

WRITING LATINOS

Season 2 Episode 8

Karla Cornejo Villavicencio

Geraldo Cadava: Stardom or fame is an American story about how you beat the odds in this country. And so her grandma calls her my little miracle. And I think Catalina is the example of someone who's just kind of living on a prayer and reacting with the best that she can to the circumstances that she's been given, the cards that she's been dealt.

Hi, my name is Geraldo Cadava, and I want to thank you for tuning into season two of writing Latinos, a podcast from public books.

As usual, we've had some, in my opinion, terrific conversations with latino authors writing about the wide world of Latinidad.

Each episode has offered thoughtful reflections on latino identity and how writing conveys some of its meanings.

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We have a real treat for this final episode of season two, a conversation with Karla Cornejo Villavicencio about her new novel called Catalina, published by Oneworld.

Karla's first book, the Undocumented Americans, was a finalist for the National Book Award. Her writing has appeared just about everywhere. Her new book is a lot of things, but most basically, it's about a young woman named Catalina who left Ecuador when she was a small child, was raised by her grandparents in New York, and attended Harvard University.

Francisco Goldman says of Catalina, by so enthrallingly and perceptively giving unprecedented individual voice to a defining issue of our time, Catalina seems destined to be a contemporary american classic.

We quite agree, and we're so glad to have Karla with us today.

First, I really just would like you, if possible, to introduce us to the protagonist and such an amazing character, full of, gosh, how do you even put it?

Just energy, ambition, but also irreverence for the institution that she's at. Lots of deep connections with her grandparents who she grew up with. So how would you describe Catalina?

Karla Cornejo Villavicencio: Oh, I would describe Catalina as a 20 year old girl.

I was definitely interested in the idea of leaning into the girlishness of the character because I wanted to write somebody who was so undeniable, because I wanted to see how people would try to deny her, which is been an experience that I've had in my life, but that I've also seen in so many different variations in observing people and observing the way we relate to people who are different than us. Katalina is 20, and I am 34, and I feel very protective of her. And I kind of feels like I'm in a parent teacher conference, and I'm the parent. And I'm here to hear about what Catalina's been up to in school. All I know is she leaves home with a backpack, and she comes home with a backpack and everything else.

I'm just excited to learn what she's been up to, so to speak.

GC: Yeah, yeah, yeah. And, you know, what would you say Catalina wants? I mean, what are her desires? Because sometimes when I was reading the novel, I thought that one thing Catalina wants is just to see what kind of responses she can provoke in others. So it seemed like she was curious to see how others were responding to her, which makes me wonder what her desires were. What did she want?

KCV: I think if I were to take Catalina at her word, she would say that she wants to write a thesis even though she doesn't have a topic yet. She wants to win an award for this thesis even though she doesn't have a topic yet. And she'd probably say, as she says in the book, that she wants to sell out and work for Goldman Sachs. Catalina says a lot of things, and I don't really nudge the reader into whether they should believe her or not or whether she's lying or telling the truth. I find the place in the middle to be like a very.

A place of liminality that feels like very latin american to me, a place where fact and fiction kind of bleed into each other. And so when I was writing Catalina, even though the subject matter was dark or something, there was just this mischievousness in her way of looking at the world. So I think that she would say something like, I want to work for Goldman Sachs and sell out just like the rest of them. And then I would have be not sure how to interpret that.

GC: Yeah, I mean, one scene in particular I was thinking about was when she was talking to Nathaniel, when she's talking about rom coms and how there's always a line in rom coms where it's like, don't fall in love with me. And she wants to try out that line with Nathaniel. Nathaniel's kind of taken aback by it. And Nathaniel's also like, oh, wait. So you just say things, but that's a kind of scene that I was thinking about when I said that. Sometimes I felt like her main goal or her desire was to just get a response from the people that she was interacting with.

