

Introduction

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

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Volume 65, Number 2, 2023

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

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1110422ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.18357/anthropologica65220232673>

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Publisher(s)

University of Victoria

ISSN

0003-5459 (print)

2292-3586 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this document

Flores, A. & Ellison, S. H. (2023). Introduction: Money Lightens: Global Regimes of Racialized Class Mobility and Local Visions of the Good Life. *Anthropologica*, 65(2), 1–15. <https://doi.org/10.18357/anthropologica65220232673>

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Introduction

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

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O dinheiro embranquece. Money whitens. Money lightens.

This Brazilian idiom, serving as the title of this issue, reflects a broader Latin American folk belief that once racialized minorities have accumulated sufficient financial capital they can escape stigmatized non-white racial identities in name (e.g., Indígena, moreno, prieto) and in practice, that is, the poor treatment and lack of respect that accompanies non-white status. Money lightens is a provocative turn of phrase that unmasks the mutability of race and this mutability's intrinsic link to capital accumulation. It is also deceptively simple: it claims that all that is needed to uproot and transcend racism is money. Of course, the inverse is also true: a lack of money can further entrench racism's hold.

Money lightens, is a belief in a particular kind of mobility, one where accumulation of money trumps race. Drawing from this conceptualization, we define mobility as the uneven processes whereby lower-status individuals and their families attempt to ascend hierarchies of social stratification, access additional material resources and comforts, and enjoy a meaningful change in their social status. Furthermore, mobility is defined by the structural violences that disable it. Chief among these violences is racism. We examine the ways mobility and race intersect, demonstrating how our interlocutors make sense of their chances for mobility as constrained by racialization and how they critique racial orders of inequality as they attempt to get ahead and forge a good life.

We chose money lightens as our title for three reasons. First, it makes clear the enduring power of racism in structuring opportunities for mobility. Across the globe, being a racial other—as defined locally—can negatively impact one’s ability to access what scholars and interlocutors alike see as the foundational tools of mobility, such as educational opportunities, access to financial capital, home ownership, and freedom of movement. Even with access, there is no guarantee that money will override racial animus. Second, the idea of money lightening, or perhaps lessening one’s racial other-ness, reveals the fiction of race—if also the persistent and pernicious effects of racism. Though access to money may be understood to ease racist treatment, it can also exaggerate it, as new folk theories arise about racial others’ mobility, such as assuming ties to racially marked crime and criminality. Moreover, attempts to access wealth in ways that do not mimic the consumption patterns of “responsible” middle classes and elites can become a way to further “darken” minoritized others. At the same time, accessing the privileges of money—elite higher education, higher-end businesses, the ability to spend money on luxury goods—can be a defiant act when one’s racial group has been denied access to these social niceties and raw materials of mobility. Finally, in contrast to the idiom’s racial premise, as our interlocutors come to access these trappings of mobility they do so without abandoning difference. Rather, they definitively assert that their difference—and success—are intimately tied. Thus, for many of our interlocutors, mobility is not based on whiteness as a mode of property (Harris 1993) or assimilation into whiteness (Drouhot and Nee 2019; Portes and Zhou 1993), but rather by banking on difference. If our interlocutors sometimes invest in the idea that money lightens, money also reveals the racial orders of mobility and resistance to those orders that place whiteness on top. Despite a widening global wealth gap defined by racial inequality, our papers demonstrate how minoritized individuals strive toward a materially and morally “good” life that affords them respect as minoritized individuals, and not merely as those lightened by money.

Making A Good Life

Our interests stem from anthropologists and allied scholars’ recent efforts to explore, optimistically, the rise of new middle classes that include individuals historically marginalized by race (Coe and Pauli 2020; Klein et al. 2018; Rollock et al. 2013; Shakow 2014; Vallejo 2012). These studies of rising, racialized middle classes’ yearnings also coincide with scholarly concern around how minoritized

individuals cope with “new” forms of precarity arising from the collapse of Fordist labour regimes, diminished returns from formal education, and the rise of micro-entrepreneurship and anti-poverty efforts that, ironically, lead to increased poverty (Hardon et al. 2019; Kar 2018; Muehlebach 2013; Shange 2019; Sojoyner 2016). Emphasizing contemporary modes of precarity, however, runs the risk of ignoring long-standing racialized orders of capitalism that have always constrained minoritized populations’ mobilities, but not their dreams of the good life (Castellanos 2020; Millar 2017; Weston 2012).

