Karla Cornejo Villavicencio's *The Undocumented Americans*: Between a Memoir and a Manifesto

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Abstract

Karla Cornejo Villavicencio positions her book *The Undocumented Americans* as a "work of creative non-fiction," experimentally mixing literary genres such as the memoir, personal essay, and testimonio. She draws on journalistic methods of doing interviews and fact-checking exercises, but departs from them at will as she blends these stories from the undocumented community with the personal and the magical. This essay details some of these creative overtures and discusses how and why Villavicencio's work sits uncomfortably between fact and fiction, between memoir and manifesto, as she sets out to represent America's undocumented.

The essay examines the politics of Villavicencio's unapologetic tone, her focus on undocumented life post-migration, and her mapping of the self as an extension of community. It contextualizes her work in relation to the self-narratives that appear during the youth movements surrounding the DREAM Act in the first decade of the 21st century and probes at the limits of self-representation, especially for an undocumented writer. Villavicencio registers her struggles at representing a community that is vulnerable to the extent that it is rendered voiceless, but also overrepresented in the mainstream media as caricatures or through simplified categorizations. Her critical engagement with representing undocumented voices also manifests as complaints against translation biases in the publishing industry. Long after the publication of her book, Villavicencio has continued the behind-the-scenes work to position her voice, doing book readings and interviews. This essay is interested in Villavicencio's efforts to retain the autonomy over her voice within the textual boundaries and beyond.

Keywords

DREAMer Memoir; Karla Cornejo Villavicencio; Magical Realism; Self Representation; Testimonio; Translation; Undocumented Migrants.

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Introduction: A list of Nots

Karla Cornejo Villavicencio starts with a list of differentials to orient her book. *The Undocumented Americans* (2020) is *not* a DREAMer memoir, *nor* is it a detached journalistic take on the eleven million undocumented people living in the US. By her own admission, the book should be read as a "work of creative non-fiction" (xvi). What stands out immediately is a strong narratorial voice that is self-reflexive and is uncomfortable with normative genre conventions.

Villavicencio herself is an undocumented migrant and her book is born out of a need to self-represent. The desire motivates a contemplation of a voice that belongs to the undocumented migrant community, and at the same time retains Villavicencio's own individual style and tone. To convey the story of undocumented migrants, she resorts to an experimental mix of literary genres (memoir, personal essay, testimonio); she draws on journalistic methods of doing interviews and fact-checking exercises, but departs from them at will as she blends these stories that she reports with the personal and the magical. This essay details some of these creative overtures and discusses how and why Villavicencio's work sits uncomfortably between fact and fiction, between memoir and manifesto, as she sets out to represent America's undocumented.

I examine the politics of Villavicencio's unapologetic tone, her focus on undocumented life post-migration, and her mapping of the self as an extension of community. I contextualize her work in relation to the first public undocumented self-narratives that appear during the youth movements surrounding the DREAM Act in the first decade of the 21st century and probe at the limits of self-representation, especially for an undocumented writer.

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Not a Migration Story

Already with the title of her book, *The Undocumented Americans*, Karla Cornejo Villavicencio begins her efforts at reclaiming aspects of her identity that are at odds with each other—she is undocumented[1], and she is American. Villavicencio has continuously lived in the US since she was five, when her parents first brought her from Ecuador to join them in the US. Even though her physical presence and cultural assimilation in the US are undeniable, her

"undocumented" immigration status discounts her existence politically (with immense social and economic consequences). She shares this incongruity—between a person's social and political realities—with some eleven million undocumented people living in the US "without papers," that is, without official permission to be in the US. *The Undocumented Americans* is a testament to the existence of this community and an attempt to make its members visible "as more than laborers, … sufferers or dreamers" (xv). She addresses the various myths white America creates around undocumented migrants—undocumented migrants living in the shadows, high-functioning migrant children suffering from low self-esteem and in need of white guidance, migrants who speak like they are kindergartners, migrants who are lazy, migrants who are hardworking and grateful—and shows how these stereotypical ascriptions seek to legitimize the community's direct or indirect exploitation.

Almost as an instant refusal to play by publishing industry expectations from an undocumented writer, Villavicencio announces that her book is not going to be a tragic migration story. In fact, it skips over the border-crossing almost entirely to focus on the migrants already living in the US. In writing her book, she interviews several randomly chosen undocumented migrants of Latinx[2] background in the US but instead of focusing on their migration story, she chooses to focus on their survival story.

> I would not ask undocumented subjects why they came to America, no focus on push/pull factors, because I believe migration is a human right. I would not ask, except in rare cases, how they came to America. No thrilling, explicit border-crossing stories. I would ask them if they felt American. No apologizing for our illegality. But I would ask them if they had regrets. I would ask them if they had nightmares. (Arthurs)

The product is the documentation of the "slow, day-in-the-life stories" of undocumented migrants that does not feed the industry's appetite (Belli). There are no dramatic plot twists nor emotional meltdowns in the book, and no attempts are made to inspire or evoke sympathy in its white readers. Villavicencio observes that the "stories that came out and had become sort of popular about immigrants, undocumented or not, were stories from people who were pretty grateful to America. It seemed like the point in a lot of these narratives was to change racist white people's minds about us. And that didn't feel right with me" (Lozada). Her response was a book that refuses to play to the tastes and expectations of the white US citizenry: "I didn't write it for you to *like* it" (*Undocumented Americans* xvi). She opts for a bold refashioning of her intended readership instead: "This book is for young immigrants