KCV: I do think that's true, but I also think that that is the truth of all social interactions. I find human behavior fascinating. I find it interesting. I find all of it confusing, every single aspect of it. When I'm having an interaction with another person, or when I'm viewing human interactions amongst themselves, I'm always, like, breaking down the interaction. And so I think Catalina has a genuine curiosity about why people act the way they do and view her the way they view her and talk the way they talk. And I think for her, saying something provocative gets her there faster.

It gets her there faster by maybe knocking people off of a script that they're all on. And she might just get to information that she needs a little bit faster.

GC: So I was going to ask, too, about another set of relationships that are profoundly influential for Catalina is the relationship that she has both with her grandmother and her grandfather. I guess one of the things I'm curious to know about them is what they wanted for Catalina and what they expected from her in return.

KCV: The grandparents are one of my favorite parts of the novel. I think they feel so real to me. A little bit is taken from my own mom and dad and the way that they raised me, particularly. My father is someone who loved books, and my mother is someone who I've always viewed as, like, a feminist icon.

But it's also taken from a lot of older women and men over the years who've had a guardianship role in my life and in the lives of my friends.

It was really interesting for me to create a universe around this girl, Catalina, of people from all of these different walks of life who came into her life and I, and left an imprint, left a mark, tried to help her in some way. Catalina is an orphan in the book, and she uses a lot of bluster to talk about herself because she feels very vulnerable. And the grandparents are people who can speak in that bluster back to her. And in those conversations that Catalina has with her grandparents are some of the quickest in the book.

They fight, they have disagreements. They're mean to each other. And you see that she feels completely comfortable in her own body, in her own confidence, in the way that she stands up to them, in her own intellect. You see the way that the grandparents have been so influential and giving her the confidence that she's needed to make her way through the world. So I think that it really brings to you into the home of this tiny family of immigrants who are able to sustain each other's spirits through some really difficult times. And you see kind of the ways that they do that. And the grandparents are very good at nurturing Catalina's spirit.

It's unclear what they want from Catalina. I would say it's unclear what they want from America. I introduced them at the beginning of the book, they have just begun to age out of manual labor and are beginning to feel that there's no use for them anymore. And when Catalina comes to them as, like, a little girl whose parents were in a car crash and who has already had a lot of trauma as a little kid, there's this opportunity that they have of a second shot at life. And part of it is, as I say in the book, there's the cynical calculations involved in survival. It's, if I take care of this young person, maybe they'll take care of me in old age. But there's also, I mean, for Catalina's grandfather, who's an old latin american, lefty intellectual, he gets to inspire this young person. He gets to be a charismatic leader who inspires this rebellious young woman who is escaping the grandfather's grips because she's american, and yet he can't stop sort of ministering to her. I think there's something really lovely in that. I think the grandmother lives through Catalina and wants Catalina to go to the parties.

She wants Catalina to live her life as if it was in a movie, I would think more so than Catalina herself does. Early in the book, you see, the grandmother gave Catalina a \$20 bill, and she says, you should stay out with that mexican boy you like.

Just take a cab home. Just live something. Go have an adventure. And you see that what she wants for Catalina isn't a just safety, isn't just an education, but is also freedom, the way that the grandmother interprets it, which seems to be financial independence and the ability to control your own body.

GC: You know, it's funny, this is a little bit of an aside, but we have been talking with authors this season who have women authors, latino authors, who've been kind of, at least to my mind, reimagining the genre of writing about abuelas and kind of exploring the desires that have gone largely unfulfilled for their grandmothers, and that they want to make it possible for their granddaughters to go out and explore the world and accomplish things that they had wanted to accomplish, but it didn't happen for them. There's something in the air right now where we're actually confronting the humanity, I guess, of our grandparents, who aren't just the abuelas and Coco, who teach us lessons about things, but actually have their own desires and wanted to do things with their lives that in many cases, they didn't get to do.

KCV: I'm excited to hear that. I think decolonize abuelas, you know?

GC: Yeah, there you go.

