16.

THE FICTIONS OF THE AMERICAN DREAM RECONSIDERED: GEORGE PACKER'S *THE UNWINDING* (2013) AND J.D. VANCE'S *THE HILLBILLY ELEGY* (2016)

WIBKE SCHNIEDERMANN

1. Introduction

At the beginning of 21st century, "poverty in America is back with a vengeance," as Sasha Abramsky observes in her study *The American Way of Poverty: How the Other Half Still Lives* (2013: 2). In a recent statement to the United Nations, Special Rapporteur Philip Alston reports on how "the persistence of extreme poverty in America undermines the enjoyment of human rights by its citizens" (2017: n.p.). Since the financial meltdown of 2008, the weekly news cycles keep delivering ever more staggering numbers to quantify the rising economic inequality in today's United States: 40 million Americans continue to live in poverty, almost a third of the poor are children, and the economic divide between the richest one percent and the rest of the population has grown exponentially (Bricker et al. 2017; Gould 2018; Noah 2013).

Yet, "statistics, shocking as they may be, remain abstractions," Sieglinde Lemke reminds her readers in her book *Inequality, Poverty, and Precarity in Contemporary American Culture* (2016: 2). The national fiction of a classless American society defined by equal economic opportunities for all may have been debunked by the undeniable demographic reality reflected in those statistics, but the great myth of the American Dream was never built on numbers and graphs. As a narrative informing national identity, it is part emotional attachment, part make-believe. It does not come as a surprise, therefore, that writers who wish to address the evident incongruities between the dream's fiction and factual Americans' lives choose to do so in hybrid genres that incorporate the factuality of lived realities into a narrative form that adheres to the generic conventions of fictional storytelling. Documentary novels and autobiographical writing abound whenever writers grapple with the economic hardship of the early 21st century. To adequately narrate present-day poverty, it seems, requires a renegotiation of how historical facts factor into the fictions of national identity.

This chapter looks at factual narration in 21st century American novels that wrestle with the historical developments resulting in the recent inequality surge. The two case

studies, George Packer's *The Unwinding: Thirty Years of American Decline* (2013) and J.D. Vance's *The Hillbilly Elegy: A Memoir of a Family and a Culture in Crisis* (2016), feature several elements that are usually associated with fictional writing; they include setting, dialogue, characterization, and, to a certain degree, plot. By remaining partial to individual characters' personalities and aiming for narrative closure, both books also follow the genre standards of the novel specifically.

2. The War on Poverty

In the 21st century, economic inequality has returned to the forefront of pressing political and social issues after taking "a distant backseat to other priorities" for roughly fifty years (Abramsky 2013: 4). The 'War on Poverty,' waged by Lyndon B. Johnson in 1964, quickly turned into a war against poor Americans in a matter of years. Richard Nixon secured his 1968 election to the White House in large part through an anti-welfare campaign. Under the Reagan Administration of the 1980s, the United States settled firmly into the driver's seat when the global economy changed course towards neoliberalism. Spreading from a merely economic principle into social politics, the neoliberal shift brought with it an individualistic ideology that placed all responsibility for socio-economic success (or failure, respectively) on each person's shoulders and resulted in policies reducing federal spending on welfare and social security even further. The welfare reform bill signed into law in 1996 by then-president Bill Clinton is believed to have contributed immensely to accelerating child poverty in many states, and the shift towards non-cash assistance with stronger work participation requirements of the early 2000s facilitated further retrenchment in the welfare sector.

The rhetoric accompanying and enabling these roll-backs rested mainly on the vilification of welfare recipients, giving rise to new tenacious, often racialized and/or gendered stereotypes such as "welfare queen," which accuses women of color of welfare fraud (cf. Owen 2016; Gilman 2014) or "white trash," denoting impoverished white Americans like the "hillbilly" family members Vance writes about (cf. Schinko 2010). Reports and statistics documenting the rising number of Americans who either live below or teeter on the poverty line despite working full-time jobs did not silence the accusations of laziness, greed, and false sense of entitlement resonating in the public image of the (working) poor. When Republican presidential candidate Mitt Romney discredited welfare recipients as "government freeloaders" during his 2012 campaign (the quote was secretly captured on video and later published by *Mother Jones*) and explained his lack of concern for "the very poor" with the existence of a "safety net" in a famous CNN interview (CNN 2012), the media responded with mild indignation and some rolled their eyes at his ignorance. Four years later, the election campaign of the man who would become the 45th President of the United States was so riddled with severe attacks against marginalized

groups that only his limited vocabulary made the repeated denigration of economic "losers" stand out against the remaining verbal abuse dominating the campaign.

