# How Writer Karla Cornejo Villavicencio Maintains Control of Her Narrative

As if setting out to write a book about the undocumented immigrant experience across the country wasn't hard enough, Karla Cornejo Villavivencio set a much higher bar for The Undocumented Americans. "I promised everyone in the book, all of my subjects, that I would get Americans to care. And that's a promise that I couldn't guarantee that I could keep," she tells Alicia in this searing conversation about not wanting to be a political tool, being among the first undocumented immigrants to graduate from Harvard University, and not thinking too much about herself to avoid "going into dark places."

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Clip, Karla Cornejo Villavicencio:

> *The way I define being punk myself is that you understand that your accomplishments are not just your accomplishments. You understand that you belong to a community. You understand that the world is a system. You understand that the food on your table came from somewhere and you can envision the last hands that touched the food before they entered the package that you just opened, and that it's kind of like you're haunted. Like you're haunted by your relationship to all of the people in this world and you act accordingly.*

Alicia Menendez:

> That's Karla Cornejo Villavicencio, author of the new book, The Undocumented Americans. I could tell you about Karla, how she's a gifted writer, or a Harvard grad, but she'd probably hate all that. That's part of why she wrote this book, to tell her own story in her own words, and the complicated narrative about what it means to live in the U.S. as an undocumented immigrant.
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> This book was a long time coming. Why write it now?

Cornejo Villavicencio:

> Well, it wasn't a long time coming, because I didn't want to write it. It was like I kind of felt like my parents came to this country for me to have a better life, and not to dwell in the migrancy of my life. Like I wouldn't have been an immigration lawyer, you know? That didn't feel like the proper repayment for my parents' sacrifices. It wasn't far enough away from their migration. And I felt like a proper repayment, and that's how I thought of my life, that's how I still think of my life, for their migration, was something so far enough from their migration that it would make them not remember the trauma. And so, writing about immigration was not it, and so I just wrote about music for a long time.
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> And I wanted to be the guy in High Fidelity, and I was like, "This is me." I started writing this book in 2016, because Trump happened, and I thought I was the best person to do it, because I didn't have someone like me to guide me as a teenager, when I was

undocumented in college. I knew stuff was gonna get really bad. I had no idea how bad it was gonna get, but I just was troubled by the idea that there was just… This was all going to go down, and there was nobody like me who was going to say the things that I ended up saying in my book. Because there was a lot of writing about immigrants, where we expected to be patriotic, and where we were expected to be apologetic, and we were expected to prove that we were good citizens, and where we were expected to be grateful, and that made me sick. And I was like, "We were not… I'm not gonna let this stand."

Menendez: You write in the introduction to The Undocumented Americans that you want to give the reader permission to be punk. When was the first time you gave yourself permission to be punk?

Cornejo Villavicencio:

I've always been punk. I never accepted the title of a Dreamer, even when… before DACA existed. Even before I could be like, "I just don't feel comfortable with the way this villainizes my parents and just transacts in a narrative of innocence." I was just like, "Like Dreamer?"

Menendez: Because you thought it was cheesy?

Cornejo Villavicencio:

I'm not gonna call myself that. People would invite me to things, like where I would have to show up in a cap and gown, and I was like, "I'm not gonna fucking do that. Like, Kurt Cobain would not do that." And like I'm punk in a lot of ways, but the way I define being punk myself is that you understand that your accomplishments are not just your accomplishments. You understand that you belong to a community. You understand that the world is a system. You understand that the food on your table came from somewhere, and you can envision the last hands that touched the food before they entered the package that you just opened. And that it's kind of like you're haunted, like you're haunted by your relationship to all of the people in this world, and you act accordingly.

And it also means not giving a shit about what people expect you to act like in order to fulfill a political or a corporate goal or something. So, one thing that has always kind of disturbed me has been the portmanteau that has the prefix undocu, like undocujoy, or like undocusomething, because that seems like branding, and I just want undocumented kids to just be individuals. To understand that they can be a part of a community but understand they also don't need to perform anything for anybody. That they don't need to be consumed.

Menendez: And at the same time, you say the Dreamers have taken up a disproportionate amount of space in the immigration discourse.

Cornejo Villavicencio:

Well, that's the media's fault. That's not the Dreamers' fault.

Menendez: Talk to me about that.