KCV: But for real? I do. So I'm not having children, and I am very happy about that. However, I am a little bummed that I won't have grandchildren because I have been fantasizing about being a grandmother for my entire life. Abuelas are so canon in Latin culture.

GC: Totally.

KCV: And I was just like, I'll be the abuela. I mean, I'll be the great. I'll be the best abuela. It made me start feeling competitive and planning how I was going to be best Abuela. I imagine my grandchildren would have been obsessed with me because I would be their abuela and because they would probably never know where they stood with me.

GC: Yeah, I love that. I wanted to ask, too. You said earlier that you think that Catalina would say that she wanted to sell out and work at Goldman Sachs and win a thesis award.

Where did that drive come from? I mean, was it about her relationship with her grandparents and fulfilling her grandparents expectations? Or did her desire to win a thesis award and perhaps sell out and work for Goldman? Did that come from herself?

KCV: Well, again, I would not take Catalina at her word. So in the context in which she is speaking to Byron Wheeler, who is a british filmmaker who's interested in maybe doing a. A short feature on her, I think that's the context in which she says, I would have wanted to sell out like everyone else and work at Goldman, Goldman Sachs, at least when I was at Harvard, was a big recruiter.

When you were a senior and you saw one of your classmates in a suit, which is an awkward time cause you're college, so you're still a little kid, but you're also an adult. And so when I saw them wherever I like suits and pumps and ties, I knew they were going for interviews with Mackenzie or Goldman Sachs. And it was just a little bit strange because my classmates felt so young to me and they were joining these empires.

When Catalina says that to Byron, she's trying to say, don't think that you know me, because he's interested in doing this feature on her. Don't think that you know my character. Don't think that you know my intentions. I think she tries to make herself unknowable by saying things like that sometimes. I do think she has a great drive and ambition, but I don't attribute that to her grandparents. I attribute that to her desire to be a star, which she says very clearly from the get go. If I was not going to be someone who was an. Just another uninsured girl at Bellevue known only by her wristband, if I'm not going to be someone who died two decades ago of tuberculosis. I had to commit to Catalina. Catalina. Catalina.

And she talks about fame a lot. She even says that heartbreak is more famous than falling in love or marital bliss. So she wants to experience heartbreak because it's more famous. There's an idea, I think she has, that stardom or fame is an american story about how you beat the odds in this country. And so there's, like, imagery of, like, lottery tickets and stuff. In the book. Her grandma calls her my little miracle. And I think Catalina is the example of someone who's just kind of

living on a prayer, and I reacting with the best that she can to the circumstances that she's been given and the cards that she's been dealt.

GC: Yeah, I want to talk a little bit about what Catalina. Actually, I keep wanting to hispanicize her name and say Catalina. But you're calling her Catalina. Do you have a preference?

KCV: I don't. I don't. It's how people are with my name, too. My name is Karla, but my parents don't call me that. And my parents call me Nena, and my brother calls me Bae. My family in Ecuador calls me Marcelita because my middle name is Marcela. And, you know, people that I grew up with, like aunties and people in the congregation in my community would call me Carlita. And so Karla feels like such. Like my outside name to me. And so sometimes people do think that the right name is Karla, but that is just as fictitious as Karla. So whatever people want to call me.

GC: I will go back and forth between Catalina and Catalina then, and I won't feel free. I don't need to stress about it too much. But I want to hear a little bit about what Catalina learned at Harvard, because I teach history classes at Northwestern and I teach latino history, and the latino students in my class, the stories they have of latino history, come from their families. And then I think it's kind of eye opening to them. And I don't mean eye opening in a good way, necessarily. I just mean it's a different way of learning latino history to encounter it in a university classroom. And I felt like Catalina was kind of balancing those two things, too, and thinking about who was a kind of better teacher of latin american culture and history, her grandfather or some of the professors she took classes with at Harvard. So I guess, first, on the subject of Latin America, I mean, how were you thinking about the lessons Catalina learned from her grandfather and the kind of academic historian's version of latin american history?