3. The American Dream

Equality has been a common leitmotiv in conceptions of the American nation from the very beginning. Equal opportunity to attain economic prosperity may be only one among many expressions of this ideal, but it is the most dominant and most consistent one. The notion of the United Sates as being comprised of one big, affluent middle class of hard-working citizens is as compelling as it is persistent. "Americans have preferred to ignore class issues for the greater part of their history," Lemke observes (2016: 1). Cultural and literary critics incurred similar censure for their "neglect of poverty as a category of critical discourse" (Jones 2008: xiii; cf. Michaels 2006).

Public discourse and cultural articulations have employed various rhetorical strategies to avoid addressing even the most obvious contradictions to the fiction of equality, but "[t]he master trope by which the issue of class has been glossed over and pitched as a matter of opportunity is, of course, the 'American Dream'" (Lemke 2016: 2). It is worth recalling that this trope was coined as late as the 1930s and has therefore been part of the American imaginary for less than a century. Formulated by James Truslow Adams in his 1931 book *The Epic of America* – which the author intended to entitle *The American Dream* but whose publishers decided against it – the idea of the American Dream was almost instantly integrated into everyday language and spread like wildfire through the literature of the 1930s.

The American Dream has since been "enshrined as [the United States'] national motto" in the words of Jim Cullen (2003: 5). Cullen traces the ways in which the "lofty" term resonates strongly with a long tradition of American identity formation, from the right to the "pursuit of happiness" in the Constitution's preamble, to Alexis de Tocqueville's "anticipated success" in his *Democracy in America* (1848: 76), and to the "manifest destiny" imagined by John O'Sullivan in 1845. Adams also "borrowed ideas" from an even longer "line of thinkers," as Lawrence R. Samuel's *The American Dream: A Cultural History* indicates, listing the transcendentalists Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau, their contemporary, Walt Whitman, as well as presidents Thomas Jefferson, Benjamin Franklin, and Abraham Lincoln (Samuel 2012: 3-4).

The 'dream' as imagined by Adams is originally an egalitarian concept of "a better, richer, and happier life for all our citizens of every rank" (2012 [1931]: xx). Adams explicitly distances his idea from a purely economic strive: "It is not a dream of motor cars and high wages merely, but a dream of a social order in which each man and each woman shall be able to attain to the fullest stature of which they are innately capable" (ibid.: 403). The idealistically egalitarian phrasing still leaves a few loopholes, of course, as it does not

specify how the innate capabilities of each person can be determined or how to prevent social constraints from being interpreted as innate ones. Yet, it seems remarkable how Adams stresses repeatedly that what he refers to as the American Dream is the ideal of a society structured according to moral standards rather than an unobstructed route to accumulating wealth. The theme he sees dominating America from the beginning of its nation building is one of equality "regardless of the fortuitous circumstances of birth or position" (ibid.).

The idiom of the American Dream remains omnipresent today, and the countless ways in which it is invoked demonstrate how universally relatable a concept it has become for those who believe in it as well as those who do not. The American Dream has been declared ailing, dead or dying for decades. It has been "commonly described as 'fading,' 'withering,' 'shrinking,' 'sliding,' 'unraveling,' 'squeezed,' 'threatened,' 'broken,'" and so forth, as Samuel points out (2012: 197). One of the most consistent arguments claims that poverty is incompatible with the American Dream. John Edwards and colleagues gesture towards this argument in the title of their edition *Ending Poverty in America: How to Restore the American Dream* (2007), suggesting that the former is a viable method to achieve the latter. Abramsky invokes the concept several times in *The American Way of Poverty*, referring to the increasing number of poor Americans as "the tens of millions of people who have somehow been allowed to fall outside of the American Dream" (2013: 328). Being included in the American Dream means to be given a viable chance to achieve economic success. Especially those skeptical of the concept criticize the tendency to reduce it to purely economic aspirations. George Packer's writing identifies him as such a skeptic. He brings up the American Dream in relation to its two main domains, celebrity culture and the housing market.

