

An Escalade, a Briefcase, and Respect Latinx Youth's Imaginings of Middle-Class Status and a Cosmopolitan Good Life in Nashville, Tennessee

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Money Lightens?: Global Regimes of Racialized Class Mobility and
Local Visions of the Good Life

L'argent blanchit : régimes mondiaux de mobilité des classes
racialisées et représentations locales d'une bonne vie

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Résumé de l'article

Les jeunes immigrants latino-américains de Nashville, dans le Tennessee, qui sont sur le point d'être les premiers de leur famille à atteindre la classe moyenne, aspirent à un avenir cosmopolite fait de travail professionnel et de revenus disponibles. Cette mobilité sociale et économique est imaginée en relation avec la racialisation et la stigmatisation des Latino-américains en tant qu'ouvriers exclusifs de la classe ouvrière et en tant qu'objets d'un regard cosmopolite blanc et sudiste. À travers leurs aspirations, les jeunes remettent en question les régimes de travail, de consommation et de différence, à l'échelle locale et mondiale. En ce qui concerne le travail, les jeunes cherchent à remodeler le monde professionnel blanc en fonction de leur expérience latino-américaine. Cela leur permet de revendiquer la valeur du travail latino-américain. Ils cherchent également à s'engager dans des formes spécifiques d'accumulation matérielle qui, tout en menant à des vies matériellement plus confortables pour les individus, rendent également leur valeur visible aux yeux des autres. Enfin, la vision qu'ont les jeunes d'un avenir défini par leur capacité à traverser les cultures et les frontières repositionne leur différence ethno-raciale et linguistique comme un atout plutôt que comme un handicap. En outre, cette orientation mondiale réoriente le cosmopolitisme, qui n'est plus exclusivement blanc et réservé à l'élite. Collectivement, ces imaginations révèlent que si les aspirations de la classe moyenne peuvent renforcer la distinction de classe selon la couleur, elles peuvent aussi remodeler les hiérarchies racialisées existantes de la classe, de la mobilité et du cosmopolitisme.

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An Escalade, a Briefcase, and Respect

Latinx Youth's Imaginings of Middle-Class Status and a Cosmopolitan Good Life in Nashville, Tennessee

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Abstract: Latinx immigrant-origin youth in Nashville, Tennessee—who are poised to be the first in their families to achieve middle-class status—strive toward a cosmopolitan future of professional work and disposable income. This social and economic mobility is imagined in relation to the racialization and stigmatization of Latinx people as exclusively working-class labourers and as the objects of a Southern, white cosmopolitan gaze. Through their aspirations, youth challenge existing local and global regimes of labour, consumption, and difference. With respect to work, youth seek to remake the white professional world in ways specific to their Latinx experience. In so doing, they reclaim the value of Latinx labour. They also look to engage in specific kinds of material accumulation that, while leading to tangibly more comfortable lives individually, also make their worth visible to others. Finally, youth's views of a future defined by their ability to cross cultures and borders repositions their ethno-racial and linguistic difference as an asset rather than a liability. Moreover, this global orientation reorients cosmopolitanism away from a position of exclusively white and elite status. Collectively, these imaginings reveal that while middle-class aspirations may reinforce a colour line of class, they also potentially remake existing racialized hierarchies of class, mobility, and cosmopolitanism.

Keywords: Latinx youth; United States; immigration; cosmopolitanism race; social class

Résumé : Les jeunes immigrants latino-américains de Nashville, dans le Tennessee, qui sont sur le point d'être les premiers de leur famille à atteindre la classe moyenne, aspirent à un avenir cosmopolite fait de travail professionnel et de revenus disponibles. Cette mobilité sociale et économique est imaginée en relation avec la racialisation et la stigmatisation des Latino-américains en tant qu'ouvriers exclusifs de la classe ouvrière et en tant qu'objets d'un regard cosmopolite blanc et sudiste. À travers leurs aspirations, les jeunes remettent en question les régimes de travail, de consommation et de différence, à l'échelle locale et mondiale. En ce qui concerne le travail, les jeunes cherchent à remodeler le monde professionnel blanc en fonction de leur expérience latino-américaine. Cela leur permet de revendiquer la valeur du travail latino-américain. Ils cherchent également à s'engager dans des formes spécifiques d'accumulation matérielle qui, tout en menant à des vies matériellement plus confortables pour les individus, rendent également leur valeur visible aux yeux des autres. Enfin, la vision qu'ont les jeunes d'un avenir défini par leur capacité à traverser les cultures et les frontières repositionne leur différence ethno-raciale et linguistique comme un atout plutôt que comme un handicap. En outre, cette orientation mondiale réoriente le cosmopolitisme, qui n'est plus exclusivement blanc et réservé à l'élite. Collectivement, ces imaginations révèlent que si les aspirations de la classe moyenne peuvent renforcer la distinction de classe selon la couleur, elles peuvent aussi remodeler les hiérarchies racialisées existantes de la classe, de la mobilité et du cosmopolitisme.

