

Review – The Undocumented Americans

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INA SEETHALER, JAN 29 2024

The Undocumented Americans **By Karla Cornejo Villavicencio** **One World, 2021**

According to recent data from the Pew Research Center, about 10.5 million undocumented migrants lived in the United States in 2021, which constitutes roughly 3% of the total US population (Passel and Krogstad, 2023). Despite undocumented migrants' impact on US society and its economy (especially in the agriculture, construction, and service work sectors and by paying billions of dollars in taxes each year), their voices rarely receive a platform due to a mix of the need for protective invisibility as well as xenophobia and racism. Non-fiction publications such as Dan-el Padilla Peralta's *Undocumented* (2016), Julissa Arce's *My (Underground) American Dream* (2016), and Alberto Ledesma's *Diary of a Reluctant Dreamer* (2017), as well as Ina Batzke's scholarly monograph *Undocumented Migrants in the United States* (2019) on undocumented US life writing, offer intimate insights into the experiences of mostly high-achieving migrants. In contrast, Karla Cornejo Villavicencio's *The Undocumented Americans* purposefully does not center on DACA (Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals) recipients who tend to be portrayed as 'deserving' of protection. Villavicencio proclaims at the beginning of her book that she "did not set out to write anything inspirational" (p.xvi). Instead, she presents a "high-energy imaging of trauma brain" and a précis of "shared pain" (p.xvi), filling a glaring gap in the representation of undocumented lives in the US.

Readers first encounter Villavicencio in a gripping vignette set during the night of the 2016 US presidential election. The author powerfully declares that she "understood that night would be [her] end, but [she] would not be ushered to an internment camp in sweatpants" (p.xiii). The election of Donald Trump to the US presidency propelled Villavicencio to profile migrants in ways that would reflect her family who are more than either "sufferers or dreamers" (p.xv). Stressing her collaborators' precarity, the author elucidates her methodology for collecting others' stories: she changed all names in the book, did not make voice recordings of conversations, and destroyed all notes and transcriptions (p.xv). The end result is a work that skillfully mixes the genres of political testimonio, biography, ethnography, and memoir. Having lived as an undocumented migrant herself and not identifying as a journalist set Villavicencio apart from other authors, as she cannot help but get deeply involved and "try to solve shit the way an immigrant's kids try to solve shit for their parents because these people are all my parents" (pp.114-5). She is open about mental health issues — including suicidal ideations — which were likely caused both by having been left behind in Ecuador by her parents for multiple years at the age of eighteen months as well as by the fact that, being "deportable," she "never felt safe" in the US (p.60). Another way in which her trauma expresses herself is in the form of immense guilt, as she feels "constantly disgusting, dirty, hungover, toxic unless I'm hemorrhaging money in this very specific way that I deem *cleansing*" (p.153; emphasis in original). The empathy her book conjures up because of the author's past vigorously contrasts the prevalent demonization of migrants in the US and, consequently, produces valuable knowledge benefiting any conversation about global migration patterns.

The Undocumented Americans is divided into six locations functioning as case studies for undocumented lives and the key issues affecting them. The first chapter collects evidence of emotional and physical abuse, instances of wage theft, and the prevalence of workplace hazards experienced by day laborers on Staten Island. Villavicencio openly critiques how ideology and politics have created an artificial divide between migrant laborers and DACA recipients, marking "one a parasitic plight, the other heroic dreamers" (p.9). To counter this misrepresentation, the author

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promises to “*write about* [undocumented day laborers] *in a way they’d never been written about before!*” (p.28; emphasis in original). She succeeds with this goal by highlighting the sacrifices migrants make to help their children thrive and by uncovering how, in the aftermath of Hurricane Sandy in 2014, undocumented migrants put their health on the line to clean up New York City from toxic water and debris. This unique content renders the book a must-read for anyone interested in educating themselves about transnational migration.