KCV: I think with Catalina and we are privy to some of the lectures that she gets from her grandfather. And I think that she also gathers all of the information, gets all of the resources, looks at just the buffet of anecdotes and reports and stories and everything that they're offering her. But I think Catalina comes to her own conclusions. I think she says in the book that the anthropologist at Harvard and her grandfather basically agreed on the same story, which was that first came the Spaniards and with them the church, and then came petroleum and cocaine and NAFTA, and now we were all fucked. And something like that, I think, is the lesson anyone would take with them if they took classes on latin american history. It's hard to come up with another conclusion.

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GC: At the same time, I think Catalina, when professors would learn that she's from Ecuador, would kind of cringe and brace herself for what was about to come, because they would talk about, oh, the highlands. Oh, that's not the part of Ecuador you're from. Why not? They would want to talk about the kind of tourist version, I guess, of what they know about Ecuador.

I wonder if that's something that maybe you experienced at Harvard, too, where people would want to talk to you about their experience of Latin America in ways that you kind of brace yourself against.

KCV: I think that the American fascination with Latin America has long delighted me. And just like with everything else, like with my fascination with frogs or with corvids, I try to read as much as I can and think about it as much as I can. And if I'm going to be thinking about human beings and human behavior. Teddy Roosevelt is one of my favorite people to think about. Kissinger is one of my favorite people to think about. It takes a lot of concentration for me to think about someone, and if I'm going to give that concentration to someone, I want it to be someone that's going to be chewy, you know, someone that's going to give me something to work with for a while.

GC: Yeah. And I did want to ask about the anthropologist because it also felt to me like Catalina was also a kind of ethnographer and anthropologist, but of Harvard and kind of studying and observing. I would like to know, I guess, in particular about Nathaniel, in particular, Nathaniel and her friend Delphine, who is a particular kind of Latina who identifies as a Texan so what did Catalina learn and think about those people?

KCV: So Delphine is one of Catalina's best friends at college. Delphine is from Texas, identifies strongly as being Texan. She is Afro Latina. Her parents are Puerto Rican. Her father's black. He's a veteran. And Delphine is raised alone by her dad in Texas, where they stand out for being mixed race in a way that isn't visible to their neighbors. They feel very lonely. And this shocks Catalina, because Catalina, not being Afro Latina, looks at Delphine, and she says she's the most beautiful girl. There's a kind of naivete about what Delphine's experience might have been like. And another one of Catalina's best friends is Kyle, who is editor in chief of the school paper, black and Jewish. And he's someone who also has so many thoughts about where he belongs and what community he might belong to and where his loyalties lie. I think that in them, Catalina finds people who are grappling with complexities about their own identity and about their role in the community. And that makes her feel safe, I think, with her friends, with Nathaniel, I'm not sure she's seeking safety.

I think she's very clear that he's a beautiful boy and she would like to sleep with him. When I think of Nathaniel, I think of a handsome young man who looks a little bit like the drummer from the Strokes. And Catalina likes drummers.

GC: And she also likes baseball players, basketball players, football players. There was a long list of not everything.

KCV: Not hockey.

GC: Not everything. Not hockey.

KCV: Not pickleball, I can tell you. Not pickleball.

GC: I think Catalina has experiences with Pan Latinidad, I guess before she goes to Harvard, right. There are scenes where she's talking about the kind of parties she goes to, where there are foods from many different latino cultures and dances and music from different latino cultures. But Harvard is a kind of another experience, too. I remember a scene where Catalina is sitting in a class and looking at all of the different Latinas and Latinos and imagining that they have kind of similar stories as she does, but she's not interacting with them. And then there are these other moments where Delphine, I think you describe her as an upper middle class Latina from Texas. And so I guess I'm asking for both Catalina and you, Karla.