4. Polyphony as Structural Critique in *The Unwinding*

In *The Unwinding*, Packer introduces an understanding of the American Dream that deviates from the upright, ethical ideal imagined by Adams. In his chapter about the music industry, and specifically about the career of Shawn Corey Carter, who would rise to fame as the hip-hop artist Jay-Z, Packer traces how the false promise of instant fame made by the entertainment industry is perpetuated in the public lives of celebrities. The chapter imagines fans listening to Jay-Z's first successful album and to the way it processes the musician's upbringing in urban poverty:

> [T]he nightmare that America had locked in the basement was suddenly playing in kids' bedrooms. They wanted to live the American dream with a vengeance, like Scarface, like Jay-Z, they wanted to break the laws and win because only fools still thought you could do

> it in an orange uniform or a cheap suit when that game was fixed, and there could be a shortcut with a big payoff. (Packer 2013: 256)

Further references to the American Dream in *The Unwinding* are sparse and mostly revolve around housing and homeownership. In both chapters about the city of Tampa, Florida, Packer mentions the American Dream, albeit in passing rather than as a central theme. "What it [Tampa] offered was the American dream in a subdivision, the splendid isolation of a new homestead an hour's drive from downtown" (ibid.: 191). In other words, homeownership *is* the dream. But the rhetoric of the "dream in a subdivision" signals a doubtful distance to the ambitious goals often set with reference to the American Dream. The promised "splendid isolation" sounds equally dissonant; and the second chapter about the gigantic (failed) project of Tampa, which was supposed to be "America's Next Great City" (ibid.: 190), confirms *The Unwinding*'s unease with the idea of the American Dream. In the face of "the great spectacle of frauds and failures" on the housing market of the early 21st century, only the most devoted (and naïve) of proponents can still hold on to their "fervent belief in the American dream" (ibid.: 274-75). *The Unwinding* traces the institutional and systemic failures to which most others have lost their faith in that dream.

As its subtitle indicates, *The Unwinding* aims to tell the story not of a specific person or select group of persons, but of a thirty-year long nationwide process of metaphorical decline. (*The Unwinding* has also been published with an alternative subtitle, *An Inner History of the New America*. Apart from the subtitle, both versions are identical.) Each chapter is dedicated to a historical person or a place and the chapters are organized chronologically from 1978 to 2012. Packer therefore does single out specific persons from recent American history and writes more about some than others. Jeff Connaughton and Tammy Thomas, for instance, both have more than one chapter dedicated to distinct phases of their lives and careers whereas Jay-Z and Alice Waters only receive one chapter each. Yet, the chapters serve as separate case studies of the institutions represented through one specific person or place. Thus, *The Unwinding* portrays institutions and their position within the nation via the portrayal of people acting within these institutions.

The Unwinding has no traditional unified plot in the strict sense. Plot is usually understood as an orchestration of what happens in the story. The organizing principle of what happens in the individual chapters of Packer's book stems from the notion of a constant progressive decline that characterizes the nation's past three decades and from the author's intention to communicate a bigger issue, a thesis if you will. Despite the historically negative connotation of the genre, it makes sense, therefore, to read *The Unwinding* as a 21st century take on the *roman à these*: it conveys a theory (America has been caught in an economic and political downward spiral for many years), an ideological stance (the country lacks the fundamental structures provided by reliable civic institutions, political cohesion, and a firm moral code), and a warning (inequality and economism are a threat to the entire nation).

This genre, also called *thesis novel*, designates a novel with an ideological or, as Susan Rubin Suleiman puts it in the title of her 1993 monograph, authoritarian message. Due to its ideological bias and its alleged prioritizing of thesis over aesthetics, the genre was usually considered "too close to propaganda to be artistically valid" for most of the 20th century (1993: 3). *The Unwinding* employs several aesthetic and literary strategies to avoid the slanted representation of reality with which the *roman à thèse* is often charged. The following reading investigates some of these strategies, such as the collaging chapter prefaces and the polyphonic chapter structure. While creating a nuanced aesthetics, Packer does not abandon his political thesis: The wide-ranging process of cultural, economic, and political degradation that the book describes must be traced in the interconnectedness of the crumbling institutions portrayed in its case studies. *The Unwinding* thus argues for a distribution of structural, non-personalized responsibility showcased in the entanglement of selected individuals within the institutional structures.

In good American tradition, Packer's prologue also wrests the proverbial silver lining from the bleak situation he sketches. Unwindings, he claims, are cyclic occurrences in American history. Together with the accompanying confusion and insecurity they function as harbingers of one of the most firmly ingrained values of American national identity: freedom. Just as the book's take on the American Dream is a skeptical one, the freedom Packer describes is of a double-edged kind. It means opportunity to "succeed beyond your dreams" but also to "exist in isolation, just managing to survive" (Packer 2013: 3-4).

