

*The Undocumented Americans*. Karla Cornejo Villavicencio. New York: One World, 2020. 185 pp. \$17. Paperback ISBN-13: 9780399592706.

Karla Cornejo Villavicencio's *The Undocumented Americans*, a series of essays about undocumented immigrants in the first decades of the twenty-first century, was published in 2020 to acclaim from major newspapers, the National Book Award (which named Villavicencio its first undocumented finalist), and even Barack Obama. Defying genre, the book reads like a fusion of journalism and personal essay—notwithstanding Villavicencio's own claim that “I am not a journalist” because of her propensity to “get *involved*” in trying to help her subjects because “these people are all my parents...I am a professional immigrant's daughter.”

The book both cites and criticizes academic work on undocumented immigrants even as its main audience lies far beyond the university. Yet as researchers and as human beings, those who write and teach about migration should not miss this book. To the scholarly reader, *The Undocumented Americans* offers an implicit (and occasionally explicit) provocation: portray us in our full humanity.

On its surface, the book is a series of essays, each loosely based around a group of undocumented immigrants. These are stories most of us have not heard before: Staten Island day laborers proud to have volunteered their skills helping neighbors in the aftermath of Hurricane Sandy; undocumented immigrants suffering illness and death after working amid the rubble of the Twin Towers; Miami women resourcefully blending Western and folk medicine to find healing without health insurance; and families suffering from Flint, Michigan's water contamination crises while navigating barriers of language and immigration status.

Yet the book is far more than simply a review of the evening news through the eyes of undocumented people. It is an accounting of both the individuality of undocumented human beings and the collective trauma that being undocumented in the twenty-first century United States has inflicted on people's bodies, minds, and families. We hear the stories of undocumented immigrants falling in love with each other over cappuccinos; memorializing a beloved pet salamander with a solid gold and ruby pendant; birdwatching in a Flint backyard; and wistfully recalling years of manual labor in a chocolate and granola factory as “the most beautiful time of my life” (105). Though offered with little fanfare, the message is clear: we are *so* much more than just our immigration status.

At the same time, Villavicencio bluntly portrays the ways that undocumented status can topple the very foundations of a person's life in systematic ways that defy individual attempts to overcome adversity. She illustrates this most penetratingly through the stories of her own struggles with mental health and the complex portrait she draws of her brilliant, determined, yet ultimately fallible immigrant father. Villavicencio herself suffers from a litany of mental health challenges that her psychiatrist tells her are at least somewhat the result of her parents leaving her in Ecuador for several years as a toddler when they first came to pay off debts by

working in the United States. Early in the book, she refers to the day New York State stripped undocumented immigrants of their driver's licenses, ruining her father's good living as a taxi driver, as "the night my dad started dying" (41). By the end of the book, we understand her strong language: he has a cancer scare but exhausted by years of an unstable economic life, refuses the recommended biopsy. Her stories of undocumented immigrants are filled with characters like Javier, a loving father deported after a high-profile campaign to remain in the United States, whose family now describes him as "impatient," "mad," and "moody" from being forcibly separated from his wife and children. The American immigration system has stolen the father in more ways than one, and this family is one of many in the book that may not survive the stresses of undocumented life intact.

The hopes and dreams of undocumented immigrants, Villavicencio shows, are each entirely unique. Yet a universal fact hangs over them all: the US immigration system cares not about their longstanding connections to US families and communities, nor indeed, their individual humanity.

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