Is Harvard the place where both of these, you, Karla, and Catalina, your character, kind of experienced a wide spectrum of Latinidad.

KCV: I grew up in New York, and I felt like I understood that Latinos were comprised from many different nationalities and that not all of them spoke Spanish and that they were all different races.

Because I grew up in New York, I think I am really culturally unfamiliar with the border and with border culture, and thus with chicano culture. And even though I am ecuadorian, like I, for Catalina, I had to come up with chosen family as Catalina did.

GC: I did want to ask one more Harvard question. Did you and Catalina both leave Harvard as the same people you were when you entered Harvard, or did Harvard change you? Did it transform your lives?

KCV: And in what ways Harvard did transform my life. It makes me feel like I married one of the Beatles and kept the last name for my entire life. That's what it makes me feel like. Like my name is Karla McCartney. And I love that you're like, what's the background there? And I have

to tell you every single time, I found it really interesting and a little scary after I published the undocumented Americans, that so much of the marketing was dedicated around me having gone to Harvard specifically, having been one of the first undocumented students to graduate from Harvard, and that was something that happened because of things outside of my control. I, like Catalina, have been dealt certain cards, and I've done my absolute best with what I've been given. Harvard was one of those things that when I applied there, I really felt like it was going to be a miracle if I got in.

And I really needed to get in. I was really counting on that miracle because at the time, being a dreamer and having no ability to pay for college unless I got a full scholarship from the institution, because I couldn't. I wasn't eligible for any kind of loan or federal aid. And so it had to be an institution rich enough that they could just fund all of it. And those are the schools that I ended up applying to. And a lot of schools that I applied to that were a little bit smaller or just a little bit less rich. They rejected me because they couldn't pay for me. And so once I got to Harvard, I felt like one of the chosen ones. But I had already felt like one of the chosen ones because I've survived so much and because I'd been through so much. Those are the things that make me feel extraordinary about myself. It's the ways that I. The things that I have in common with other migrants, regardless of how old they were when they came here, just the hunger, the resilience, the impertinence, those things. But then with Harvard, like when I was promoting the first book, there was just a tone where it was, like, the most important thing about me. And that made me feel really cagey and really withdrawn about wanting to talk about Harvard. Part of it is because I was confused by how many people cared about Harvard as a social signifier. I saw in real time how real it was to go to Harvard, it legitimized me immediately. Like, if I were to go on to MSNBC and throw a stapler at Rachel Maddow, which I would never, because I love her, but if I was to, it would be, like, one of the first undocumented students to graduate from Harvard through a stapler at Rachel Maddow.

GC: Yeah.

KCV: And because that was what legitimizes me for the American public, I decided to have a little fun with it. And so I remember saying, when I was asked about it in the first book, I remember saying that I thought that having gone to Harvard was my birthright, and I knew that was going to trigger so many white people, and it did, but it was going to trigger them anyway. So if there are certain reactions that I can anticipate from the public, and if I can somehow preempt those reactions and try to respond to them in creative ways so that those reactions still happen, but I had creative input. And how those reactions do happen, that's a place where I feel good. So for this. This book, I was like, you wanted the dreamer story at Harvard? Here's the dreamer story at Harvard. I hope you like what you got.

GC: Yeah. And I think with Catalina, it seemed like she was always wrestling with insider, outsider status. I mean, on the one hand, she came to Harvard with all of the same kind of literary reference points that other students at Harvard would have. But I had a very different background story. And then I remember there was this other moment where she was having lunch with an alumni at the Cygnet club. I think it is where it was this older lady. I think it was cygnet. It might have been some other space, but where they were bonding over hats. They were both wearing hats, and why don't people wear hats anymore? But then the same older lady started asking her about, well, why haven't you been back to Ecuador? You should travel. You should travel the world. And at that point, and even in that one moment, Catalina is both establishing some kind of connection with this person who's otherwise very different than her, but also feels the difference when they talk about traveling the world and things like that.