The Unwinding is more interested in representing a "spectrum" of factors contributing to inequality rather than sticking to the "polar opposites of personal and societal responsibility" that David K. Shipler (2008: 6) urges scholars to overcome and that *The Hillbilly Elegy*, as the following reading will show, cannot fully escape. The biographical sketches of *The Unwinding*'s chapters create a polyphony, in the Bakhtinian sense, of the country's recent history. Coined by Mikhail Bakhtin in the 1960s, the concept of polyphony describes – in the literal sense of the term – a form of 'multivoicedness' in literature. While Bakhtin considered the novel an inherently polyphonic genre, it is more common to distinguish between degrees of polyphony in novels and other narrative texts. David Lodge defines the polyphonic novel as one "in which a variety of conflicting ideological positions are given a voice and set in play both between and within individual speaking subjects, without being placed and judged by an authoritative authorial voice" (1990: 86).

Packer achieves this in part by avoiding to establish a conventional protagonist. Traditional novels feature one or more central characters around and in relation to whom the minor characters and the plot can be grouped. Unequal distribution of attention and of personality among the characters is usually central to the way in which a novel creates narrative meaning. As Alex Woloch puts it in his study *The One vs. the Many: Minor Characters and the Space of the Protagonist in the Novel*, "[n]arrative meaning takes shape

in the dynamic flux of attention and neglect toward the various characters who are locked within the same story but have radically different positions within the narrative" (2003: 2).

The characters at the center of each chapter of *The Unwinding* illustrate the way in which personal involvement and experience cannot be detached from the institutional context in which they occur. *The Unwinding* thus attempts a balancing act between its political message and this diversity of voices. It claims a hybrid position between various genres that are usually considered mutually exclusive: It is a non-fiction novel (or, depending on the emphasis, a novelistic non-fiction book) that is both dialogic and authoritative. As the somewhat contradictory form of a polyphonic *roman à thèse*, *The Unwinding* represents perspectives and political positions as diverse as those of Colin Powell, Andrew Breitbart, and Oprah Winfrey. It also includes chapters centering on people who are not federal politicians, media proprietors or otherwise famous. Packer's writing thus negotiates "the tension that narrative continually elicits between an individual who claims our interest and a fictional totality that forces this individual out of, or beneath, the discursive world" (Woloch 2003: 38). The totality of *The Unwinding* is not a fictional one, and the book's specific form aims to ensure that none of its multiple voices and perspectives is excluded from the debates and conflicts it represents.

The segmentation of the text according to specific years includes another strategy to amplify its polyphony. The segments are each dedicated to one year in irregular intervals and subsume several chapters under the respective year. The segments begin with accumulated quotations from that year, thus enhancing the polyphony by extending it to multiple – sometimes contradictory – voices from various media sources. Compiled of snippets from movie and TV dialogues, newspapers, political speeches, pop songs, social media, etc., these collages fill one page at the beginning of each segment. Different fonts contrast the quotes that are separated by dotted ellipses, which adds a visual element to these textual imitations of soundscapes. The prefaces complement the chapters' multivoicedness with the representation of a multisensory experience. A line from the lyrics of a famous song, such as The Ramones' "I Wanna Be Sedated" (Packer 2013: 7), the slogan of a once-omnipresent car commercial (ibid.: 35), or the announcement of a celebrity's death, e.g. Kurt Cobain (ibid.: 107) and Heath Ledger (ibid.: 217), instantly conjure up specific sounds, the corresponding images and emotions in the reader's mind. The brevity of the quotes and the short ellipses separating them suggest a quick succession or even simultaneity, like flicking through channels on several devices at once. After overwhelming the reader with this cacophony, each segment investigates selected voices and images from the respective time period.

The Unwinding uses these narrative and rhetoric strategies to avoid the risk of simplification that lies in the fusion of personal and structural levels. Like the imbalances of the traditional novel's character stratification, Packer's reinterpretation of a character system has political and ethical implications. Woloch relates the 19th century novel's

"asymmetric structure of characterization – in which many are represented but attention flows towards a delimited centre – [to] the 19th century comprehension of social stratification" (2003: 30-31). In other words, he claims that the 19th century's systematic organization of characters reflects contemporary tensions between the social realities and emerging middle-class ideologies. 21st century America is grappling with its own class tensions. Representations that address the growing inequality reflect and comment on the shifting class structures not just on the story-level, but also in their formal organization (cf. Christ 2014). *The Unwinding* does so through its orchestration of multiple voices, lending personal relatability to otherwise abstract institutions and infusing its form with an analogy to the equality whose loss it mourns.