The authors in this issue track everyday experiences of getting by and getting ahead that are shaped both by world historical trajectories including regimes of global capitalism and colonial legacies, but also by local histories of racial relations. In so doing, we demonstrate the profoundly local iterations of racial capitalism (Robinson 2000 [1983]).¹ While all of our papers deeply historicize mobilities, transnational power formations, and the material markers of wealth, we are all ultimately concerned with how our interlocutors conceptualize a hoped-for, improved future for themselves and their kin that engages not only money but also valued things and experiences.

Our existing frameworks for understanding these hopeful strivings toward the good life for self and others are often oppositional. Celebratory accounts of such apparent economic mobility suggest they may be acts of transformative aspiration (Appadurai 2013) and “becoming” (Biehl and Locke 2017) that lead to the emergence of transfigured subjectivities and possibilities beyond present social orders, including racial ones (James 2019). Alternatively, these yearning efforts are cast as incarnations of “cruel optimism” (Berlant 2020), whereby hopeful strivers unwittingly pursue fantasies of the good life that ultimately do them harm. Just as we aim to historicize present economic and racial orders in our papers, we propose in our work herein that we can simultaneously hold the pleasurable and the painful within the same analytical frame of striving’s social work. The work of Black feminist scholars has shown how appeals to self-reliance and entrepreneurship cannot be reduced to the adoption of a neoliberal subjectivity or merely acquiescence to respectability politics for Black populations (Reese 2017; see also Mullings 2014). Instead, such appeals may reckon with the lived experience of racial capitalism while remaining deeply embedded in a collective project of shared survival and “communal uplift” that critiques racial orders (Reese 2017, 411).

To further deepen our analysis in this way, we attend to our interlocutors’ definitions of what constitutes a good life and the socially productive aspects

of the everyday—and enjoyable—parts of their lives (Back 2015; Fischer 2014; Garth 2019; Mathews and Izquierdo 2009; Robbins 2013; Thin 2009). Pleasurable experiences, like new clothes, respect and a promotion at work, or a trip abroad, are critical to how people are “making life liveable” and subverting the unequal socio-political systems that make them vulnerable (Back 2015). Pleasurable pauses provide a sense of release as people grapple with competing moral-political imperatives and the weariness of navigating them (Garth 2019). Even amid the most difficult of circumstances, specific material culture artefacts can affirm one’s dignity and provide the physical proof of a life well lived (Collins 2010; Fassin 2012; Low 2004; Stoller 2002). Likewise, appeals to differing modes of cosmopolitanism from those marginalized by global inequalities reclaim individual and collective value and demand recognition (Appadurai 2013; Eze 2014; Gidwani 2006). At the same time, we aim to sidestep the “ethnographic sentimentalism” that risks reproducing the “liberal myth of perfectibility through the progressive incorporation of historically subordinated peoples into the comforts and privileges of property and citizenship” (Jobson 2020, 259). In sum, we braid together our commitment to historicizing contemporary struggles to make do and embrace the inherent tensions of individuals’ vulnerable striving. Collectively, our papers heed the call to examine “what’s really happening” (Chin 2001, Reese 2017) in the lived experience of the cruel and the aspirational.

Contributions to the Special Issue

Central to these papers is a firm commitment to deeply ethnographic work. We take seriously the micropractices of everyday life—ranging from making decisions about where and how to work and buying second-hand clothes, to taking out a credit card and having an extravagant wedding. Our papers’ ethnographic foci span the Americas, Asia, and Europe as an explicitly cross-cultural examination of the experiences of mobility and racialization that gets at global regimes of power shaped by world historical trajectories. In so doing, we demonstrate the profoundly local iterations of the global system of racial capitalism. Additionally, this cross-cultural focus enables us to trace the alignments and disjunctures in theories of race, mobility, and the good life across geographies. At the same time, we remain firmly committed to the local, examining how the particularities of places, and how they are imagined and inhabited by our interlocutors, create unique experiences of mobility and race. We aim to push our collective anthropological imaginations by attending

to how people made marginal by race and class define a “good” life and self in material, relational, and moral registers and how the categories of race and class that ensnare these lives are understood in local and transnational terms (Fischer 2014; Gregory and Altman 2018). In this way, this special issue seeks to work against the epistemological violence that can occur in academic research and writing by centring the sense-making practices of our interlocutors as co-theorists of their own experiences of racial and class-based marginalization and mobility.