Cornejo Villavicencio:

Well, the media has been obsessed with them. Like, I understand that… I'm not villainizing anyone, any specific person or anything, but you know, of course it makes sense that kids

doing sit-ins in caps and gowns, and showing their diplomas, and showing their grades, that's appealing to garner sympathy for white middle America. When I was undocumented and I was a kid, I remember being in like eighth grade, and my dad was like, "The DREAM Act is going to pass." And he was so sure of it. And I was 13 years old and I'm 30 now. And the reason why he told me the DREAM Act was going to pass is because Americans love children, and Americans love academically achieving minorities. And I remember in... Was it 2016? When we had those marches for comprehensive immigration reform. My dad and I walked with all those immigrants, and people didn't go to work, people risked losing their jobs, and we all dressed in white, because we thought that would make us look not menacing. That's just branded in my brain. Just all of us marching down, just down Lower Manhattan and like all of these crowds, and we were not afraid, and people had Mexican flags, and then they were like, "Don't bring your Mexican flags, because people are gonna think that you're not patriotic." My dad made these t-shirts that he had bought in bulk in Chinatown that had the American flag on them. And in the back he wrote, "We are the American dream."

He distributed them to his undocumented coworkers at the restaurant where he worked at, and we wore those t-shirts, and it's like, "We are not the American dream, because it doesn't exist." And I feel like the media's enraptured with Dreamers because Dreamers suggest that the American dream does exist, that you come here, you assimilate, you go to college, you join the military, and the American dream happens. But the camera doesn't stop filming after that. It's like, "Well, what happens?" DACA is a temporary solution. Even if there was a DREAM Act, what would happen is that these kids, we have to take care of our parents. We have to take care of our elderly, who are sick, who have been doing manual labor in many cases for decades, with absolutely zero safety net, even though they've been paying taxes, and we have to pay for them out of pocket.

And you know, this idea that the possibility of inheritable wealth, which really is the American dream, is unattainable for us, because we have to take care of our elderly. And we have to see that our parents suffer from mental health issues, like PTSD, depression, anxiety, alcoholism, addiction, especially our fathers, our grandfathers, our uncles, and that's the behind the scenes of what the Dreamers have to deal with. But we don't talk about that.

Menendez: It's interesting, because on one hand, you yourself say by some measures, you are the American dream, right? If you could bottle it up and sell it, you could. But then there is this... what you just articulated, which is this critique of the American dream, and I wonder how you square the two. Your own experience fueling that rise, and then what I think is a very accurate assessment of where we are in this moment.

Cornejo Villavicencio:

I describe it somewhere as like kind of like in Spanish, there's a word called escampado, which is like when it stops raining just for a little while, like it's raining hard but then it stops for like five minutes. And that's where I am right now in my life. I always feel like my goal in my life has always been social mobility. I'm a little toy that was made in a factory, like where social mobility was a goal, and that's my pursuit, and I also have other pursuits. I have moral pursuits. I have ethical pursuits, but my personal pursuit is social mobility in order to take care of my parents, in order to take care of other undocumented immigrants.

Right now, the rain for me has escampado. You know? Well, the pandemic fucked that up, but I'm able to take care of my parents right now. I'm hemorrhaging savings. I'm writing like

crazy. I'm working 12 hours a day in order to be able to support my parents. But I can. I can. A lot of people can't. And I am very fortunate, and I feel very guilty, and the guilt eats away at my mental health, and I'm not always healthy about the ways that I cope with it. That is the full portrait of what it looks like to be a successful American dream portrait. Thank God I'm a writer. Thank God I'm not someone who doesn't have control over my own narrative, and it's not an American dream story like Carmen Miranda, who was not able to take control of their own narrative, and who became a fucking caricature. So, I have control over my own narrative, and if I ever feel like someone takes control of my narrative, I can take it right back, because I'm a writer.

*Ad:* *Miss Juleyka, nice to have you on. Must be a special reason.*

*Lantigua-Williams:*

*Yeah, yeah. You know it's a special reason, since I like to be behind the scenes. All right, so when Cantu Beauty decided to come on board, I rushed.*

*Menendez:* *You rushed to volunteer to try the products.*

*Lantigua-Williams:*

*Yes, I know I did, and it's the first time. I know. But I've already been using their coconut curling cream for years, so I figured I wasn't gonna miss a chance to try out sister products.*

*Menendez:* *I like the photo you sent me the other day. Your hair looked really good.*

*Lantigua-Williams:*

*And that was just after one shampoo and conditioner. My curls were shiny and smooth, man, and my comb was not full of my own hair after I detangled it in the shower.*

*Menendez:* *Even in pictures it's coming through, like your hair looks shiny, and hydrated, and just so healthy.*

*Lantigua-Williams:*

*Thanks. I really appreciate that you let me send you those, because I'm really excited about the change.*

*Menendez:* *So, how many products are you using all told?*

*Lantigua-Williams:*

*Right now, I've got like four, so I'm using the shampoo, the conditioner, the leave-in cream, and then, can I just tell you what my favorite is?*

*Menendez:* *Mm-hmm (Affirmative).*

*Lantigua-Williams:*

*The Wave Whip. First of all, that name is everything, but I love how my waves and my curls just are fuller, they're more touchable, they're less frizzy. I mean, I know. I sound like an ad, but let me tell you.*

*Menendez:* *Well, you can enjoy the benefits of the Cantu Beauty haircare line, picking up your favorites at Target, or ordering from target.com.*

Menendez: Can we talk about mental health?