5. 'Hard Work' and the 'Culture of Poverty' in *The Hillbilly Elegy*

The Hillbilly Elegy takes the opposite approach, beginning from the micro-level of the author's personal life and, in relation to that, his family's history. The fates of his family members tell the history of an entire region – a region that has been synonymous with abject poverty, neglect, and cultural decline for much of the 20th century. Set in Appalachia and the neighboring Midwestern regions of the so-called Rust Belt, Vance's family memoir is an intimate portrait of one of the poorest and most discredited areas in the United States.

Like Packer's, Vance's book also signals its main thrust in its subtitle, *A Memoir of a Family and a Culture in Crisis*. Denoting its genre (memoir), its significance beyond the personal scope (an entire culture), and a central assertion (family and culture are caught up in the same crisis), *The Hillbilly Elegy* claims to provide general truths about and insights into this cultural crisis through the personalized accounts of its author and the author's family members. This complies with the common genre confines of memoir. "The term memoir," as Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson observe, is "more malleable than the term autobiography, foregrounding historical shifts and intersecting cultural formations" (2010: 4). Such shifts and intersections are precisely what Vance's *Hillbilly Elegy* ventures to investigate. The explicit genre designation announces this intention, thus prompting its readers "to think about the significance of that choice and the kind of reading it invites" (Smith/Watson 2010: 4).

In the case of *The Hillbilly Elegy*, the invitation to its audience is to consider the specific and personal story of the author's family and upbringing as representative not just of a larger group of people or a community, but of an entire culture. The strongly racialized public discourse on poverty in the United States has repeatedly been fueled by what is commonly referred to as the culture-of-poverty debate. This debate originated when scholars in the 1960s proposed to reinterpret poverty as a social force producing a set of values, beliefs, and practices that result in a veritable culture of its own right. Oscar Lewis (1969) and Daniel Patrick Moynihan (1965) published the most prominent studies in this

field. Particularly Moynihan's observations about the poverty of African-American families tap into deeply-rooted racist sentiments, while Lewis' theory of a persistent and self-perpetuating culture of poverty seems to blame the victims by suggesting that one need only change one's culture in order to cease being poor (cf. Ryan 1976). While recent poverty research is careful to avoid the sort of pathologization Moynihan uses and to redefine its notion of culture, cultural sociologists and ethnographers have begun to reconsider the cultural aspects of poverty (cf. Small et al. 2010).

The Hillbilly Elegy resonates with the notion of a 'culture of poverty.' Vance takes care to refute the racist undercurrents that have historically burdened such perspectives. "I have known many welfare queens," he says with reference to one of the most aggressively racist and sexist stereotypes against Black women. "[S]ome were my neighbors, and all were white," he points out (Vance 2016: 8). His account aims to illicit "an appreciation of how class and family affect the poor without filtering [readers'] views through a racial prism" (ibid.). Noble as this goal may be, it seems questionable how such a filter, intentional or unintentional, could be avoided in the context of a country that has viewed poverty as a racial issue throughout its history, particularly in a book limited to the experiences of poor whites. Vance's assertion that his "is not a story about why white people have more to complain about than black people or any other group" (ibid) cannot eclipse the fact that the poverty memoir of a relatively unknown white Ivy-league graduate made it to the best-seller lists while accounts of authors from other ethnic and cultural backgrounds are conspicuously absent. By framing his book as a post-racial story about a cultural crisis, Vance neglects to acknowledge that only a white American could attempt to exclude the category of race from a story about poverty; no writer of color would get away with that.

Vance claims a superior authority based on his direct experiences of hillbilly culture, tapping into on the affordances of the memoir genre. "Nobel-winning economists," he observes about intellectual analyses of post-industrial regions, "worry about the decline of the industrial Midwest and the hollowing out of the economic core of working whites" (ibid.: 7). His insider-look at "what goes on in the lives of real people," however, suggests that the abstraction of a purely scholarly view neglects the complicity of those 'real people' in deteriorating their own situation: "It's about reacting to bad circumstances in the worst way possible" (ibid.). The personal responses Vance refers to, in the work place as well as in the privacy of family homes, lead him to conclude that there exists a distinct culture among the people he writes about, "a culture that increasingly encourages social decay instead of counteracting it" (ibid.).