Mots-clés : jeunes latino-américains ; États-Unis ; immigration ; cosmopolitanisme ; race ; classe sociale

“I’m gonna pop some tags/Only got twenty dollars in my pocket/I, I, I’m hunting, looking for a come-up/This is really awesome,” the students shouted *Thrift Shop*’s radio-edit lyrics in unison, looking to spare me and the staff of the Succeeders college access program the horrors of the “F” word. The bouncy pop-rap hit, by Seattle-based rapper Macklemore, celebrates clothes shopping at thrift stores, like the name-checked Goodwill, and mocks the full-price shoppers of designer clothes with lyrics like, “Fifty dollars for a T-shirt, that’s just some ignorant bitch (Shit).” Earlier in our endless bus ride, Liz, the Succeeders program coordinator, had been chatting excitedly with some of the students—hereafter, the Succeeders— about the best Goodwills to hit up in Nashville. It was agreed that the one closest to Vanderbilt University had particularly fancy items that could be purchased at a bargain. The conversation reminded me of when my interview with Lupita turned to both sartorial matters and her vision for the future.

During her elementary school years, Lupita's working-class, Mexican-Salvadoran family rented a house in upscale Westchester County just outside New York City where her dad worked in construction. While her richer peers could afford brand-name clothes, Lupita's family could not. Instead of being celebrated for her family's street-smart frugality, as in *Thrift Shop's* lyrics, Lupita "got made fun of because I didn't wear Abercrombie & Fitch [...] it's super expensive."¹ For Lupita, it was not just taunting about clothes that made her class—and racial—status clear.

Her childhood best friend, Mary, was the white, privileged daughter of a successful lawyer who "worked in the city." According to Lupita, Mary "had everything"—ranging from those coveted Abercrombie clothes to a mansion, to "purebred dogs, like the really nice kind." She was also oblivious to it. Yet, Mary's material comfort and ignorance of it made an impression on Lupita that still animated her aspirations for a future good life. Lupita noted: "That's what I want, not only financial security, but when I have children, I want them to know what it's like to have everything and not feel different from American kids." In her future, Lupita hoped to escape economic precarity, but also to access both Mary's "ease of privilege" and a sameness or ability to blend with "American kids," particularly through material goods (Khan 2011, 77).

Lupita, born in New York City, discounted her own US citizenship and chances of belonging in this framing. As she described her Westchester years, it was clear that "American kids" meant rich white ones, like Mary, and not poor brown ones, like Lupita. In this way, Lupita herself further inscribed the supremacy of white middle-class identity as the dominant *national* one (Flores-González 2017). Moreover, in her understanding of her difference from white peers, Lupita ignored how her "ease" in a globalized world as a bilingual youth conversant in Salvadoran, Mexican, and US norms could be an asset. In discounting her facility across cultures, Lupita also reinforced the supremacy of wealth and whiteness in defining who counts as what we might term a cosmopolitan.

I follow Jeffrey and McFarlane in defining cosmopolitanism as "a repertoire of imaginaries and practices... symbolically or physically crossing defined boundaries and claiming a degree of cultural versatility" (2008, 420). As terms like "subaltern cosmopolitanism" (Gidwani 2006) or "vernacular cosmopolitanism" (Bhabha 1996) demonstrate, cosmopolitanism is not the sole purview of global elites with disposable income, but can be enacted from precarious economic positions and in between these poles (Cheng 2018).

Non-elite cosmopolitanism challenges existing social and racial orders that suggest cosmopolitanism is an elite, white endeavour (Camozzi 2022; Cheng 2018; Kothari 2008; Kromidas 2011; see Werbner 2006 for an overview). Succeeders' performances of cosmopolitanism and economic mobility are related rejoinders to insular, lower-class status as inevitable for Latinx people.

Low-income Succeeders like Lupita often described their futures as middle-class, defined by their ability to accumulate certain material goods like nice clothes, to hold white-collar work like Mary's lawyer father, and to demonstrate both comfort with privilege and a cosmopolitan orientation to a globalized world. This more elite status, however, was not just about clothes, professional status, or the urbane worldliness assumed to go with them. Nor were they about becoming white. I argue that achieving these material and immaterial markers of middle-class status was about demonstrating social value as a Latinx person when, popularly and politically, working-class, Latinx people are stigmatized as incapable of class mobility, national "incorporation," and cosmopolitanism. In Lupita's words, having "everything" and "not feeling different" is, ultimately, about asserting one's value and capacity for a good life in spite of and counter to regimes of nativist white supremacy and foreclosed global mobility. As Lupita's reflections demonstrate, youth's visions of the future, their material ends, and their global desires reveal how they make sense of inequalities, including racial, class-based, and nativist ones (Chin 1999; Crivello 2011; Smith 2006; Stahl et al. 2021; Vigh 2009; Wu 2022). They also reveal how young people enact agency in the face of them (Cuzzocrea and Mandich 2016; Hitlin and Kirkpatrick Johnson 2015; Marzi 2022).