and children of immigrants[3]. [. . .] This book will give you permission to let go" (xvii). It seeks to forge a connection with the US' undocumented youth and exposes them to the futility and toxicity of narratives of gratitude: be it towards white America in the hopes of making migrant presence in the US more acceptable, or towards their migrant parents who sacrifice a lot to give them the opportunity to live in the US, but in return expect success and distinction from their children (Gurba). She hopes a direct and honest conversation would bring young migrants to a deeper understanding of the full effect of generational trauma caused by migration and allow them to live their lives on their own terms and not according to what others expect of them. Her book is to function as a manual, a template for young undocumented writers, nudging them to allow themselves the freedom to write their own stories in an assertive and unapologetic tone, to claim the first person narratorial voice, to permit themselves to experiment with genres and forms, to be creative and playful while sensitively portraying the violent erasures and exploitations of undocumented people (Villavicencio "Karla Cornejo Villavicencio on 'The Undocumented Americans'"). Critics reckoned with Villavicencio's work as "caustic" and "hardcore," labelling it a "punk manifesto" (Lozada, Gurba, Arthurs). *The Undocumented Americans*' focus, intended readership, tone, and form work together to build its exposition of undocumented migration. The end product is a messy (filled with random stories of undocumented migrants), lyrical (translated as poetry), and complex (written from a place of shared trauma) representation of undocumented life. At its core lies the distilled message: undocumented Americans *are* a part of the US. They exist and they should not apologize for their presence.

The book centers around Staten Island, Ground Zero (site of the former World Trade Center buildings), Miami, Flint, Cleveland, New Haven, intentionally avoiding the Southern border cities, which immediately crop up in discussions on undocumented migration to the US. There is also a personal reason for the selection of these places: as an undocumented writer, traveling too far from home and her network poses a challenge and a risk: "I was scared when I set out to write this book, scared of flying, scared of ICE. [. . .] I wondered if I was putting my parents at risk" (Arthurs). Staying away from the border, however, meant focusing on the local. This shift in focus helped her convey the ubiquity of undocumented migrants in the various cities and towns in the US. Migrants define these American cities as much as these places shape their identities. Her parents, Villavicencio mentions, "are New Yorkers to the core" (*Undocumented Americans* 4). The statement imprints her parents' identity as long-term New York residents rather than identifying them as Ecuadorian migrants in the US. It allows them a life and identity beyond that of the legal transgression, acknowledging the *long durée* of post-migration life

(which involves surviving years in the US as undocumented). The presence of migrants adds (by means of cheap labor, diversity, cosmopolitanism) to New York's cultural capital and preeminence, and migrants both documented and undocumented are entitled to their identities as New Yorkers. Like all New Yorkers, migrants' personal histories are entwined with the history of the city. Her father "drove a cab back when East New York was still gang country" and his driving days were brought to an end when New York suspended driver's licenses for undocumented migrants in the aftermath of 9/11 (*Undocumented Americans* 4). In their family history, that was the night that her father, the most powerful man she knew, "started dying" (41). The city had used his labor and dismissed his services for no fault of his own; he had contributed to New York's economy and its legislations cost him his source of income. Villavicencio includes details of her family history (in the US) to recalibrate skewed perspectives that imagine migrant identities as frozen in time, as if migrants' lives and histories cease to be at the border. Her attempt is to pin migrant presence onto the US map, to visibilize them, to accord the undocumented a place in US history and economy.

The Undocumented Americans is not a migration story, it is a story of survival (despite the long-term mental and physical consequences of surviving as undocumented in the US). Villavicencio begins her book close to home, in Staten Island, where she meets with day laborers, the majority of whom were undocumented. For the undocumented day laborers, this struggle for survival literally plays out on a daily basis. Some start out as teenagers, others are as old as her father—professionals who "represent a wide range of skills, from muscle to flooring to woodwork to welding to painting to cement work to brickwork to carpentry to insulation to stucco to electrical work…" (*Undocumented Americans* 10). But their immigration status diminishes their contribution. Their labor is characterized as "unskilled," a euphemism for cheap labor. These undocumented laborers are on their own, unprotected by labor regulations, exposed to wage thefts and precarious working conditions.

Villavicencio is furious that *The New York Times* describes day laborers as "idling on street corners" (*Undocumented Americans* 9). The article she refers to insensitively portrays day laborers as benefitting from natural disasters, as "finding fortune along the streets of ruined homes and upended lives" (Berger). It postulates an insidious binary relation between citizen-sufferers and migrant-profiteers. It zooms in on what migrants receive (with their pay they bought their children at home "computer, bicycles and new shoes") and glosses over what migrants offer. One interviewee said, "Day laborers are like first responders to this crisis," but this statement doesn't find emphasis in the article. The implicit discomfort at this influx of undocumented day laborers at New York City street curbs (that finds expression in the *Times* article) arises

from an exclusionary attitude that refuses undocumented bodies a place in US public spaces despite a clear demand for their labor. The undocumented body in a public space is matter out of place, an inappropriate presence. The rejection of their bodies is evocative of theories of dirt, which frame dirt as being relational to a system of order: "where there is dirt there is system" (Douglas 44). Dirt as matter out of place is ultimately suggestive of the rational and limits of the ordering system. Undocumented men could be working in the gardens, working in basements, repairing roofs of citizen households, but do not belong idling on public corners and streets. "What an offensive way to describe labor that requires standing in hellish heat or cold or rain from dawn until nightfall, negotiating in a language not your own, competing with your own friends for the same job, then performing it to perfection without the certainty of pay" (Villavicencio, *Undocumented Americans* 11). This denial is offensive and convenient at the same time: it operates as if there is a split between migrant labor (which is almost received as inanimate) and migrant life (which is animated with messy internal conflicts and bodily limitations).