Vance locates the crisis that is at the core of his book within that culture. He sees it manifests itself in "problems that run far deeper than macroeconomic trends and policy" (ibid.). The problems he diagnoses are not those that can be remedied through politics, and often they are not described as cultural ones either. Instead, they are to be found in

personalities "immune to hard work" (ibid.) and therefore in violation of one of the core values believed to be a prerequisite for realizing the American Dream.

In his introduction to *The Hillbilly Elegy*, Vance mentions "the American Dream as my family and I encountered it" as soon as the second page (ibid.: 2). His use of the term indicates a traditional and positive notion of the concept: it is understood as a kind of contract between each individual and the American nation. The central part of that contract is a mutual agreement that hard work will earn you the "better, richer" life Adams writes about. Both ends of that bargain are a bit elusive, which may be part of the concept's "profound ambiguity" (Samuel 2012: 4). It is usually not specified what distinguishes 'hard work' from other kinds of work. It may be the difficulty of a task, its value for the community, the physical or mental challenge it involves, or some other quality. For Vance, it has to do with the number of working hours and the self-discipline needed to keep working when it is inconvenient.

The other end of the bargain is supposed to be held up by a rather abstract entity or by various institutions depending on the trajectory of one's dream. It may be the government that is supposed to create a legal landscape guaranteeing religious freedom or equal opportunities for upward mobility to all citizens; it may be the housing market ensuring that everyone has a chance to realize the most common expression of the dream, homeownership; or it may be the proverbial dream factory, the entertainment industry, providing the ultimate form of upward mobility, fame and stardom. The assumption is often that the conditions are already provided and that whoever fails to achieve the dream must therefore not be working hard enough.

In the official government-issued letter congratulating newly naturalized U.S. citizens, hard work ranks first in a list of values that define American culture. This letter, at least in its current form (it has not been updated since the Obama administration), also mentions the promises of the American Dream and confirms the national creed that it can be realized, precisely, through these values. Countless popular narratives support this belief by following a rags-to-riches template or culminating in the success (e.g. in the form of a baseball trophy, a courtroom victory, or a university degree) of an unlikely underdog (such as Vance himself, who graduated from Yale University). As *the* all-American value par excellence, hard work and the discipline it requires can also serve as a redeeming quality for pretty much every character flaw imaginable, save maybe for pedophilia. (Consider a character like Dexter Morgan, played by Michael C. Hall, in the TV series *Dexter*: He may be a sociopathic serial killer who relishes torturing people, but his work ethics and self-discipline compensate for those defects. He is a diligent, disciplined worker who also works hard on himself to channel his murderous tendencies so that he only kills 'bad people,' thus improving his community by doing all the dirty work himself. By the same token, an immunity to hard work and a lack of self-discipline are tantamount to being unpatriotic). A lack of a Protestant work ethics is, unsurprisingly, the negative characteristic of his home

region that Vance finds most problematic and for which he has no qualifying statement or excuse. Neighbors and relatives habitually abusing alcohol and drugs, neglectful parents, domestic violence, violence against strangers, abusive language, and a tendency to resolve conflicts with fire arms feature prominently in this memoir, but none of these practices receive the unqualified condemnation reserved for those who do not work hard.

There are, for instance, the remnants of unabashed boyish reverence in Vance's writing when he tells anecdotes to characterize his beloved uncles. Even the seemingly "nicest" one among them, a charming business man, responds with what would seem to most readers like disproportionate violence to being called a "son of a bitch:" "Uncle Pet did what any rational business owner would do: He pulled the man from his truck, beat him unconscious, and ran an electric saw up and down his body" (Vance 2016: 14). The irony might signal a certain distance between the grownup author's views and the described incident, but it is a rhetorical distance that merely downplays the brutal scene in a cartoonish way rather than criticize it. Other stories include Vance's grandmother shooting a man at age twelve (ibid.: 15) and another uncle forcing somebody "at knifepoint" to eat an item of underwear (ibid.: 17). The nonchalant, humorous tone of the anecdotes – Vance blithely concludes "I come from a clan of lunatics" (ibid.) – and his repeated declarations of love and adoration for his family members create a tone that risks at times to trivialize the omnipresence of violence and abuse.