KCV: I think in that moment, she felt the difference when they were bonding over the hats. And the lady turns to Catalina, who I think was wearing a sleeveless dress, and touches her and says, look at this complexion, like, what a gorgeous complexion. Are you spanish, my dear? And that is the moment where Catalina says, no, not this, because she knows that this is something that can happen, that you can be having a perfectly nice time with someone, and all of a sudden they're like, what a gorgeous complexion, my dear. Where are you from? So that's why she says, no, not this. I was hoping we could avoid this pitfall, but here we are.

GC: Totally. Tell me a little bit about Henry Kissinger. He is someone who I think you were describing as a chewy person. And in the book, I think you admire some things about him, like hes not boring. You said, I think hes an interesting person, even though you know about all of the just vile things he had done in his life, too. So tell me a little bit about you're or Catalina, as I should say, fascination with Henry Kissinger.

KCV: I can tell you, for me, I was concurrently learning a lot about just doing a lot of reading into Argentina and their military dictatorships and chile. And I was just circling around Kissinger. Circling around Kissinger.

Henry Kissinger is one of those men. He's one of those men that I've fantasized about being with alone in a room and have the ability to ask them a question or to say something to them. And I still don't know what question I would ask or what I would say to them. And that's, again, one of the daydreams that I have.

GC: *The Undocumented Americans* was a book of nonfiction. This is a book of fiction.

You know, what do you think? I mean, what was behind that choice to write in a different genre? And what did you learn was possible in this genre that wasn't in the other?

KCV: *The Undocumented Americans* was reporting based, and it was me lending my voice to tell the stories of other people and the moments where I wrote about myself. It was to create a

To cross over the bridge with other people and to find a place of compassionate understanding that came from shared experience.

And in this book, I did a lot of research.

I read so many books. I went to so many trips to the natural history museum and to the Peabody and.

But it felt like the most intimate experience in the world. It was just me with me. I wrote this book at night. During the day, it suddenly became a little bit too overwhelming for my brain to really work. And so during the day, I handle things. I like read or handle administrative things, but the creative work I could only do once lights were off. Once my partner was in bed, I would turn the blue lights on downstairs and set out the yoga mat and just lie around on the floor thinking, recording things into voice memos, transcribing those, printing them out, and then line editing that there was just a lot of.

It was painstaking, but it was very private, and I liked that. And it was a time in my life where I really wanted to be alone with my thoughts and sit in a room that was dark. And the only thing that could light up the room was probably the look in my eyes when I came up with a line that I thought was really, really mean, and my eyes would probably just light up. But that was the main difference, is that the undocumented Americans was an act of community, and this one was the interior life of just one girl. And so you really go in there. You really. I really had to live in that headspace because that's where I was inviting my readers to go into that headspace. And it was really hard to get into her headspace. Every night. The world is painful, and I am a sensitive soul. And often by the day's end, you know, you're beat down and you're like, oh, my gosh, how much worse can the world be? And how much worse can people be? And in order to get to Catalina's voice, which is almost like a hip hop voice in terms of the momentum it requires posturing, the witness, the readings, the references, it requires every cell in your body to be awake. And so transforming my mood and having to inhabit the mind of this young woman who's all defiance, and that was really helpful for me.

GC: Thank you so much for writing Catalina, and I love how you described the nighttime process of creativity. And I really hope that all of the listeners go out and buy and read it and enjoy every single word of it. So thank you for your time, Karla.

KCV: Thank you so much for having me.

GC: Thank you for listening to season two of writing Latinos. We'd love to hear your suggestions for new books that we should be reading and talking about. Drop us a line at [@publicbooks.org](mailto:publicbooks.org) dot. This episode is brought to you by Public Books. It was produced by Tasha Sandoval. Our music is City of mirrors by the Chicago based band Dos Santos. You can follow us on Twitter and Instagram to receive updates about season three of writing Latinos. I'm Geraldo Cadava. We'll see you again soon.