To add insult to injury, undocumented migrants' exclusion from public spaces is attributed to their shadowy lives (which is an effect of their illegality) in the US: "They say we live in the shadows. That's the metaphor the media likes to use about undocumented immigrants. It never made sense to me. We're everywhere" (Villavicencio, "A Theory of Animals"). This selective visibility, which sees migrant labor when the job necessitates it, but overlooks their lives, is a consequence (or continuation) of the split between life and labor. She sets out to redress this erasure, interviewing day laborers (without putting "on the drag of a journalist"), following them everywhere—to street corners, worker centers, city hall testimonials, soccer matches, Christmas parties (Villavicencio, *Undocumented Americans* 15). She collects their stories: the everyday exploitations at work, their attempts to learn English at the local libraries, their aspirations for their children, their medical and mental health conditions, their desire to belong in the US. Together they form a map of the various facets of a migrant's life. The pattern repeats itself in other places she visits: she tells the story of undocumented people, infusing it with details of their private lives affected by their public exclusions.

Not a (DREAMer) Memoir

Karla Cornejo Villavicencio first wrote "publicly" about "her situation"—about her being undocumented in 2010, when she was a senior at Harvard ("DREAM Act: I'm an Illegal Immigrant at Harvard"). The essay was published by the *The Daily Beast* anonymized, to protect her identity. Publishing agents and news reporters however, tracked her and reached out to her for scoops of her private life. A memoir was expected of her at age twenty-one. Her story was to join a

list of student testimonials that appealed for their path to legal residency. She refused to deliver that "interchangeable immigrant [. . .] sad book" that either posited her as a victim or as a hero (Villavicencio, *Undocumented Americans* xiv). She confides her pessimism to her readers: "It is important that I make clear I was the valedictorian of my high school class and got full scholarships to the country's best schools. [. . .] We go running [. . .]. We recycle. But you and I both know this changes nothing" (Villavicencio, "DREAM Act: I'm an Illegal Immigrant at Harvard"). She challenges the argument that socialization and merit could make undocumented students "worthy" of US citizenship. Her article was a response to the DREAM Act (short for Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors Act) being gutted at the US Senate after a decade of congressional debates and undocumented students' movements. The bill, first introduced in 2001, offered a glimmer of hope—a conditional path to permanent residency—for many young undocumented migrants who, like Villavicencio, were brought to the US as minors. The conditions were many: they had to be long-term US residents who had graduated from US high schools and had no criminal record, were of good moral character, and who promised to attend college or give two years of their life to the US military ("DREAM Act").

During the 2007 congressional hearings titled "Comprehensive Immigration Reform: The Future of Undocumented Immigrant Students," three undocumented youths, Marie Nazareth Gonzalez, Martine Mwanj Kalaw, and Tam Tran, publicly offered their life stories in the hopes of immigration reforms. Their "coming out" to the public marked a historic moment as previously undocumented youths were represented publicly by political figures and activist organizations. Their testimonies "were some of the first public and openly accessible life narratives produced by undocumented youths, narratives that reached a level of visibility previously unheard of for individual undocumented students" (Batzke, "Concealing and Revealing" 308). These testimonies were prototypes that defined the motifs of other undocumented autobiographies that followed soon after. Each of these students stressed their academic performance in American schools and colleges, their integration into American society, their faith in the American Dream, and their willingness to work hard to achieve that dream. "Only in America…" read Gonzalez's statement, affirming US exceptionalism ("Comprehensive Immigration Reform" 9 and 11). These students were both victims and heroes: victims brought illegally to the US by their parents often without their knowledge, and heroes as they persevered against all odds. Like Villavicencio, they were overachievers, exemplary members of the undocumented community. They were high school valedictorians, recipients of full scholarships, bright young minds, fully Americanized—they became the symbols of the DREAM Act.

Befitting the framing of the congressional hearing, these stories played into a narrative of reward and punishment. Michigan Congressman John Conyers Jr. argued in support of the DREAMers: "children should not be punished 'for the sins of the fathers'[. . .] but [we] should instead reward them when they succeed" ("Comprehensive Immigration Reform" 5). These testimonies and supporting arguments mapped DREAMer life narratives onto the cultural narrative of the "hardworking" American, worthy of US citizenship and, by extension, the American Dream. The US had the power to reward these young aspiring people for their hard work. Kalaw pleaded: despite her academic record she was "unable to explore [her] full potential" because of her immigration status ("Comprehensive Immigration Reform" 12). The DREAM Act would give her that opportunity. Phyllis P. Chock problematizes this narrative of opportunity as it demands individual distinction, creating an ethical and moral hierarchy amongst members of the community; it also deludes with a promise of a straight route from handwork to success when in reality there is no guarantee:

> The typical opportunity story centers on an immigrant (man) whose arrival in America, desire for betterment, striving in adversity, and putting down of roots make him a 'new man.' That is, he is the Promethean hero of his own story; the story erases his past, foreign cultural baggage, and restraining social ties. (Chock 281)

In narratives of distinction, the focus on the individual is at the expense of the community, the network of friends and family that the undocumented so strongly relies upon in the absence of institutional support. These early testimonies inadvertently ended up perpetuating the divisive politics of separating the individual from the community. Encoded in these individual self-narratives was a promise of success, that fed into the making of their own exceptionalism. Because of the tightly controlled political setup of the congressional hearings, and for their advocacy of the DREAM Act (which was severely limited and insular in its very provision and ideology), these self-narratives were coerced into being "'neat' and 'normative'" (Batzke, "Concealing and Revealing" 312). They were purged of any criticism against the US state and its immigration policies. Almost as a rejoinder, Villavicencio writes, to tell "the full story, you have to be a little crazy. And you certainly can't be enamored by America, not still. That disqualifies you" (*Undocumented Americans* xv). This is the main challenge for undocumented youth: to criticize the US state while still hoping to get US citizenship; to invest in mobilizing their voice towards a political end when they don't have the power of the vote.