For the Succeeders, this agentic sensemaking centres on two related claims. First, they rework local racialized notions of working class and white-collar labour and the materially better lives they enable. Such lives include professional work, homeownership, and luxury goods consumption. Second, they claim a cosmopolitan orientation to difference, travel, and multilingualism. They do so despite being subjected to a white cosmopolitan, liberal multicultural gaze locally and to legal regimes that, for some, prohibit mobile, global futures. In this way, Succeeders desired local and recognized embeddedness in Nashville through their future work, homes, and everyday consumption habits, but also retained an openness to the world. These seeming "cosmopolitan contradictions" (Feld 2012, 229) reflect the kinds of nationals and cosmopolitans Succeeders currently are (unvalued and subaltern) and the ones they aspire to be in the future (valued and middle class). Such desires reflect "rooted cosmopolitanism,"

where individuals can have strong attachments and identification with their local, cultural, and national “home” while being open to “different places that are home to other, different people” (Appiah 1997, 618).

There is an inherent radicalness in Succeeders’ aspirations to a physical home in Nashville and a metaphorical home in the world. This radicalness stems from the reality that many would not see Succeeders as true locals based in the exclusionary racialized, legal, and classed terms of American life. Aspiring to openness in an era of hardened borders and multicultural failures works in a similar way. As Succeeders—particularly undocumented ones—aspire to local “status” and unfettered physical access to the world, they make an even more defiant critique of the world orders that exclude them from these ways of living. In sum, the Succeeders’ experiences and desires illustrate how individual lives are shaped by and come to shape normative social values about what comprises a good life, who can access it, and how we, ultimately, define a life as good.

These findings are based on my fieldwork (2012–2017) with the Succeeders program. The program aimed to promote college access and stimulate leadership development through a mix of weekend field trips to local professional workplaces and colleges, a structured after-school curriculum, and one-on-one guidance. The staff worked with Latinx youth aged 14 to 19 in six high schools in Nashville, Tennessee. The Succeeders themselves were largely Mexican and Central American in familial origin and poised to be the first in their families to graduate secondary school and attend higher education. With a few exceptions, students’ families were low-income, with parents working in janitorial/domestic service jobs, construction, hospitality, and factory work. Many families also relied on the Succeeders’ wages in the same field. Such was the case with a cadre of young men who, as minors, worked in roofing on their weekends and school breaks. Around half of the Succeeders were undocumented, coming to the US as children. Many more came from “mixed-status families,” where family members can be authorized immigrants, citizens, and undocumented, respectively. These young people faced both opportunities and obstacles for their mobility, and as they made sense of them, they pointed to the racial faultlines of class and cosmopolitanism.

I first show how the Succeeders’ imaginings of their futures reveal an enduring racialization of class-based labour, with more manual and “unskilled” jobs marked as Latinx and professional work linked to whiteness. I then shift to how Succeeders’ material definitions of a future good life are not crass

consumption. Instead, this anticipated consumption makes Latinx worth physically material. Finally, as youth mark themselves as cosmopolitan in their orientation to the world beyond Nashville, they rework their unvalued racialized positions globally. In so doing, youth attempt to subvert local and global racio-class and legal orders that preclude them from the “good” upwardly-mobile life and the respect that accompanies it.

The Country Cosmopolitan: Nashville and the New South

During the Succeeders’ childhoods and adolescence, Nashville became a “new destination” for international migration. Historically, the city was a regional destination for internal migration—drawing from the Black and white residents of the rural Southeast who looked to climb the economic ladder in the city at the turn of the twentieth century (Kyraikoudes 2003, 73–115). As the city grew at the dawn of a new century, international migrants—primarily from Latin America—filled the service, cleaning, and construction industries that undergirded the fledgling global city’s uneven economic orders (Doyle 1985; Winders 2013). In 2010, Latinx individuals—both foreign-born and US citizens—accounted for ten percent of the city’s population and the majority of the foreign-born population (Winders 2013, 19).

In addition to the sizeable population of primarily Mexican and Central American economic immigrants, Nashville also has a significant refugee population. The city is home to the largest Kurdish population in the US, with Iraqi Kurds initially arriving in the 1970s to escape anti-Kurdish state violence and later to escape further targeting due to collaboration with the US military during the Gulf Wars (Arpacik 2019, 45; Thangaraj 2019; Thangaraj 2022). There are now sizeable populations of Somali, Sudanese, Burmese, and Bhutanese families. Between 2000 and 2012, the city’s population went from two percent foreign-born to thirteen percent (Hance 2017). Refugees and immigrants share working-class occupational niches in the hospitality, food processing, construction, and service industries and are generally co-located in South Nashville (Winders 2013).

These local demographic trends are representative of broader regional ones in the Southeast that make a “New South” characterized by increased diversity outside of the Black-white binary and by a potentially less insular and regional outlook (Jones 2019; Odem and Lacy 2009; Peacock et al. 2005). However, reception of the growing international community has been mixed, reaching a nativist crescendo in 2009 with an ultimately unsuccessful effort to make all city services

offered in English only.² Albakry and Warden argue that local media surrounding the English-only effort revealed a “moral panic” about the shifting demographics of the city away from whiteness as the dominant identity (2013, 1; 15). It also revealed how the immigrant community was being collectively imagined by some as drains on city services rather than as valued contributors to the city’s economic growth and cultural plurality. After English-only, reception of immigrants and refugees has largely improved at the municipal level despite continuing state-level anti-immigrant legislation. In recognition of Nashville’s strides, President Obama campaigned for immigration reform in Nashville in 2014, highlighting the city as an example of the diversity of the New South and as an exemplar of positive local responses to immigration (Garrison 2014).