While rooted in deep ethnographic observations, our papers are organized to reflect how our analyses move across sliding scales of ethnographic intimacy. Kathleen Millar tracks another idiomatic expression related to mobility, in this case, bad credit or—“nome sujo” (dirty name)—and its links to colonial histories of race and capitalism that animate present-day Brazilians’ understandings of credit ratings. Next, Susan Ellison examines the spread of global multilevel marketing companies in Bolivia and the ways Indigenous distributors repurpose their racialization—and accompanying experiences of racial discrimination—to recruit more people into their “downlines,” revealing the ways racial capitalism operates through the expansive reach of networked sales. Grazia Ting Deng’s work compares and contrasts the hoped-for good lives of Chinese immigrants and their children in Italy, tracing the move from economic stability to social recognition in light of both the racialization of the Chinese in Italy and China’s global rise on the world stage. Andrea Flores treads similar ground demonstrating how immigrant-origin Latinx youth aim for professional futures, homes, and cosmopolitan travel in spite of legal constraints, racial stereotypes and class stigma trailing Latinx identities in the US. Lai Wo considers the intimate relations forged between South Asian women and Euro-American expatriate men who encounter each other, sing karaoke, flirt, and even find long-term partners in Hong Kong’s entertainment district in Wanchai—and, in the process, imagine futures for themselves that are more affectively and materially rewarding, even as those relations are crosscut by gendered, raced, and financial inequalities. Finally, Maureen Kihika’s paper draws from her family’s personal professional and immigration histories alongside those of African immigrant nurses in Vancouver to demonstrate how reliance on Afropolitan identities can mitigate the wounding effects of anti-Blackness while also reinforcing classism. Bookending this introduction is Anne-Christine Tremon’s French language commentary which provides additional framing of our articles’ theoretical throughlines and conceptual

frames. We now introduce each of the ethnographic articles as a guide to the issue's contents.

Through her long-term fieldwork with recyclables collectors (*catadores*) working on Rio's city dump in the Jardim Gramacho neighbourhood, Millar explores the historical origins and contemporary reverberations of the racialization of debt in Brazil. Amid a decades-long, global push for "financial inclusion" targeting low-income individuals around the world, many Brazilians have found themselves—like peers elsewhere—struggling to pay off loans and credit card bills. As Millar shows in her contribution to this special issue, the widespread idioms through which Brazilians characterize these experiences with bad credit or delinquent payments—fears of having one's name "dirtied" by default—are heavily racialized. Millar demonstrates that appeals to dirtiness reflect historical tropes of anti-Blackness linked to indebtedness and public humiliation for one's financial failing. For Millar's interlocutors, concerns about being attached to filth are particularly poignant as they seek to keep their names, like their dump-labouring bodies, "clean." As Millar demonstrates, the phrase *nome sujo* (dirty name) attaches to particular bodies (racialized Black ones) as they are folded into commercial banking systems yet continue to engage in financial practices that fail to adopt the "austerity subjectivity" they are meant to embody. In the process, the alternative financial practices that poor residents of Jardim Gramacho adopt—from sharing credit cards to managing social obligations through debt—are increasingly pathologized in racialized terms. Despite significant anxieties around the ways credit might contaminate someone with a "dirty name," Millar argues, her interlocutors continue to navigate competing demands to keep their names clean while extending care to others through often-"dirtying" debts.

Crushing debt also forms the backdrop to Ellison's piece on the rise of multi-level marketing among Aymara residents of El Alto, Bolivia. Global multilevel marketing companies (MLMs) like Herbalife have alighted in Bolivia amid widespread celebrations of the country's purportedly rising Indigenous middle classes—including Indigenous merchants who have forged durable trade networks spanning from the Andes to Asia. Yet those financial successes emerged in the wake of dominant racial ideologies that presented formal schooling and professionalization as the primary means of Indigenous uplift—often linked to expectations of Indigenous whitening or *blanqueamiento*. Yet, as Ellison shows, multilevel marketing company recruitment events capitalize on widespread dissatisfaction among Indigenous residents of El Alto who

express their frustrations that those promised pathways to a more “dignified” and better quality of life have proven inaccessible for them and their families. In that context, Ellison argues, MLM recruiters craft persuasive testimonials that repurpose racialization toward their own objectives—drawing more and more people into downline MLM structures—by highlighting people’s sense of alienation from dominant narratives of racialized class mobility. They do so, however, in the service of a business model that often fails to deliver on its promises. Much as Millar reveals the anti-Black underpinnings of Brazil’s particular brand of racial capitalism, Ellison demonstrates how the racial subjugation that has enabled capitalist extraction undergirds the work of direct sales and multilevel marketing.