Chapter two continues to explore the exploitation of migrant bodies for the public good by investigating undocumented labor on and around Ground Zero after September 11, 2001. As Villavicencio states, the “second responders were undocumented immigrants” (p.32). A substantial amount of them now suffer from PTSD and other mental health conditions as well as severe physical health issues like cancer. The author uses uncensored language to describe the severity of the human rights abuses she catalogues, for example when she exclaims that one of her interviewees’ “lungs got . . . fucked up” (p.39). It is unclear how many undocumented individuals died in the attacks because the “undocumented often work in clever ways to leave no paper trail” and employers refused to share their names to avoid being fined (p.49). Villavicencio defiantly lists the names of undocumented victims and shares their stories, including the imagined final moments of an undocumented migrant in the Twin Towers, who puts an ID between his teeth to be recognized — a futile effort as the ID is fake (p.56). The chapter further investigates the anti-immigrant paranoia 9/11 unleashed which still manifests itself in draconian policies such as the denial of drivers licenses to undocumented individuals. The chapter reverberates with undocumented migrants’ sentiment that “[t]hey don’t want us in this country” (p.43). By assembling such first-hand testimony from affected migrants, *The Undocumented Americans* accomplishes personal data collection that is rare in the field of migration studies.

Focusing on community health in Miami, the next chapter clarifies that undocumented migrants cannot purchase health insurance, often rely on alternative treatments because they cannot afford medical care, and many die because they are rejected by hospitals (p.85). Villavicencio also outlines the daily pressures of living without documentation, such as the stress from driving without a license as well as the emotional, physical, and sexual abuse many undocumented workers — in particular, undocumented women housekeepers — have to endure to avoid deportation (p.92).

In Flint, Michigan, where Villavicencio takes the reader in chapter four, the public health crisis caused by contaminated water affected undocumented migrants in unique ways, because warning materials were only available in English and undocumented people were less likely to open their doors for public and military officials sent to educate residents about the dangers of drinking tap water (p.96). Moreover, some centers that distributed bottled water required a state ID, which made clean water inaccessible to many (p.107). The author paints Flint as a “microcosm of the way the government treats the undocumented everywhere, making the conditions in this country as deadly and toxic and inhumane as possible so that we will self-deport” (p.115). According to her, undocumented migrants across the nation are “being killed softly, silently, and with impunity” (p.115). In their detailed recounting of the everyday challenges undocumented migrants face, chapters three and four push back against common xenophobic stereotypes that ostracize non-US citizens as economic opportunists. Taken seriously, the author’s findings might provide productive nuance with regard to political rhetoric about social safety networks and border security.

In chapter five, located in Cleveland, Ohio, Villavicencio digs into the trauma that family separation causes by retelling the story of a father of four who was deported after a traffic stop and two other fathers who sought sanctuary in churches. The children in these families now suffer from insomnia, PTSD, and eating disorders. Villavicencio forcefully rejects this treatment on an ethical basis, arguing that the “higher moral law here is that people have a human right to move, to change location, if they experience hunger, poverty, violence, or lack of opportunity, especially if that climate in their home countries is created by the United States” (p.138). Scholarly studies have consistently suggested that current US migration laws can result in psychological damage for children and adults alike (Hampton et al., 2021). The accounts collected in this book add constructive qualitative records to the serious analysis of the psychosomatic, social, and political effects of undocumented migration.

The Undocumented Americans ends with a chapter set in New Haven, CT that scrutinizes aging for undocumented migrants with “no safety net” (p.149) in a country that “takes their youth, their dreams, their labor, and spits them out

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with nothing to show for it” (p.149). As a result, Villavicencio hears from community members who desire to go back to their country of origin before dying as they “do not want to live in eternity in a place where [they are] not wanted” (p.160). The struggles of aging parents result in extreme pressure on US-born children to be flawless in order to initiate their parents’ naturalization process once they turn twenty-one. With a recent uptick in migrants being detained at immigration hearings, though, this option, too, is becoming ever riskier (p.163).

Despite the trauma, hardship, and oppression Villavicencio learned about, few of her collaborators talked about “regrets” in terms of their decision to come to the US (p.172). This observation denotes one of the book’s biggest strengths, namely its ability to capture the complexity of undocumented migrants’ lives and, above all, their humanity.

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Dr. Ina C. Seethaler serves as Associate Professor and Director of Women’s and Gender Studies at Coastal Carolina University in the United States. Her research explores how minoritized communities use the genre of life writing in all its forms to contest oppressive rhetoric, practices, and policies. She has published, among other topics, on a fake mail-order bride website as feminist activism, undocumented migration and reproductive justice, and feminist service learning. Her book *Lives beyond Borders* on immigrant women’s life writing, nationality, and social justice was published by SUNY Press in 2021. In her teaching, she focuses primarily on feminist activism and popular culture.