

Peralta, Dan-el Padilla (2015) *Undocumented: A Dominican Boy's Odyssey from a Homeless Shelter to the Ivy League*, Penguin Books, New York, Ny.

Vance, J.D. (2016) *Hillbilly Elegy: A Memoir of a Family and Culture in Crisis*, HarperCollins, New York, Ny.

Review by Stefanie Stiles

The lives of Dan-el Padilla Peralta and J.D. Vance are remarkably similar, despite the obvious demographic distinctions: Peralta is a black, undocumented Dominican immigrant, raised in poverty in East Harlem, and J.D. Vance is a white Rustbelt denizen whose poor Appalachian roots go back many generations. Now in their early 30s, Peralta and Vance overcame unstable childhoods, graduated from the Ivy League (Princeton, Oxford and Stanford for Peralta, and Yale Law School for Vance), and went on to professional success in their respective careers in academia and finance. Although both of the authors' memoirs have generated significant media coverage, they've never been linked. In the inaugural issue of this journal, Sherry Lee Linkon and John Russo¹ identified four major central questions in the field of Working-Class Studies, including the ongoing one of how to incorporate the topic of race and racism (and sexuality, gender, immigration status and other social categories) into discussions of class relations. One step in this direction is to examine these memoirs jointly as two meaningful articulations of the working-class experience. Doing so is intellectually productive because it calls attention to the commonalities of the authors' experiences across racial and cultural lines, as well as the ways that race complicates class issues.

In the popular press, Vance's *Hillbilly Elegy* has generally received good reviews and owes its bestseller status to its reputation as the book that explains Trump's appeal among America's beaten-down white working class. The author, a centrist political conservative, recounts his unconventional upbringing as a child of the 'Hillbilly diaspora' in a dying industrial town, Middletown, Ohio. His biological father is mostly absent, and his mother is a negligent drug addict, leaving Vance to be raised mainly by his older sister and beloved grandparents, 'Mamaw' and 'Papaw', who are far from moral paragons themselves. Vance is both proud of his family heritage and class background, and disapproving of some of its prevalent cultural practices. In

¹ <https://workingclassstudiesjournal.com/>

particular, he notes the importance of a stable, loving home environment in producing functional adults; Vance's own childhood is chaotic, punctuated by domestic violence, in large part because of the some 15 different boyfriends and stepfathers cycled rapidly in and out of his life.

Undocumented has also garnered attention, though it has not been successful in changing the larger public conversation on the contentious topic of immigration reform, no doubt the aim behind its publication. In this account, the precocious Peralta's intellectual talents are recognized at age 9, while living in a homeless shelter with his mother and younger brother. Jeff Cowen, a shelter volunteer, is impressed by the young Peralta, and helps secure his admission on scholarship to Collegiate, a prestigious Manhattan boys' private school. The rest, as they say, is history.

The unlikely successes achieved by the authors are the result of a conflux of factors, but two stand out: individual agency and social environment. Regarding the former, it is evident throughout the narrative, for all of his inconsistent and not-so-very-convincing claims otherwise, that Peralta is an unusually brilliant and persistent individual. Peralta's use of literature as a means of escaping the tumult of his daily life—in his case the study of Greek and Roman classics—is a characteristic feature in many narratives of the working-class academic. Vance, likewise, though by no means a stand-out scholar like Peralta, is nonetheless intelligent and unusually self-motivated. He learns to conquer what he regards as a widespread class failing, 'learned helplessness' (he borrows Martin's Seligman's term), under first the tutelage of the wise and ferocious Mamaw and then his Marines' superiors.

Social relationships are also key in the authors' stories of class movement, in particular those with a few significant family members and mentors. Peralta's mother devotes herself to her sons' education, deciding to stay in the United States illegally and sacrifice her marriage to allow them access to better schooling and opportunities. She fosters their personal growth: monitoring their school-work, signing them up for arts programs, and encouraging Peralta's musically-inclined brother to audition for a choral group. Mamaw fills a similar role in Vance's life. She also emphasizes education, and constantly promotes the working-class value of hard work. Distrustful of politicians and the ruling classes, she still tells her grandson, 'Never be like those fucking losers who think the deck is stacked against them'. In spite of their lack of resources, the efforts of both women are examples of the 'concerted cultivation' approach to childrearing more common among middle-class parents, as per Annette Lareau.

Unfortunately, neither of these matriarchal figures can provide the social or cultural capital crucial in achieving middle-class status—in fact, Maria Elena Peralta can barely speak English. Various institutions fill in to cover these deficits for the two young men, or as Peralta puts it, 'structures, contexts, and luck reigned supreme' in his journey. It is clear that admission to elite educational institutions like Collegiate, Princeton and Yale change the course of their lives, but less obvious, perhaps, is the role of the Roman Catholic Church and the Marines at other critical junctures in the authors' stories. In Peralta's case, being an altar-boy at Resurrection Catholic Church provides him with an alternative to street life, and guidance from the kindly Father Michael. For Vance, besides building up his self-esteem, Marines' contacts also teach him practical skills that his family did not, like how to choose the best bank, or shop around for a low-interest car loan.