Cornejo Villavicencio:

Sure.

Menendez: You write, “My diagnoses are borderline personality disorder, major depression, anxiety and OCD.” What prompted you to get evaluated professionally?

Cornejo Villavicencio:

Okay, so those include some misdiagnoses. I could not possibly have all of those things. I was 21, and at Yale, and had health insurance, and felt depressed, and went to seek help, and I knew that that was the right thing to do. It was not just depression. It was just... There were other things, but there were misdiagnoses. Yale Mental Health has not a good track record of working with students of color, queer students, immigrant students, with their mental health, because of many reasons, including cultural incompetence and a tendency to overmedicate when they should be looking at factors in their patients’ lives.

So, I was not spoken to about being left in Ecuador as a child. I was not spoken to about being undocumented. I was not spoken to about growing up poor. I was not spoken to about my obsession with my father’s pain and my attachment issues. It became bipolar disorder, even though I’d never experienced a manic episode in my life. What was considered mania was my obsession with work and that I felt like work was the way out. But how could work not be the way out for a child that since you were six years old was like, “Work is my way out of the ghetto.” So, of course I write, I stay up all night writing, because that’s what I think is going to save me.

So, most of my psychiatrists and everything were white, and they were like... You know, and remember that I had read about all these artists, most of whom had received also probably incorrectly manic-depressive diagnoses, when it was much more complicated than that. A lot of people are misdiagnosed as bipolar. So, I was on a lot of antipsychotics for many years that made me feel sluggish, that made me feel tired. I was just completely a carcass. And it was over the past few years that I’ve found some things that make more sense, like complex trauma, a borderline personality disorder diagnosis that... I’ve gone to lots of different doctors, and some of them disagree with each other, and some of them just don’t really believe in diagnoses, per se. I have benefited greatly from DBT, dialectical behavioral therapy. I have benefited greatly from CBT.

Menendez: Cognitive behavioral therapy.

Cornejo Villavicencio:

Cognitive behavioral therapy. I have a set of skills. I know what works for me. I have to make the choice. If I am feeling panic, if I am feeling self-harmy, will I reach for something more self-harmy? Or will I reach for something that I know is a skill? And that is a choice that you still have to make, but I understand, and what I try to write in the book is that people who have been separated from their parents as children, there’s a lot of us, and it’s not just immigrants, but it’s people who have been separated from their parents because of mass incarceration, because of the war on drugs, because of the opioid crisis, now because of COVID. There’s just a lot of us, and I think mental health resources have to

become more financially accessible to people. I was able to pay for my parents' therapy with my book advance, and it was really hard finding Spanish-speaking people for my parents.

Menendez: But wait, before you even get there, how did you convince them to go? Did you have to convince them?

Cornejo Villavicencio:

Yes. First of all, I'm kind of the head of the household in my house, so it took a lot of convincing, like months of convincing, but basically I was like, "I've done all the research and I'm mentally ill, and there's no way that this happened without you guys being unscathed, either." They needed it. They knew they needed it. And of course, there was like my father was like, "I'm not crazy." And of course, my mom was like, "I have God." I just speak honestly with them. Here's what I told my parents: I told my mom what is just the classic thing, like, "You have arthritis. You have these other different things going on with your body. You go to the doctor. This is not any different. Also, I have been taking medication for years. What would you do if I stopped taking my medication? You would be upset, because I'm not taking care of myself. Because I owe it to you, and I owe it to people I love to take care of myself. You owe it to me, you owe it to your children, and you owe it to yourself to take care of yourself."

And my mom was just depressed. My mom had just separated from my dad. She knew she was depressed. And I said, "Be kind to yourself. You've been so good to us. You've been such a good mother. You're such a good person in the congregation. You're such a good worker. Love yourself. Do something good for yourself for the first time in your life. Be kind to yourself. I'm paying for this. Just be kind to yourself." And girl, she didn't want to do therapy. She said therapy made her anxious, and like that's okay, because therapy sometimes makes me anxious, too. But she went to a psychiatrist, and I found a very good Latino psychiatrist, and he put her on an antidepressant, and it helped so much. It helped so much. She is a different person now. She has no stigma around it and she's a completely different person.

And my dad goes to therapy, or he did before the pandemic every week, and every week he called me, and he was like, 'Thank you, nena. I feel so much lighter. It's so good to have somebody to talk to."