Ina Batzke traces the historical emboldening of the voices within the undocumented youth movement surrounding the rejections of the DREAM Act: post-2007 congressional hearing students realized the limitations of the label of a DREAMer and began claiming their identity as "undocumented" (*Undocumented Migrants* 101), closely followed by "unafraid," and finally around 2011 identifying as "unapologetic" (*Undocumented Migrants* 121). It is within this context that Villavicencio's voice has to be located. Villavicencio distances herself from DREAMer ascriptions, even though she mentions her inductions at premier educational institutions such as Harvard and Yale: "I never called myself a Dreamer. The word was saccharine and dumb, and it yoked basic human rights to getting an A on a report card" (Villavicencio, "Waking Up from the American Dream"). Education, to her, even if it were Harvard, was not an opportunity, but her "birth right" (Villavicencio, "Embiggening [I Can't Be Your Hero, Baby]"). Of course, part of this posturing is performance—"to troll white people" (De León). Its goal is to jolt people out of complicity that accepts migrants as either intellectually inferior or in need of white support and guidance. Her bravado is an act of preservation against racist stereotypes: "Why *would* I have been shocked that I can write a book? I realized that this [presumptions of migrants' insecurities despite achievements] was a white narrative: that there was something lacking in me, and that not only was there something lacking in me and my background, but that I was sort of obviously insecure and had low self-esteem" (De León). Quite clearly hers is not a narrative of gratitude. Compared to another contemporary undocumented writer, Jose Antonio Vargas, who produces a list of white beneficiaries, whom he lovingly calls his "adopted family" for their unconditional support, Villavicencio frames her relationship with her wealthy white sponsors as being mutually beneficial. They were the patrons and she the artist: "They were Gertrude Stein, and I was a young Hemingway. I was Van Gogh, crazy and broken" (*Undocumented Americans* 6). Identifying with Hemingway and Van Gogh announces her potential as a creator of art (and by extension value), and at the same time it claims a space for herself—a queer brown undocumented woman—in the Western traditional canon of artists primarily dominated by white men. She emphasizes that poor undocumented youth might need patronage from wealthy white citizens to receive college education in the absence of government aid for them, but Americans would benefit from this investment: "we'd make excellent permanent neighbors" ("DREAM Act: I'm an Illegal Immigrant at Harvard"). This is a transaction undocumented youth need not be apologetic about; it was not a condition of their making but a survivalist response to their systemic oppression.

Connecting the "I" to "We": Elements of *Testimonio* Tradition

Foregoing the memoir format allows Karla Cornejo Villavicencio other freedoms: she fast-forwards through her life story, retelling episodes at will. She adopts a wide-angle frame that accommodates the stories of her parents and community. How and why she and her parents came to the US is not central to the narrative of *The Undocumented Americans*. She writes, "The story as far as I know it goes something like this [. . .]," introducing an element of ambiguity (4). It was her version of the truth, not an explanation for legitimacy. A problematic aspect that recurred in undocumented youth memoirs such as in Vargas was the motif of the betrayal (a carryover from the DREAM Act testimonials)—the shock at discovering his immigration status when he visited a DMV office to get a driver's permit at sixteen. This is the starting point of a rift between Vargas and his grandparents (Lolo and Lola) who brought him to the US. In the 2007 testimonials, DREAMers attested to their innocence by pointing out how it was not they who had broken the US immigration laws, but their parents. Villavicencio skips this blame game entirely. She identifies with her parents and says had she been in their place she would do the same (*Undocumented Americans* 5). She never had to forgive her parents for bringing her to the US or for leaving her behind in Ecuador during her early childhood (despite the abandonment causing her lasting trauma and mental health issues). She writes, each of them had already paid "daily, privately, painfully" for their undocumented existence in the US, but their punishment isn't visible or "made legitimate by the presence of an audience" ("DREAM Act: I'm an Illegal Immigrant at Harvard").

Villavicencio identifies herself as an (undocumented) "immigrant's daughter," squarely putting the focus on the family (*Undocumented Americans* 115). Though not a memoir, *The Undocumented Americans* does include a fair amount of personal details to underscore the undocumented people's reliance on each other and on their families. "It's always been just the four of us" ("DREAM Act: I'm an Illegal Immigrant at Harvard"). Her parents made sacrifices to give her the education that she had and she in turn hopes to finance their retirement and health care (as elderly undocumented people are not entitled to pensions and medical benefits) ("Waking up from the American Dream"). The recognition of the role of the family in the survival (and successes) of the undocumented is important for Villavicencio. The emphasis also helps understand the isolation of these families, excluded from society, outside of legal aid and protection. It is an important political stance, a marked shift from the individual-centric DREAMer rhetoric. From this standpoint, it is easy to understand Villavicencio's *The Undocumented Americans* as a narrative of inclusion rather than an exclusive personal memoir. The authorial voice, "I," insists on its embeddedness in the community: "I attempt to write from a

place of shared trauma, shared memories, shared pain," and efforts at self-representation therefore become inseparable from the experiences of the entire undocumented community (*Undocumented Americans* xvi). The entanglement of the personal and the community is the legacy of the *testimonio* tradition that Villavicencio borrows from. The *testimonio* tradition, popular in Latin American literature, promotes the merging of the "I" with the collective "we," or positing of the "I" as representative of the "we." "That is, testimonio allows for one individual to tell her story while connecting it to similar conditions across her community" (Saavedra and Pérez 451-52). John Beverly describes *testimonio* or testimonial narratives as marginal witness accounts which come to existence in the 1960s amidst national liberation movements in Latin America. *Testimonio* has elements of resistance literature in its aspiration to represent those "excluded from authorized representation" (Beverley 13). *Testimonio* gives voice in literature to people deprived, disenfranchised, and rendered voiceless. For it to function optimally, the individualistic "I" has to take a back seat and make way for its affirmation in the interdependent collective mode "we."