As Nashville was becoming global demographically, its image as an urban tourist destination was not about projecting its potential worldly cosmopolitanism, but rather a hyper-local identity based in an essentialized notion of Southern-ness that its producers and consumers most often racialized as white. There are contemporary correctives to this whitening of the old South. For example, local museums, such as the National Museum of African American Music and the Country Music Hall of Fame, emphasize popular music’s origins and future in Black traditions. Another critique is more focused on the current erasure of minorized creators in the New South. Local critics of the meteoric rise of “Nashville hot chicken,” spurred by the wildly successful franchising of white-owned chains like Hattie B’s, emphatically point to the dish’s origin with the Black, Nashville-resident Prince family and the unnamed Black woman who devised the recipe (see Chamberlain 2022; Martin 2021).³

The track record on recognizing international populations’ role in Nashville’s rise is less disruptive. A variety of city culinary/cultural festivals, like the long-running *Celebrate Nashville*, highlight the international population. Some public schools with sizeable immigrant and refugee populations host International Days celebrating students’ familial nations of origin. Celebrations of difference like these are examples of liberal multiculturalism, where the emphasis is on highlighting essentialized differences denuded of any political struggle. Such efforts aim both to increase ethno-racial harmony locally and to prevent broader critique of historical dispossession and current economic orders that perpetuate inequalities (May and Sleeter 2010, 4–10). They can also make tolerance of local diversity a mark of the white elite population’s cosmopolitanism as they navigate their city’s diversity. Immigrants and their families become not cosmopolitans, but the object of elite white others’ cosmopolitan gaze.

While these festivals and events recognize the role of immigrants and minoritized populations in public life and claim it in public space, they are limited in their potential to change metropolitan and global inequalities. The economic boom of Nashville is largely dependent on the labour and innovation of Black and Brown people, as I was reminded when looking at the large number of Spanish-language names written on a preserved construction artifact in the lobby of one of the new high-rise condo buildings that dominate the skyline. These populations continue to face limited pathways to mobility within Nashville, including owning the very homes they build, as they enable wealth and consumption for others. André Prince Jeffries—the current head of the Prince family’s eponymous restaurants—summed up the socio-economic and racial inequalities of the diversifying city: “People of color are the most exploited people on the face of the earth. We create things but don’t get the credit. Other people get rich, but it doesn’t trickle down with a profit to the creators” (Chamberlain 2022).

The questions and contradictions of race, class, and cosmopolitanism are not limited to the politics of cities like Nashville, their growth, and who benefits materially from them. Rather, the imbrications of these categories frame how young people like the Succeeders see themselves, their place in their hometowns and world, and their chances of social and economic mobility. In many ways, Nashville’s broader process of working out its “country cosmopolitanism” is similar to the situation the Succeeders find themselves in as they plan their futures in Nashville and beyond the city limits.

Succeeders are attempting to claim deepened middle-class roots in the city—a shift from immigrant to citizen rendered in local professional jobs and homeownership. They also look outward toward the broader world through aspirations of international travel and additional language acquisition that subvert cultural insularity. They attempt to reclaim their racialized difference from something that is either tolerated by whites or celebrated as a mark of whites’ cosmopolitanism to something that uniquely connects the Succeeders to a global world of difference. In so doing, they make a truly New South.

White Collars, Brown Bodies: The Racial Orders of Work

Early in the year, the Succeeders staff ran a session on defining success at the various school sites. The session began with students calling out their “wildest dreams,” which I wrote on beat-up whiteboards. Many cited professions dependent on a college degree (“being an orthodontist,” “an engineer,” “a

teacher”). Others were generally related to working (“having a job”) and its material outcome (“being able to support your family”).

Defining middle-class status in the US often boils down to meeting a few deceptively simple measures—homeownership, a professional occupation, a particular income, and a high level of educational attainment. Educational attainment, professional status, and homeownership are not simply indicators of wealth, but are freighted markers that can serve to define not just class, but notions of success, national belonging, and a life well-lived (Cattelino 2008; Ronald 2008; Rosenbaum 2017; Vallejo 2012; Webb 2012). These measures are also tied to processes of racialization, histories of exclusion, and global interconnections that make some people elites and others subaltern as they move across the globe.