Much of the violence and misery Vance recounts originates in fundamental cultural categories such as honor and justice. His grandparents moved to Ohio as part of the industrial migration of the 1950s when the growing industrialized economies of the Midwest encouraged workers from Appalachia to relocate for job opportunities. Vance describes his grandparents' life among the white Ohio middle class in terms of a clash of cultures: "They brought an ancient family structure from the hills and tried to make it work in a world of privacy and nuclear families" (ibid.: 32), thus never losing their "cultural unease" (ibid.: 36). Another anecdote of violence illustrates their failure to fit in, and it suggests that what prevents them from adapting to that "different world" (ibid.: 34) is, again, the deeply ingrained hillbilly culture. What defines this culture in Vance's words are "a robust sense of honor, devotion to family, and bizarre sexism" (ibid.: 41). Both the specific hillbilly honor as well as the appreciation of family are expressed mainly through two practices, illegitimate violence and hard work.

Accordingly, the crisis of his culture presents itself to Vance first and foremost as a lack of work ethics and a slanted self-image among the younger generations: "You can walk through a town [like the one he grew up in] where 30 percent of the young men work fewer than twenty hours a week and find not a single person aware of his own laziness" (ibid.: 57). The rant that follows addresses the gap between people's self-assessment in terms of their working time and the actual amount of work they accomplish. Vance concludes: "[M]any folks talk about working more than they actually work" (ibid.). The subsequent

admission that factors other than laziness may impact the weekly work hours of the poor does little to soften the blow. A previous chapter already constructs an opposition between "hardworking" persons and "food stamp recipients who show little interest in honest work" (ibid.: 21). In a later chapter Vance confirms that his experiences have led him to mistrust welfare programs and, even more so, their beneficiaries whom he describes as "living off of government largess" while he is "forced by Uncle Sam to buy [T-bone steaks] for someone else" with the taxes deducted from his meagre pay-check (ibid.: 139).

The Hillbilly Elegy is an ambiguous book that joins in the condemnation of the 'undeserving poor' as lazy and untrustworthy, on the one hand, while also devoting long passages to an investigation of the socio-cultural factors that prove detrimental to social advancement on the other (ibid.: 20, 147). Vance's rhetoric rarely departs from the traditional "binary according to which the precariat is either 'unwilling' or 'unable' to attain financial stability" (Lemke 2016: 164). At the same time, he cites as one of his greatest intellectual influences the sociologist William Julius Wilson, who has repeatedly argued the case for abandoning precisely that polarity (Vance 2016: 144). Much of the ambiguity stems from the way in which the memoir blends the author's personal experiences with his analysis of a larger cultural, historical, and political context. Conflating the personal and the systemic is sometimes an inevitable, even intended result. *The Hillbilly Elegy* hazards the risk of simplifying the problems it addresses in favor of an anecdotal structure and the recognition value of well-worn cultural binaries.

6. Conclusion

Stories about inequality in America at the beginning of the 21st century build upon the prevalent notion that the country is divided into two unequal and irreconcilable parts. The dualistic principle is a familiar one – for all the progress of identity politics and civil rights campaigns, racial disparity still basically separates whites from non-whites; non-binary gender politics have only recently begun to gain some traction; and the political system itself is structured along the divide between two major parties – but the social-political consequences as well as the undeniable economic manifestation of these inequalities are more present in the public debate than they have been for decades. Any doubts about the severity of the current situation were settled in the course and the aftermath of the 2016 Presidential elections.

It takes the specific affordances of the novelistic form – a certain length, scope of subject, flexible hierarchies of characters and topics, diversity of narrative styles and techniques, an aim for closure – to represent the complexities of American poverty at the beginning of the 21st century. To document them, however, facts and real-life experiences are required. The number of non-fiction and life-writing books that address poverty indicate

a public interest in factual or fact-based narratives that make sense of the surge in economic and class inequality of the past decades.