Villavicencio relates to the community as an extension of her family. When she meets the day laborers at the worker center in Staten Island, she says she sees her father's face in each one of them and "I know that this astigmatism will always be with me" (*Undocumented Americans* 13). This identification is not simply one that is emotionally projected, her father actually does become a day laborer at age fifty-three after losing his restaurant job of fifteen years (16). The connection is one forged by shared precarity. She carries this prism—of seeing undocumented people as members of her family—as she documents the community, bringing into her narration empathy and urgency. She offers readers stories about friendships among undocumented men that sustain them in the US: they become custodians of each other's memories, witnesses to each other's existence (39-40). Esme, a Uruguayan undocumented woman in Florida, is influenced by the Argentine Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo, and joins a group of women, You Are Not Alone, to protest against mistreatment and sudden disappearance of undocumented migrants from the US Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) offices. The group stands across the street from the Miramar USCIS offices, sloganeering: "We see you, and you won't get away with this" (79). Bringing in cross-national Latin American cultural influences enriches the representational canvas of the Latinx undocumented people in the US. Villavicencio shows that the community (despite its vulnerabilities) takes on immense duress to sustain its members (the family unit is a microcosm of this) and relies on an extended network of US-born Latinx beneficiaries, people with undocumented family members, for example, who share their medicine, give free car rides and grand

tips to support the undocumented community. *The Undocumented Americans* is an attempt at visibilizing this extended community and the wide range of services its members offer not only to US citizens but to their own community.

Not a (Realist) Journalistic Account

In its aspirations to visibilize the undocumented community, *Undocumented Americans* tests the limits of journalistic objectivity. With its personal essayistic reporting style, it situates itself as a legatee of new journalism—a form of journalism more permissive than traditional journalism. New Journalism emerged in the 1960s, allowing a play of fact and fiction, public affairs and the intimate, seeking to soften the hard edges of journalistic objectivity with a literary sensibility. Karla Cornejo Villavicencio's alignment with New Journalism can be gauged from her admiration of its proponents such as Truman Capote and Joan Didion. *The Undocumented Americans*, in fact, begins with a quote from Joan Didion's *The White Album*: "A place belongs forever to whoever claims it hardest [. . .] ." Villavicencio teases her readers: first guaranteeing them the veracity of her reportage by mentioning her commitment to journalistic methods of fact-checking and ethical practices such as source protection; and then immediately bringing these claims into question: "Names of persons have all been changed. Names of places have all been changed. Physical descriptions have all been changed. Or have they?" (*Undocumented Americans* xv). She remarks: after the legal review she destroyed her interview notes—the very foundation of this journalistic enterprise. And she had never used a recorder in the first place so as not to intimidate her sources, once again emphasizing her commitment to her community over her commitment to the practice of journalism. The legacies of her book are the memories and the relationships of trust she built with her interviewees. She continues to keep in touch with her interviewees, these relationships assure her "that there are dozens of homes across the country where there is a couch and a warm meal waiting for me should I need it, and a very long hug, and I've never really had that before" (Arthurs). The very act of writing the book, *The Undocumented Americans*, therefore can be read as an exercise in community building. Villavicencio's hierarchical posturing of the affective over the objective is significant for a community which stands little chance at accumulating documentary material. With her book, too, in the absence of any record, or at least with her admission of its absence, Villavicencio enters into a contract of trust with her readers, just as memoirists do as they set out to retell their life stories. The readers simply have to believe her account. Here, embedding her personal story into her "journalistic" account of the undocumented community only authenticates her investment in the community and in their stories. Their stories are inseparable from her own and the truth-effect of one legitimizes the other.

Villavicencio problematizes journalistic standards of objectivity and non-intervention, especially when the subject of representation has been historically denied self-representation. She writes, "Literature about undocumented people in this country is too rare – and too often written by writers who've never been undocumented" ("In This Novel"). Within this context, a hierarchical posturing of emotional distance appears misplaced. When the undocumented begins writing/telling their own stories, expectations of objective distance only diminish the emotional power of these narratives. Without as much as doing the emotional work for her readers, that is cueing them on when to feel sympathy and inspiration (as most of her stories are fragments, without emotional build-up or plot), Villavicencio's book still appeals to emotional affinity. As with the *testimonio*, her documentary work hopes to achieve "an appropriate ethical and political response more the possibility of solidarity than of charity" (Beverly 19). Not posing as a typical journalist (with a recorder and camera) frees Villavicencio: "I was able to get involved in people's lives and gather these stories in unconventional ways" (Belli). She develops personal and long-term relationships with her subjects, inserting herself as one invested in their lives. In one instance, she becomes a mentor to four children whose father was recently deported, because she saw her brother in them (*Undocumented Americans* 119). She holds fundraisers for them and motivates them to study. Her immersion into her subjects' lives is a political act of expressing solidarity and care (towards her community). Documentation, here, serves an inward function of self-validation. These affective approaches of identification and investment allow the space to pause at small details of life and facets of personality that are strikingly revealing and therefore have immense documentary value. These are the particularities that a well-meaning journalistic account with a strict imposition of emotional distance might overlook.

Villavicencio self-reflexively comments at one point, "Journalists are not allowed to get *involved* the way I have gotten involved. Journalists, to the best of my knowledge, do not try to change the outcome of their stories as crudely as I do" (*Undocumented Americans* 114). Here, she is not only talking about flouting journalistic conventions of non-intervention (affecting the course of the narrative) but also about giving herself permission to rewrite people's stories (reimagining an alternative narrative). This has to do with retroactively seeking justice for people who have never had a fair chance at being truthfully represented. The goal is to dig beyond the reality that has been factually transcribed, to explore the realm of the "extra-real"; to do justice to the memories of undocumented people which fade away without mnemonic material objects and cultural narratives that invest in their memories.