Dávila argues that Latinx populations’ experiences of class mobility in the present are not analogous to existing class mobility models based on the trajectories of white immigrants in the past, such as Eastern European Jews and Irish Catholics (2008). For these groups, achieving the above markers, participating in anti-Blackness, and asserting white supremacy led to class mobility and acceptance into whiteness (Brodkin 1998; Ignatiev 1995; Roediger 1991, 2005). Contrastingly, Latinx immigrants can be subjected to white supremacy and white nationalism, even if they own a home and present as white. Of course, Latinx populations can also participate in anti-Blackness and anti-Indigeneity themselves (Haywood 2017). More structurally, in the wake of several recent economic downturns, there is concern that Latinx youth, particularly undocumented ones who are steadily gaining higher education credentials, face “working class stagnation” rooted in intractable racial barriers in the workplace and legal status limitations (Terriquez 2014). In this latter way, such comparisons between white ethnics and Latinxes obscure “the multiple ways in which Latinos are subordinated even when they are supposedly joining the ranks of mainstream culture” (Dávila 2008, 13).

Foundational to that subordination is not only white supremacy within the US, but the fact that “our vast Latino population is the unintended harvest of the U.S. empire” within Latin America (González 2011, xvii). As Olivos and Sandoval argue, historical dispossession by race in the colonial past and more recently by race and legal status in the neoliberal present make middle-class status elusive for recent Latinx arrivals, like some of the Succeeders’ parents, who can only find an occupational niche in “low skill,” and low prestige, areas that often exploit their undocumented legal status (2015). In this way, many

working-class Latinx people across generations do not achieve middle-class status but remain disposable labour stretching from generations past at the *finca* (farm) to the present on the shrinking factory floor.

Clearly, as the Succeeders' desire to "support your family," demonstrates, the aspirations regarding professional status I copied onto the white(ish) board were intimately connected to financial stability—or getting beyond both the *finca* and the factory floor. In an interview, Emma stated: "I know what it's like to be like, struggling, because I've seen my mom [a Certified Nursing Assistant] do it... I work, and sometimes I barely have any gas money left. So, I wanna be able to have a good paying job." Beyond monetary gains, Succeeders' professional aspirations were also tied to not wanting to work in the same low-status occupations as their immigrant parents.

These parental occupations—like landscaping, agricultural work, and domestic service—are also racialized as Latinx generally and sometimes specifically in terms of nations of origins that emphasize these workers' foreignness, for example, the female Salvadoran maid, the male Mexican landscaper (Chavez 2008; Estrada et al. 2020; Hondagneu-Sotelo 2014, Maldonado 2006, 2009; Olivos and Sandoval 2015).⁴ Jenny articulated this view in that she felt that "education is the one thing that people think we can't accomplish as Hispanic women... overcoming that obstacle... you prove you're not just another Hispanic, you know, who's just here to, I dunno—babysit and—[...] do the stereotypical jobs lots of [Latinx] people have." In contrast, Jenny aspired to become a nutritionist with her own practice, inspired by the work of nutritionists in the food assistance programs her mother had participated in as a young immigrant mother.

The pigeonholing of Latinx people as particularly suited to racio-gendered work like a nanny relies on naturalizing their fit in the racially-coded language of essentialisms, e.g., "it is in their nature to do menial labor," or it is against their culture for Latinas to supervise men (Maldonado 2009, 1026). Moreover, these kinds of statements often rely on stereotypes of Black and white labour, entrenching other racial positions. These framings not only naturalize working class work as the purview of Latinx people, but discourage imaginings of Latinx people as potential members of the professional middle class or as cosmopolitans with expansive outlooks. Jenny's framing of her aspirations makes clear that Succeeders confronted these discursive barriers and framed them as central to their ambitions. Sometimes, in that process, it came at the expense of their parents.

Mauricio, who wanted to be a doctor (and became a real estate agent), used charged language when describing his ambitions in relation to his father's work at Taco Bell: "I don't want to be mean and say [he is] a nobody, but I don't want to follow in my parent's footsteps." The message about not following a parent's example also came from parents or grandparents themselves. Isabel's grandfather told her: "I don't want you working, killing your back off cleaning someone else's bathrooms." Working-class parents and youth having hopes for inter-generational mobility is not specific to the Latinx experience. However, the current marking of these jobs as the natural purview of Latinx people endows these intergenerational aspirations with layers of racial and gendered stigma and stereotypes, as well as colonial legacies (Chavez 2008).

Just as youth were quick to point to how work like domestic labour, landscaping, and construction were gendered Latinx domains, they also pointed to the fact that there were few Latinxes or Blacks acting as "somebody professional." Lupita noted that she began to notice the difference between Latinx jobs and her white friends' parents' jobs as doctors, lawyers, and bankers: "Those were the jobs that make money. Those are the jobs that get you where you want to be." White collar work would endow students not with whiteness, but with respect as a Latinx person—"where you want to be." Emma stated that she aspired to professional work because it would allow her to "be somebody important." Implicit in this and other statements was the frame of comparison. An important "somebody professional" necessitates a working class "nobody." Indeed, this was the position to which Mauricio reluctantly relegated his father.

Emma did leave room for the ways this "somebody" could be different. She rounded out her view of being a professional thusly:

Someone who has a title... someone maybe like, in a business or organization who makes—who maybe calls the shots, but at the same time like, helps other people... Maybe someone with their name on like a little plate thing ... Someone carrying around like—not a briefcase, cause that's not for me, but like, a purse or something that has important things in it.