It is undisputed by now that the war on poverty has not simply been lost, it has backfired. Both Packer and Vance identify the 1960s as the decade in which the course was set for America's response to present-day inequality and the way in which it treats its poor populations until today. In his most recent book *Tailspin: The People and Forces Behind America's Fifty-Year Fall – and Those Fighting to Reverse It*, Steven Brill likewise finds the origins of today's "polarization that has broken America" in the sixties, specifically in the erosion of government responsibility and changes to economic law dating back to that time (2018: 7). Brill brings forth his own attempt at maintaining the familiar polarity in the way the poor are perceived while thwarting the vilification of one of the two resulting groups. By speaking in his introduction of "the protected" versus "the unprotected" (ibid.: 1-18), he, too, divides American society into two groups, following the pattern of notions like the 'haves' and the 'have-nots,' the 'one percent' and the 'ninety-nine percent,' or the proverbial 'other half' whose very name identifies the speaker as belonging to the positive half, the one that requires no further specification. Brill's categories, however, reflect a shift in perspective, one that separates groups not according to the outcome of their economic situation but by summarizing the effect of the systemic privileges they receive. Protection, in Brill's book, can come in the institutionalized, bureaucratic form of eligibility to financial and other support. Much more effective, as Brill points out, is its frequently undetected and unregulated form of racial and gender-related privilege, which all-too-often translates into economic protection. The question of who deserves or might not deserve such protection is not an issue in Brill's book.

J.D. Vance relies on the old distinction between the deserving and the undeserving poor and treats it as a legitimate reflection of the social reality he writes about. Vance's memoir is interesting among the non-fictional narratives of American poverty for its blending of personal life story with cultural analysis and political inferences. Unlike other popularly successful memoirs about experiences of poverty – like Jeannette Walls's *The Glass Castle* (2006), for instance, which focuses on psychologically intricate family dynamics – Vance projects his personal experiences intentionally and explicitly onto a larger socio-cultural plane. The peculiar sense of honor and "hillbilly justice" he grapples with – and which can, apparently, only be defended through battery, force of arms, and criminal property damage – may be misguided and at times off-putting, Vance admits, but he seeks a (cultural) explanation for each of these practices. Shying away from 'hard work,' on the other hand, is unforgivable and not part of the hillbilly culture of his youth, which he looks back upon with a good deal of sentimentality. He repeatedly points out that his grandparents and their generation were not just willing to work, but "had an almost religious faith in hard work and the American Dream" (Vance 2016: 35). The phrasing confirms that

in his definition the latter depends on the former and that realizing the dream is not just an opportunity, but a matter of obligation.

In *Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) Getting by in America* (2001), Barbara Ehrenreich indirectly tackles the question what may prevent people from dedicating themselves to the ideal of 'hard work' from a different perspective. Based on research conducted in the very last years of the previous century, Ehrenreich writes about her experiences in the low-wage workforce of the late 1990s, a time of economic prosperity, before the 9/11 terrorist attacks traumatized the nation, and when voices cautioning against the mechanisms in global finance that would result in the largest economic depression since the 1930s remained largely unheeded. As an established writer and a highly-educated white woman, Ehrenreich is very aware of her outsider's perspective and the immense privileges it affords her. Unlike Vance, she writes as a 'tourist' of poverty. Among the most emphatically narrated passages in her book are those that address the emotional and mental consequences of short-term low-wage labor, which rob her of any ambition and threaten to engulf her in depression after just a few months of entry-level jobs. *Nickel and Dimed* describes a reality in which, even in the relative affluence of the late 1990s, a minimum-wage job cannot provide a decent, healthy life, no matter how 'hard' one works and for reasons that go beyond the mere math of the wages-to-cost of living ratio. 15 years, an economic depression, and a phase of political upheaval later, *The Hillbilly Elegy* looks at a reality that may, at least in part, very well be a direct result of having neglected the debilitating – physical, emotional, and mental – effects of poverty for decades.

George Packer's *The Unwinding* acknowledges precisely these effects and embeds them in a wide institutional context. Packer circumvents the individual-society opposition that Vance upholds by highlighting individual persons as well as places representative of institutions or political processes. The variety, in quantity as well as quality, of his case studies creates a multitude of perspectives that, thanks to the geographical diversity of the chapters and the imitation of soundbites that preface each section, evoke a landscape as well as a soundscape of the economic, social, and cultural climate whose decline the book aims to document. Packer's analysis focuses on showcasing the vast interconnectedness characterizing this decline, and the polyphony it employs to impart this complexity embraces the dissonance that comes with it. Within these formal choices *The Unwinding* makes an argument for a democratization of representation that includes contradictory positions without trying to reconcile them. The 'agree to disagree' approach reads like a call to overcome the divide that is believed to characterize America in the early 21st century while the immense contradictions the book documents make this endeavor seem doubtful, if not futile. This, one suspects, is another incongruity that *The Unwinding* combines.

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