> In my mind it was like a belief system in the form of a literary technique that was used to bring justice to the page when there was impunity in real life and in our environment, where there are disappearances, where people's bodies are being mutilated, where we're being thrown into unmarked vans, where we're living under what seems like a banana republic dictatorship. I thought it was the perfect moment to use magical realism. (De León)

Towards the end of the chapter "Staten Island," she reports the story of Ubaldo Cruz Martinez, a homeless alcoholic day laborer, who drowns in a basement during Hurricane Sandy. She reclaims his death story by inserting a squirrel into his last moments, proposing the two died together, witnessing each other's death. Readers are told he cared for the squirrel until the very end: the narrative endows him with values of kindness and compassion, affecting the legacy and memories of the day laborer. The reader is asked to take a documentary leap of faith, to transgress the boundaries of "facts" and embrace a reparative fiction to reclaim the dead, the silenced, and those who disappeared without a trace. The exercise points to the poverty of written record and the heavy reliance on the anecdotal when representing a community written off as undocumented. This layering of real and fabulation, of fact and fiction can be traced to the Latin American magical realist traditions exemplified in the writings of Jorge Luis Borges and Gabriel Garcia Marquez. "Garcia Marquez suggests that the magic text is, paradoxically, more realistic than a 'realistic' text" for its capacity to supplement exclusive versions of reality (Simpkins 144). By tinkering with the probable outcomes of an undocumented person's life, Villavicencio conveys the acute loneliness and lack of options in the undocumented community. A reader might now be left wondering about other magical scenarios where: i) Ubaldo Cruz Martinez's death is surrounded by family members who were not denied entry at the US border; ii) Ubaldo Cruz Martinez dies in his hometown of San Jerónimo Xayacatlán, never needing to migrate to the US; iii) Ubaldo Cruz Martinez lives out his life, never faced with hopelessness. The multiple scenarios question the very "reality" surrounding Ubaldo Cruz Martinez's death; that Hurricane Sandy had little to do with his death; and that he was already a dead man living in the US with the hopelessness (manifested in his drinking problem) caused by poverty, lack of options, and loneliness. Her use of magical realism becomes a commentary on immigration policies, its gate-keeping functions, its production of the "illegal" subject at the border and its multiple reproductions within the US. It is not just the border "where the Third World grates against the first and bleeds" (Anzaldúa 25); the institutionally normalized exploitation of migrants continues much beyond the frontiers into their everyday lives in the heart of the US.

Translating the Specificities in Migrant Voices

The attempts at representing the undocumented people are not without their challenges. Initially, Karla Cornejo Villavicencio pitched her ideas as a PhD dissertation project at Yale. The dissertation committee rejected her ideas because it didn't fit the departmental focus "on brown skin, on calloused hands" of migration studies (Lozada). As a book project too, there was a clash between her vision and the publishing industry's expectations. The industry also has fixed ideas about how her voice should be positioned and marketed.

> My imprint treated me very respectfully, but they knew people would want to read the book by one of the first undocumented students to have graduated from Harvard. And I think that condemned my book to not be seen as a work of capital L literature, but instead as a DREAMer memoir. DREAMer memoirs have their purpose. But that's not what I set out to write. My book is a serious work of literature. When I've done interviews, people don't ask me about literary things, people don't ask me about formal things, people don't often ask me about my influences or whether I have any training in writing or who I studied under or things like that. People just ask me about my parents leaving me in Ecuador, or what I do for self-care, things like that. It's very clear that I'm being seen through a sociological lens. (Lozada)

There is a circularity to not being seen and valued as a creator of "capital L literature." It maintains the confinement of migrant voices to certain genres and forms, denying them privileges of formal experimentation, and expects a polite posture that conveys the gratitude for being heard and published. This is exactly what Villavicencio fights against with "the book's punk sensibility" and its "radical experiment in genre" (Gurba, Lozada). But the challenges do not stop with the writing and publication of the book; they continue as she negotiates the terms of marketing, translations, and reception.

Of these struggles, the issue of translation is particularly revealing of publishing industry conservatism. As mentioned earlier, a primary authorial intention was to write *The Undocumented Americans* for the undocumented community, especially for "children of immigrants" (Gurba). Needless to say, a Spanish version of the book would have helped its outreach, however, so far, the book doesn't have a Spanish translation. In interviews, Villavicencio has discussed putting on hold a Spanish translation as she didn't want to lose her voice to a high-brow "aristocratic" Latin American Spanish translation which is what her publishers offered to her ("Karla Cornejo Villavicencio on 'The Undocumented Americans'"). In the book, she employs a conversational tone in Latinx vernacular to reproduce the way children of migrants speak.

In fact, she attests that her way of speaking—a mixture of Latinx telenovela Spanish with New York–New Jersey inflections—helped ease her way into the lives of her interviewees who immediately identified her as one of their own ("Author: Karla Cornejo Villavicencio and Jonathan Blitzer in Conversation"). She understands the value of these specificities of language and expression, and considers the preservation of the distinctive elements of migrant voices non-negotiable, especially for a documentary project like hers invested in representing the undocumented community. Imposing a high-brow Latin American Spanish onto long-term US migrants such as her Ecuadorian parents denies them the specificity of their experiences in the US. It is as if they never left their native countries, or their language calcified at the border. It also doesn't represent the significant number of migrants from minority communities from Mexico and Central America who do not speak mainstream Spanish. Attempts at homogenizing their voices somehow fail to respect the basic tenet of representation. After their arrival, low-income migrants often live in high-density migrant neighborhoods where they jostle with other migrants from the various Spanish-speaking countries in Latin and Central America, and the Caribbean. Add to this mix their interactions with their African American neighbors, and their absorption of idiomatic American English. Migrants' speech then becomes a kind of spongy canvas that is dynamic and alive, where various Spanish versions and vernaculars morph with English, and is rendered distinct by its blending with local accents and slurs. In time, their speech becomes a rich tapestry of all their influences and experiences. Smoothing over these peculiarities for the comfort of the larger Spanish readership is a continuation of the violent erasure of undocumented people from the written document.

