complexity, paradoxes, pain, and beauty of disenfranchised, soulful human beings. Dry facts and literal translations are not enough. Art must step in.