Where the two young working-class men differ, however, is in their racial background and immigrant status. In many ways, Peralta's is the more exceptional working-class success story, because of the greater challenges he faced due to his lack of 'papeles'. His college admission, scholarship funding, employment, ability to travel outside of the United States and return to visit

his family—all of these things are threatened by his ambiguous immigrant status. Peralta must also grapple with racial prejudice that sometimes threatens his emotional health, and the violence of daily life as an impoverished person of color in Harlem. While at Princeton, he learns of the senseless shooting death of a peer who also worked his way out of the ghetto to college. Peralta muses, ‘I’d think of Tim, and for the most fleeting moment I’d fear that no matter how hard I worked and no matter what I achieved, I’d always be one angry motherfucker away from getting popped’.

Vance, on the other hand, though he lacks the cultural knowledge to know what sparkling water is at a dinner interview with law firm recruiters, is able to mainly fly under the radar as a straight white man crossing class boundaries. At Ohio State, he inwardly seethes while listening to a middle-class undergraduate spout stereotypes about soldiers, and at Yale he’s embarrassed when his group leaves a mess for servers at a restaurant. Yet these moments of concealed class rage, as uncomfortable as they are, do not constitute the same sort of insecurity that Peralta must deal with: at any time the existential threat of deportation hangs over his head. His ability to study and reach academic milestones under the Damoclean sword shows a mastery of focus and compartmentalization.

Not surprisingly, the authors’ politics are also divergent, at least on the surface. Vance is clearly conservative, and Peralta is almost by default liberal, though direct comparison is tricky, because their books’ political foci don’t often overlap. In Joshua Rothman’s insightful *New Yorker* review, he notes that Vance blames both economic and cultural factors for the declining fortunes of his hillbilly peers, and that his sharp analysis is leavened by his compassion. He argues that Vance’s book is remarkable because it moves beyond the typical, politically divisive ‘culture vs. economics’ explanations for poverty, refusing to attribute sole causality to either. I think Vance does indeed lean much more heavily toward personal agency as the solution, but Rothman is quite right in praising the author for taking a nuanced, sensitive view of a complicated issue.

There are far fewer moments of overt polemic in Peralta’s book, though the author’s life story in and of itself, of course, makes a powerful political statement about the societal contributions of undocumented immigrants. The overall sense is that Peralta is less an ideologue, than he is, at heart, a scholar’s scholar, often unwillingly drawn into a political debate. (Today Peralta is an Assistant Professor of Classics at Princeton.) He supports the now-halted DREAM Act, yet ultimately is left feeling jaded about the political process: when he asks his politician acquaintances about timelines for DREAM, his concerns are graciously dismissed with talk of ‘legislative priorities’. There is an underlying tone of resentment throughout the memoir, stronger than any professed political statement: Peralta refuses to be anyone’s pawn. He claims a multiplicity of selves, ‘I had and have no intention of ever being only a Dominican, or a minority, or an undocumented immigrant, or a Spanish Harlem resident; or a Collegiate man, a Princeton man, an Oxford man’. There is something exhilarating and very American about this personal declaration of independence.

Interestingly, the two men share a distinctly working-class political perspective—one that partially explains American blue-collar workers’ rejection, in recent years, of establishment candidates from both parties—and that is frustration with a patronizing middle-class who often appear to be completely out of touch with the struggles of the poor. Like Linda Tirado, the working-class writer of *Hand to Mouth* (2015), Vance is critical of the well-intentioned attempts of politicians to curb the lending practices of payday loan companies, which he believes are an unfortunate, but

necessary option for the poor who often cannot access quick funds elsewhere. As Vance states, ‘Powerful people sometimes do things to help people like me without really understanding people like me’. Similarly, Peralta has little patience for middle-class idealism, referring to Teach for America recruitment emails (‘Change things’ read the email subject-heads) as ‘corny and pretentious beyond belief’. Notably, both men come from families who view social workers, housing case-workers, and other agents of the state, as potentially threatening forces.

‘What separates the successful from the unsuccessful are the expectations that they had for their own lives’, argues Vance. His expectations for himself gradually change due to the influence of positive family members and mentors, and his internalization of the central message of the Marines, that a lack of effort, not a lack of intelligence, is what holds people back (a drill instructor barks at him, ‘If you’re not puking, you’re lazy!’). Peralta’s success is also predicated on a complex mix of fortunate circumstances, social structures, and sustained personal effort—this last element is what psychologist Angela Duckworth identifies as the all-important determinant of achievement known as ‘grit’. These men are very much products of their environments, but they also grow to be knowing players in a greater social game. Viewed in parallel, their capacity for negotiating and transcending their environments is what makes Peralta and Vance more alike than they are different.

Reviewer Bio

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