One might be curious then, why did Villavicencio write her book in English? The intuitive answer would be that it has to do with her identity as an American, socialized and educated in America, in English. Even though her "maternal language is Spanish," she says, "the language I write in and think in is English" ("Karla Cornejo Villavicencio on 'The Undocumented Americans'"). But she also makes a political point of her writing in English. It visibilizes the labor of translation that is embedded in migrant communities, often carried out by children of migrants, again highlighting her own subject location as a child of migrants. Villavicencio conducts her conversations with her interviewees in (Latinx) Spanish and simultaneously transcribes the auditory feed into her notebook in English (as she doesn't use a tape recorder). This process of writing/transcription is an attempt to embody the instantaneous translation process that children of migrants adopt at an early age. The point is to draw attention to the fact that translation is a difficult job, requiring several layers of interpretative understanding (not only the understanding of

the two languages) and has tremendous emotional consequence. It involves children ensuring their parents' safety, their dignity, negotiating their rights, trying to open doors of opportunities for their parents. It means a forced precociousness for migrant children, where they are expected to know which information to filter out so as not to hurt or offend their parents' sentiments, which sensitive information to withhold to protect their parents. Children have to decode the legal and ancillary social systems to which their families could appeal to, and initiate their parents into American societal mores and culture, skewing normative power relationships between parents and children. Migrant children, socialized in American culture and equipped with the English language, become their parents' mediators to the world around them. Villavicencio uses the term "parentification" of migrant children to refer to this phenomenon, where migration puts children in a position where they "have to become parent figures to [their] parents" ("Karla Cornejo Villavicencio on 'The Undocumented Americans'"). Villavicencio gives an example of a doctor informing a patient's son about his mother's cancer. In this situation, the doctor expects the young boy to carry the emotional weight of breaking the news of cancer to his mother (*Undocumented Americans* 103). Translation thus puts these children not only in positions of power but also of immense responsibility and takes a heavy emotional toll on them.

Villavicencio has other complaints against translation: "I hate the way journalists translate the words of Spanish speakers in their stories. They transliterate, and make us sound dumb, like we all have a first grade-vocabulary" (*Undocumented Americans* xvi). This kind of clinical translation involves no art or poetry, denying the people translated any subjectivity and cultural specificities. Here, too, there is a homogenizing of migrant voices; these translations reproduce racist and classist stereotypes. This is why the emphasis on translation is important. Translation is central to representation: both need care and emotional connection to illicit that care. In the best-case scenario, the translation process involves members of the community. This is why in Villavicencio's writings her subjects are portrayed with dignity and complexity: "I found my subjects to be warm, funny, dry, evasive, philosophical, weird, annoying, etc., and I tried to convey that tone in the translations" (xvi). As is the case in general with representation, the value of a community's self-translations is incontestable; but in the next section I explore the limits of self-representation especially when this self is embedded in a politics of self-censorship.

Conclusion: Limits of Self-Representations

In a YouTube interview, Javier Zamora, another powerful undocumented writer, advises aspiring undocumented writers to stick to poetry (which is what he did with his first publication) or fiction as a measure in self-censorship. I think it is worth reading the transcription[4] of his entire response to understand the full implication of self-expression for the undocumented writer.

> If you can be truthful, be truthful. I would say from a legal perspective, I wouldn't advise you write non-fiction, if you want to get papers and if you want to write about your own story. I would write poetry or fiction because you know, and I guess, this is getting recorded and it's gonna get circled, so I'll leave it at that. But to make it short, I think, I will be a forever green card holder. I don't think I would be, I can become a citizen anytime soon because of the book that I wrote. Because I have an EB-1 visa, which is an Einstein visa, a professional visa, a visa given to me because I was a writer, and because I wrote a poetry book. And so everything that I write, will eventually, if I do want to interview and become a citizen will be judged by a lone person, because that is how fucked up the immigration system is. It is up to one person that interviews you for them to deem you worthy of citizenship, or to check all the background and everything that you have said and done so I'll leave it at that. I would just say that, I would be as truthful as you can be, and sometimes fiction is truer than non-fiction. (Zamora)

The weight of judgment on Zamora over every word spoken is palpable. He is extremely conscious of what he says on recorded camera. According to him, the words of undocumented writers can have life-long consequences, and any information they reveal can be incriminating not only for the writers themselves, but also for their undocumented family members and friends. What seems like an intended paradox is that undocumented writers' attempts at documenting their life stories can get them disqualified from being documented as legal subjects. Their immigration status enforces or expects a kind of self-erasure, which perpetuates the cycle of invisibility (or legal non-existence). In this context, a carefully constructed narrative of gratitude or opportunity in undocumented migrant literature is less a matter of choice but rather a given. And the publishing industry and market with its demand for narratives of gratitude and suffering are complicit in reproducing the undocumented authors' legal vulnerabilities. Zamora's reliance on fiction to convey reality more truthfully than non-fiction is not simply an authorial choice, but an effect of his authorial position. Fiction, or a blend of fact and fiction, is a recourse for undocumented writers. Scholars of the transatlantic

slave trade explore similar narrative techniques: Saidiya Hartman relies on "critical fabulation" and speculative possibilities of the subjunctive, imagining "what might have been or could have been," when narrating intimate stories of African slaves largely absent from the archive (11-12). Undocumented writers, banished from the documented page, rely on fiction or fabulated supplements of their realities to narrate their everyday life stories and exploitations. These variational inventive narrative forms allow the undocumented to tell their stories despite the institutional injunction on self-expression. Experimentations in forms and genres then are more than formal experiments but take new meanings, they become tools of resistance and possibility.