*Ad:* *If you're looking for another podcast, check out Offshore, from Honolulu Civil Beat. Offshore is an immersive storytelling podcast that tackles some of the most socially relevant issues in America today. This season, they're taking a deep dive into the Hawaiian diaspora. Nearly half of all native Hawaiians now live outside Hawaii. It's a figure that raises a lot of painful questions about identity, family, and culture.*

*"As Hawaii's first people, I'm very concerned."*

*"It's why I always consider myself a man without an island."*

*"Native Hawaiians abroad can rightfully be understood as economic refugees from an economy that is skewed towards tourism."*

*"It's always in my heart to return to my homeland."*

*Native Hawaiian journalist Ku'you Kauanoe explores what's causing so many Hawaiians to leave the islands today and tells some amazing and little-known stories about*

*Hawaiians who left long ago. Hawaiians who discovered gold in California, fought in America's civil war, and changed American music forever. You can listen to Offshore on Apple Podcasts, Stitcher, or wherever you get your podcasts. Check it out. Offshorepodcast.org. You don't want to miss it.*

Menendez: How did you get people to trust you? And how did you get them, even more, what I found so compelling about what you did, is get them beyond the obvious, beyond the narrative that has been transposed onto them.

Cornejo Villavicencio:

So, one thing that I did is I gave them the elevator pitch for the book that I gave to sell the book, to the publishers, and to the editors, and to everyone. I gave them the pitch, too. So, I'd be like, "Hi, this is who I am. I started writing about music, but then in 2016," I just gave it to them, and it took a long time. It was weird. It was a little uncomfortable. But I gave it to them, and I was like, "I'm getting a PhD at Yale and I read a lot of books on migration and I hate them, and this is why I hate them, and I'm undocumented, and my parents are undocumented. This is why I write about immigration, and I want to retire my parents, and I have mental health issues." I just told them the whole thing, and so that was one thing. It helped that I was undocumented a lot. It helped that my parents were undocumented. I often brought up my parents and I would often be like, "Oh, that reminds me of my dad. Or that reminds me of my mom." I would ask about their children.

There were a lot of things that made me different from them. Obviously, I was privileged in a lot of ways. But there were also things that made us very similar. We were all deportable, and we were all scared of similar things, like sometimes cops would pull up and we would all get scared. I never asked any of my subjects why they came to America, because it's none of my fucking business, and I think people, like undocumented immigrants, when they talk to journalists, are used to people asking them that. It's none of my fucking business why they came to America. They're here. It's hard here. That's enough for me. I don't even care why my parents came to America. It's enough that they've withstood 30 fucking years here. I'm interested in whether the immigrants I talk to are taking multivitamins, and I think that when I talk to them, and they're like, "Yeah, I've been feeling really faint lately," and I'm like, "Are you taking Centrum?" And I'm like, "You should." And like-

Menendez: When you took on the responsibility of telling other people's stories as part of this book, how did that sort of responsibility of getting it right manifest for you?

Cornejo Villavicencio:

It was just my job, and so when I was writing my book, I was like, "You know, I have to get this right." Getting this right is not only just getting every single word that they said right, but was getting like the affect right, getting the mood right, getting the anger right, getting the sadness right, getting like... And I told them. You know, what I promised everyone in the book, all of my subjects, that I would get Americans to care, and that's a promise that I couldn't guarantee that I could keep. But I knew that I had a vision for how I could representationally get Americans to care, because I think that what my talent is is not necessarily just like... I'm not like a public intellectual. I don't have brilliant ideas. But I think I can get things that are in circulation as clichés, and take them out of that, take them out of circulation, and revive them from cliché to something a lot more human, something a lot

weirder, and something that makes you think or feel something. And I think that that's what my talent is.

And I promised them. I said, "I promise you that I'm gonna tell the story and if Americans read this book, they will care about your story." And I promised that to all my subjects, and I think they're not really used to journalists being like, "I promise that if readers read your story, they will care about you as a human being." But I had enough trust in myself as an undocumented immigrant who people didn't give a shit about to say, "I'm gonna use my voice to lift up your voice." And I think that's why they trusted me.

Menendez: Thank you, Karla.

Cornejo Villavicencio:

Thank you.

Menendez: Thank you as always for joining us. Latina to Latina is executive produced and owned by Juleyka Lantigua-Williams and me, Alicia Menendez. Cedric Wilson is our sound designer. Emma Forbes is our assistant producer. Manuela Bedoya is our intern. We love hearing from you. Email us at hola@latinatolatina.com, and remember to subscribe or follow us on RadioPublic, Apple Podcasts, Google Podcasts, wherever you're listening, and please, please leave a review. It is one of the quickest and easiest ways to help us grow as a community.

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