

Professor reflects on growing up undocumented and the power of books

WHEN DAN-EL PADILLA PERALTA WAS 4, he and his parents left the Dominican Republic and traveled to the United States for better medical care for his mother. Although his father returned to Santo Domingo, Padilla Peralta and his mother overstayed their temporary visas, subsisting partly on the public assistance funds received by Padilla Peralta's younger brother, who was born in the United States. The family spent a year in the New York City shelter system.

With support from a scholarship, Padilla Peralta attended a private high school, and he graduated from Princeton in 2006 as salutatorian with a degree in classics and a certificate in the Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs. After earning a master's degree in classics at the University of Oxford and a Ph.D. at Stanford University, Padilla Peralta was a postdoctoral fellow at Columbia University. His memoir, *Undocumented: A Dominican Boy's Odyssey from a Homeless Shelter to the Ivy League*, was published in 2015.

Padilla Peralta, undocumented no longer, joined Princeton as an assistant professor of classics in 2016. In this excerpt from the University's "What I Think" faculty interview series, he reflects on his childhood inspirations and his current area of inquiry. **—By Jamie Saxon**

Growing up, I drew sustenance from books.

Books provided me with the raw material I needed to construct a vision of what not only my future but my family's future, my community's futures, should look like.

One of the most salient memories I have of the first shelter we stayed in was the smell of the bathroom; it was rank and overpowering. It was very loud in the hallways. In the shelter's library, I discovered the book *How People Lived in Ancient Greece and Rome*.

I started reading The Odyssey in middle school, and it spoke to me. Initially, Telemachus' constant negotiation of the challenges of adolescence and young adulthood and his acute feeling of loss from not having a father figure resonated with my own experiences.

I'm fascinated by the influence of ancient Greek on rap music. Jay-Z raps in one song on the album "Watch the Throne" he made with Kanye West, "Is pious pious 'cause God loves pious?" This is a pretty unmistakable reference to Plato's *Euthyphro*, in which one of the questions raised by Socrates and Euthyphro is, "Is the pious known as the pious because the divinity has defined it as pious?"

I'm challenging my students to do some serious thinking about the long history of exclusion. For example, Romans understood their own cultural history as being pluralistic, yet they repeatedly defined themselves by excluding certain others. You have a culture that is, on the one hand, preoccupied with targeting and expelling certain communities and yet at the same time is aware of the degree to which its own origins are implicated in cultural difference, in migration, in mobility — this is the scope of the paradox that I want my students to appreciate.

—By Dan-el Padilla Peralta

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Above: Dan-el Padilla Peralta, age 9, reads a book in spring 1994 in the Bushwick Family Center, one of the shelters he lived in with his mother and brother. Left: Padilla Peralta on campus in the fall of 2016.



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