Any discussion on the limits of self-representation of undocumented people has to take into account the publishing industry's hyper-selection of authors based on their individual distinction. Their distinction in turn is conferred upon them by intellectual and cultural institutions, with the academic and journalistic spheres increasingly aligning themselves closely together. Karla Cornejo Villavicencio has her Ivy League pedigree (which initially generates interest in her work); Javier Zamora too was at Harvard as a Radcliffe fellow, in addition to his degrees from the universities of California, Berkeley and New York; Jose Antonio Vargas has his Pulitzer Prize for news reporting; and Dan-el Padilla Peralta his distinguished career at Princeton, Oxford, and Stanford. Peralta writes in his epilogue, "Everyday I feel grateful to this country for the education it has given and continues to give me" (294). Villavicencio distances herself from such expressions of gratitude. And yet, she cannot free herself from being constantly marketed "as the poster child for the American Dream. [. . .] because we needed to sell books" (Lozada). She has come to an uneasy reconciliation of this branding: "When people try to pitch me to media, they're like, she was born in a literal ditch and somehow made her way to Harvard which angers me 50% of the time, and makes me laugh 50% of the time" (Arthurs). To take control of her narrative, she has explored paratextual avenues: in the book, the introduction serves as a manual to reading her book; after the publication of her book, Villavicencio has continued with the behind-the-scenes work, giving interviews, writing opinion pieces to position her voice (many of these have been referenced in this essay). At times, she has actively worked to "sabotage" the marketing plans to retain some degree of autonomy over her own work, at other times she has resorted to self-censorship: "There's some stuff that I can't say because I would like to continue to make a living through out my life in publishing" ("Karla Cornejo Villavicencio on 'The Undocumented Americans'"). A fair amount of these paratextual conversations—curating, clarifying, and publicizing her views—has taken place on social media platforms hosted by these premier institutions (Yale News, Yale University YouTube channel) or the pages of *The New Yorker*

and *The New York Times* (even though Villavicencio publicly criticizes the *New York Times* article on undocumented day laborers), revealing the power of, and dependence on, these cultural institutions. Because of their cultural capital, reviews of her book on these platforms influence sales and recognition of her work. One could even argue that perhaps, she consciously leverages their power: after all, her first public positioning as an undocumented migrant also asserts herself as a Harvard graduate (although in *Undocumented Americans* she does not dwell on it). Irrespective of how undocumented writers position themselves, the constant resurfacing of these labels of distinction speaks to their power and authority. Intellectual distinction (the pressure to bring A grades despite systemic disadvantages, mental health issues, family and financial troubles) continues to present itself as a shield against racial and ethnic stereotypes leveled against minority communities—it is the ticket out of the hood. But individual distinction of any kind, as already mentioned, comes at the expense of the community; and members who then make it as visible cultural symbols stand disassociated from their origin.

As a scholar and teacher interested in undocumented migrants, Karla Cornejo Villavicencio's *The Undocumented Americans* immediately appeals to me because it is a self-representation which employs a wide-angle lens to include the entire community. It sits in the interstices between the genres of the memoir and the essay form, allowing insights into the personal and the public aspects of undocumented life. Its focus on migrant lives beyond the moment of border-crossing is refreshing and makes an important political point that urges readers to stop dwelling on the whys of migration (accepting it as a global reality) and turn their energies to understand the effects of migration—for example, the traumas that are borne at a personal level and those carried on generationally. Her book with its assertive, unapologetic tone encapsulates an evolutionary stage in undocumented migrant voices (since the undocumented students' movements around the DREAM Act) and signals to a hopefully bold new generation of undocumented migrant authors (with substantial cultural influence). Her struggles with self-representation and positioning make me wonder if the logical next step to maintaining autonomy and freeing oneself from institutional gate-keeping is self-publication—of collaborative works, primarily made for the consumption and validation of the undocumented community. And one has to believe the sales will follow.

I am a migrant myself from the global south and for years have observed the struggles of outsiders like me to establish ourselves in the First World academia—our dependence on intellectual distinction to get out of the Third World, the expectation of gratitude when allowed entry into the First World, seeking validation from Eurocentric institutions of power and cultural capital, knowing full well many of these draw their accumulated wealth from

colonial legacies. Villavicencio says she "read a lot of James Baldwin to muster up the courage to write this [*Undocumented Americans*]," showing Baldwin's continued relevance in positioning undocumented voices in the twenty first century ("Karla Cornejo Villavicencio on 'The Undocumented Americans'"). Similarly, Villavicencio's bold voice, which claims her undocumented identity and autonomy despite being critically vulnerable, instills courage and faith in the larger (more privileged) migrant community to which I belong. It forces me to imagine a future where we do not wait any longer for a seat at the table, where we have declared a table of our own.

Notes

[1] Karla Cornejo Villavicencio is undocumented at the time of writing her book, but towards the end of 2020, after her marriage with a US citizen, Villavicencio gets her green card and is "no longer undocumented" ("Stephen Miller Will Have Some Free Time Soon").

[2] "Latinx" is a term Villavicencio uses and identifies with, and I retain that in this essay.

[3] Throughout the essay I prefer the use of the term "migrant" over "immigrant" because "migrant" is a more neutral term and conveys more accurately the uncertain nature of the temporal length of the stay most migrants set out with when they leave their native countries. The term "immigrant" tends to disproportionately focus on the end destination and lends itself to the US rhetoric of exceptionalism. However, at certain points in the essay, especially when quoting or paraphrasing Villavicencio's views, I have retained the use of the term "immigrant." For example, when Villavicencio talks about herself or her intended readers as "children of immigrants."

[4] I have transcribed Javier Zamora's video interview, adding punctuations where I thought necessary, and deleting speech fillers such as "um," "uh," and repetitions for conciseness.

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Biography

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