Emma's aspiration for professional life suggests layers of "importance" to professional work that is coded as white. However, she also shifted the racial orders of the professional middle class. Beyond imagining themselves in professional futures, students pointed to the Latinx professionals who came to the Succeeders program as guest speakers as the specifically Latinx professionals they aspired to become. Jenny reflected that the speakers

that really impact me are the female Latina speakers...I'm a female and I'm Hispanic—so it's like, "If they can do it, I can do it." And I want people to look at me in the future and be like, "If she can do it, then I can do it."

Vallejo's examination of middle-class Mexican Americans in Los Angeles provides insight into how the Latinx middle class (as described by Jenny and Emma) differs from the assimilationist white middle-class models, providing evidence of what she calls "minority cultures of mobility" (2012, 16).⁵ Vallejo's interlocutors' middle-class status was still defined by the usual trappings of homeownership, white collar work, higher incomes, and college educations, but also through financial support of kin, contributions to their communities, and participation in ethnic professional networks (2012). Emma, Jenny, and others defined middle-class status in similar, distinctively Latinx ways. For Jenny, it meant following guest speakers' lead and inspiring other Latinxes to aspire. Emma claimed a space of Latinx professional status in terms of organizational leadership ("to call the shots") and mutuality ("someone...who helps people"). Such collective ends, and resistance to a white, assimilationist frame of middle-class status, also materialized in Succeeders' material aspirations, even if a briefcase is "not for me."

A House for Mom: Materializing Latinx Worth

Janitza leaned back in the black office chair. Undocumented, she was currently working under the table as a secretary at a construction firm making, as she described it, "good money." As she reflected on my question of what college would do for her, she discussed feeling "complete." Then, she stated: "Girl, I'm not even going to lie. I love money and I feel like if I have a career, I will make myself happy. I'll make my mom proud." As I have explored elsewhere (Flores 2021), Succeeders often framed their educational and professional ambitions this way—in terms of meeting emotional and material obligations to their parents. They also plainly talked about money.

Most commonly, students talked about buying their parents and themselves a house. Pedro, whose janitor mother dreamed of his professional status, rendered his ambitions in terms of both fulfilling her dream and his of homeownership. He stated: "I want to buy her her own house—or maybe buy a big house for myself where she can come and live." It is unsurprising that homeownership loomed large in students' imagined futures. As Cattelino argues, "homeownership, the bedrock of the American Dream, is a foundation upon

which the full realization of citizenship is culturally and economically organized in the United States” (2008, 151). Moreover, when considered against a racialized and gendered professional horizon of “cleaning someone else’s bathrooms,” as Isabel’s grandfather stated, owning one’s house can represent an important class shift and a shift toward local embeddedness on more equal terms.

As Rosenbaum (2017) argues, domestic labour—the “stereotypical jobs” Jenny pointed out—serve to reproduce uneven class, racial, and national relations between middle-class American homeowners and their immigrant employees. The domestic sphere becomes the location of “the everyday struggle to make a living and to make a life... it illustrates the concomitant production of the domestic sphere... with the domestic, or national borders” (Rosenbaum 2017, 13). In buying a house for oneself or for a mother who worked in domestic or janitorial service like Pedro’s mom, Succeeders make a claim toward national, class, and racial equality. Homeownership also very physically locates Succeeders in the local context they and their families were once considered peripheral to. Janitza’s “love of money” and her succinct aspiration of “I don’t want to go out there and clean bathrooms... I want to sit in my office... I want to have a big house” become less about crass accumulation and how that accumulation can define a good, valuable life that upends orders of racialized labour, consumption, and rootedness.

The same can be said about other material desires, like Emma’s purse in her vision of her professional self. Alfredo, too, put material goods at the top of his list when describing his dream to “have a big house, an Escalade [luxury car]... wear a suit.” Like Lupita, Alfredo had spent some of his formative years as a renter on the edge of a rich, white suburb, but this time in Alabama:

It was a wealthy suburb. Once you start seventh and eighth grade, people start to treat you and be judgmental... For one, I was really dark, and people bullied [me] that I was too dark. I was the darkest Mexican they had ever seen... Everyone in there had really nice clothes and fancy clothes, nice cars, big houses, maids... I lived in a one-bedroom apartment with four people. My parents had a really old car. I was the outcast of everything.

Alfredo’s sense of being “the outcast of everything” was tied to his perceived racial difference (“the darkest Mexican”) and his material lack (“a one-bedroom apartment... a really old car”). Like Janitza’s aspiration for a house, Lupita’s for her children to “have everything,” and Emma’s for a purse, Alfredo’s Escalade

is about no longer experiencing economic precarity. It is also laced with a sense of surmounting racialized poverty and working-class status to make one's worth clear to others. Alfredo and Lupita had experienced the sting of racialized and class-based bullying and judgement. In their material aspirations, they looked to show their worth. Beyond merely matching the material consumption of the white middle class to prove their worth, Succeeders also made appeals to more abstract dispositions to signal their value. As aspiring rooted cosmopolitans with elite economic status materialized in cars, purses, and homes, they looked to shift their difference as something to cover up with class mobility to something that enabled it.

Deportable Cosmopolitans: Claiming a Respectable Place in the Global Order

At Jackson Hills High, Liz was trying out something different with the “defining success” activity. The club there was smaller, and she thought “vision boards” might help students manifest their futures. Following crafting, students presented their posters. Most of them had pictures of houses and cars with babies and happy families cut out from the glossy advertisements. One even had a picture of television personality Dr. Oz to represent dreams of becoming a physician.

Alejandro and Raven's posters were different. They were, however, different in a way that resonated with another dimension of many Succeeders' imagined futures. Alejandro had a map and train because “I want to travel.” Likewise, Raven, who hoped to work as a photographer for National Geographic, had lots of pictures from an old travel magazine because she has “always wanted to travel the world... I want to be cultured and everything and like learn languages.” Alejandro also had pictures of babies—but Asian ones. He clarified that he wanted to adopt an Asian girl when he grew up. Raven teased him, saying, “That's not creepy at all.” Alejandro clarified that he had wanted to adopt since they watched a movie in ninth grade about “Chinese girls being thrown away.”

Many Succeeders, when I would ask them about their futures, pointed to a desire to travel and learn languages. Pamela, who wanted to study international business, was hoping to minor in French in college to become trilingual. Alejandro had similar plans, but for Chinese. Raven wanted to learn Mandarin, Japanese, Italian, French, and Portuguese. Being bilingual was a point often brought up by adult guest speakers and by the program's staff as something that gave Succeeders a leg-up in a competitive, global economy. In so doing, these

professionals signalled to Succeeders that their difference, their language use that was once stigmatized in the era of English-only, could lead to middle-class status. Indeed, Pamela only considered international business upon meeting and talking with a Latinx employee at a major multinational corporation with headquarters in Nashville who had expounded on the value of bilingualism. In this frame, being different, being Latinx, could be an advantage. It was a route to, rather than a roadblock against, middle-class status and global connection.

Students could have been content to be bilingual, but this aspiration to a third, fourth, or fifth language signals something beyond an ability to liaise with growing Latin American markets to ascend the class ladder. So, too, do Alejandro's hopes of international adoption or Raven's hopes for travel. In these aspirations, students hope to signal their cosmopolitan orientation to difference, their abilities to cross other cultures beyond those of immigrant and receiving community. In crossing beyond these boundaries, youth claim a space of cosmopolitanism that is uniquely theirs, going beyond the US and Latin America.

Consider Raven's description of her desire to travel to Egypt, Italy, France, India, and Japan. Her future globetrotting stemmed from the fact that

I've always wanted to experience culture; I've always said I want to live a year in each [of these countries] so I can get a chance to learn the culture, experience these other things that I never get to experience... if I go to the actual country, I would know what people were talking about.

While many students talked about travel in the same way as houses or luxury items, Raven's aspirations sounded more like ethnographic fieldwork than either enjoying disposable income or the multicultural consumption of difference. In Raven's desire to "learn the culture" by speaking other languages and moving cross-culturally, she positions travel as demonstrating cosmopolitan openness.

Raven was already demonstrating a cosmopolitan orientation to the world—she watched Japanese anime and had a friendship group that spanned Black, white, Latinx, and other immigrant groups. However, she considered herself not yet "cultured." A potential explanation for this is what Kromidas notes regarding liberal multiculturalism's focus on difference as something to be tolerated, rather than the lived reality of immigrant youth's working through of their actual positionalities with each other to build a more global orientation

(2011, 581; 589). It may also indicate that Raven understood herself as only as subaltern and not yet cosmopolitan, given its imbrications with whiteness and economic elite status.

Jackson Hills was one of the first schools to have a significant international population. Painted flags of the students' and families' nations of origin served as a kind of low-budget crown moulding in the hallways. The school had the oldest International Day in the district. Yet, youth like Raven saw how that made them something to be tolerated, or at best celebrated locally, rather than someone who signalled a shifted global order. While she downplays her current state of "being cultured," Raven and other Succeeders were already cosmopolitans, but desired to be deeper ones who also transcended class orders and their racialization. Signalling a desire to deepen that through travel, language acquisition, and deeper engagement with cultural differences as compared to their school's passive multicultural efforts illustrated another mode of being upwardly mobile and different in the world.

There were limits to how this more expansive notion could speak back to constructions of a white-only middle class, difference as something to be tolerated, or cosmopolitanism as elite. Sofia, the Succeeders program director, often told the Succeeders that they were "global citizens" who would, again, have a leg-up in a global economic order because of their difference. Sofia believed her statement to be true, but also informed me after a particularly difficult conversation with undocumented teen parents that she made this claim specifically for undocumented students, whose bicultural and bilingual status could not counteract the limits of legal citizenship. Sofia counselled these students, as she did this couple, to remain in school and continue to aspire beyond present circumstances. She would make the case that even if students got deported, their US degree and cross-cultural bona fides could lead to better work in multinational corporations with offices in their nation of origin or in the local tourist industry, which served cosmopolitan elites.

Pamela, the aspiring businesswoman, and Emma of the hoped-for nameplate were undocumented global citizens who sought middle-class futures that superseded their legal status. Such aspirations could be viewed as "cruel optimism," but that perspective reinscribes existing orders of who is and who is not, as Emma puts it, "important," and who can and cannot have a mobile future (Berlant 2011). While we must recognize the very real constraints on these students, their hopeful aspirations are also everyday critiques of social orders that make them unimportant. Being a "deportable cosmopolitan" demands a

reconsideration of who young people like Pamela and Emma are and are not. They are not disposable labour, but rather have the “capacity to aspire” and the ability to recognize how to signal that capacity toward their social recognition as valuable, as curiously open to difference, if deportable (Appadurai 2004).

Discussion and Conclusion

Youth’s aspirations to achieve markers of middle-class status reveal both the colour line of class and how Succeeders look to shift narratives about who Latinx people can be. Their desire to move into professional occupations is about reclaiming the value of Latinx labour, which, in the form of immigrant parents’ “low skill” racialized labour, is often degraded—including by the Succeeders and parents themselves. It is also about modelling a Latinx professional middle class that supports the mobility of others. Material desires of a house, luxury cars, and nice clothes are not just about financial security, but about signaling worth to others and the self. Achieving these two sets of markers may suggest a more defensive position centred on reclaiming Latinx value. However, they also make a trenchant critique of the national “incorporation” of racialized immigrants. Future professional Succeeders will claim rootedness, if not necessarily whiteness, through property—through homes that house mothers and fathers who used to clean and build them (Harris 1993).

Youth’s aspirations to cosmopolitanism also push against local and global orders—including legal ones—that would reduce their difference to a consumable diversion and preclude their ability to transcend boundaries. The Succeeders’ “cosmopolitan contradictions” of desiring local rootedness and global unboundedness are not actually contradictions, but instead reveal the “unsettling ironies of uneven experience” in today’s world (Feld 2012, 229; 231). Through their lived, raced, and classed cosmopolitanism and aspirations for upward and physical mobility, Succeeders make an “irrevocable claim” to another political order and, ultimately, another good life—made through, and not in spite of, their difference (Gidwani 2006, 19).

Since 2013, when I finished long-term fieldwork, many Succeeders have made their way to a middle-class, cosmopolitan present. Emma bought a house. Pamela has an MBA. Alfredo has worn a suit. Lupita has travelled the globe. Alejandro lives in Europe. Raven works as the “new Liz” at Succeeders, helping make the pathway to college and the middle class visible to new Succeeders. Janitza didn’t make it to college. Buoyed by her success as an Avon saleswoman,

she now has a small business as a photographer. She also dreams of regularizing her status.

Returning to Macklemore and *Thrift Shop*, what may be less clear is that Succeeders—while fearful of conforming to racialized, class stereotypes—were largely not ashamed of being working class. The shouting of Macklemore on the bus was a proud reclamation of working-class status and smarts. They would not fall for the “ignorant bitch (shit)” of luxury goods, even if they wanted an Escalade, a Coach purse, a nameplate, or a year’s stay “abroad.” Even Lupita, who was perhaps the most affected by her childhood taunts, was, by the start of her career, proud of her parents’ frugality. It enabled her present globetrotting with a humanitarian nonprofit. More locally, that frugality still did important work as youth settled into better lives. It demonstrated their local know-how in navigating the best Goodwills while maintaining their street savviness as they earned more and ascended locally. As Janitza told me, “I used to wear used clothes and people used to make fun of me because of that. And I’m not even gonna lie, I get my own money, but I still go to the Pulgas [flea market]. I still do. I love those places.”

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Notes

- 1 Lupita’s taunting about second-hand clothes, her shame, and the Succeeders’ proud reclamation of thrifting reveal how that youth’s consumption is a complex “medium through which social inequalities—most notably race, class, and gender—are formed, experienced, imposed, and resisted” (Chin 2001, 3).

- 2 Attempts to ban nonstandard English (like Ebonics) and “foreign” language usage are acts of linguistic racialization and discrimination that reinforce a singular national identity rooted in whiteness marked through appropriate use of only standard English (Flores and Rosa 2015; Silverstein 1996).
- 3 The dish was created by an unnamed Black woman who looked to spite her unfaithful lover, Thornton Prince, with spicy chicken. Her efforts had the opposite effect—with Prince devouring the dish—leading to Thornton and successive generations selling the chicken to fellow residents in Black Nashville. The dish was popularized outside of the Black community by former Mayor Bill Purcell, who established the city’s hot chicken festival in 2006. See Martin (2021) for a complete history.
- 4 Such frames are gendered. Young women referenced how their educations and resulting class mobility would counter their association with the Latin American immigrant-heavy ranks of domestic labour. Young men also held up jobs like landscapers, waiters in a Mexican restaurant, or drug dealers as the vocational and racial stereotypes they hoped to escape.
- 5 While assimilation has largely been studied separately from racialization, Ramírez argues that the US mobility project under the label of the American dream or the meritocracy more broadly “gloss over, rest on, and even celebrate the foundational facts of settler colonialism, indigenous dispossession, slavery, and empire” (2020, 22).

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