Like Ellison’s interlocutors, the younger generation of Chinese entrepreneurs in Italy seeks social recognition in spite of racialization as key to accessing the good life. Deng’s analysis contrasts the aspirations of an older generation of Chinese migrants who came to Italy in the 1980s–1990s with those of their children who came of age in Italy recently. For the older generation of migrants, hope for the good life was rooted in being able to make use of one’s spatial mobility and labour to eventually own one’s own legal business and pour profits into cultivating their children’s white-collar futures. These children, despite having more opportunities, still faced racist perceptions of their Chineseness in Italy, including the linking of their economic mobility to the ill-gotten gains of a *mafia cinese* (Chinese mafia). They came to see their future “good life” as defined by, as one of Deng’s interlocutors puts it, “pursuing social status.” Conspicuous consumption, expensive leisure pursuits, high-end educational opportunities for their children, and their assertion of their status as Italians, if Chinese ones, were markers of a life well-lived. Deng connects these intergenerational differences in hoped-for futures with the global hierarchies of nations. She tracks how China’s rise as a global superpower and Italy’s slumping economy map onto how both generations managed their futures. In the current moment, Global China provides a new kind of cosmopolitanism that enables racialized Chinese to turn the tables of prejudice against their Italian neighbours and assert Chinese dominance.

Flores’ paper also works with the concept of cosmopolitan orientations to the good life, tracing how Latinx youth in Nashville, Tennessee aspire to professional cosmopolitan futures in light of pervasive anti-Latinx stereotypes. The youth Flores works with define a future good life in terms of homeownership for themselves and their parents, luxury goods consumption,

and their own professional employment outside of labour domains associated with their parents' Latinx bodies, like house cleaning and landscaping. Beyond these occupational and material markers, these youth aspired to become trilingual and travel the world. Here, they not only signalled their bicultural ease, but "their cosmopolitan orientation to difference, their abilities to cross other cultures beyond those of immigrant and receiving community." Flores also considers "deportable cosmopolitans," that is, undocumented youth who nevertheless aspired to this urbane worldliness and freedom of movement. She argues that these youth are not victims of entrenching legal orders prohibiting mobility, but those whose aspirations critique the global deportation regimes that position them outside of the aspiring classes. As youth work across the racial, class, and legal boundaries that constrain their present, their aspirations reveal a trenchant critique of these social orders.

While Flores and Deng's interlocutors are rooted in parental-child relationships, in her contribution, Wo traces the intimate relationships that emerge as migrant Southeast Asian women flirt, date, and sometimes marry Euro-American expatriate men they meet in Hong Kong's Wanchai entertainment district. Many of Wo's Southeast Asian interlocutors navigate—and sometimes intentionally exaggerate—unequal gendered and racialized power dynamics to develop relationships with these expatriate men. These men are, in turn, grappling with their own perceptions of powerlessness and dislocation—from labour redundancies to failed prior relationships that have left them disappointed and alone. For minoritized Southeast Asian women, such short-term boyfriends and even longer-term relationships offer some respite from the gruelling hours of unregulated domestic care work and open a path for Wo's interlocutors to renegotiate and resignify—if not entirely escape—their more subjugated racialized class positions. These intimacies and the aspirations they enable, Wo argues, allow us to reckon with the agentic manoeuvring of migrant women whose performances of sexual and racial scripts cannot be reduced to mere victimization. As Wo insists, by attending to the "future-making possibilities forged out of intimacies shared between two distinct migrant groups," we can better apprehend how South Asian migrant women and their expatriate partners try to "re-envision what might be affectively and materially possible in their futures beyond domestic labour, ageing alone, and imminent precarity."

In a different sense of intimacy, Kihika combines a deeply personal autoethnographic account of her Kenyan family's contradictory mobility

experience from Kenya to Canada alongside the similar accounts of her interlocutors: Black African nurses who moved to Vancouver. Kihika explores how collectively they make use of “a cultural politics of Afropolitanism” to negotiate fraught experiences of upward and downward mobility undergirded by anti-Black racism, negative stereotypes of Africa, and potentially their own classism. Kihika tracks how Afropolitanism, as a “cultural instrument of Black political agency,” enables Africans (including these nurses) to assert an “African belonging to the world” that rejects stereotypes of African victimhood and, ultimately, anti-Blackness. The nurses Kihika engages with in her research have their professional expertise questioned, get passed over for promotions, and are generally undermined at work. While they recognize the role racial difference plays in these constructions of them as deficient professionals, they “drew on Afropolitan sensibilities to enable oppositional frameworks through which they challenged their subaltern position, reclaiming their sense of self as empowered middle-class professionals in their own terms.” Kihika also shows how these moments of “performing professionalism” can reinforce class boundaries among the racialized.

Conclusion

This special issue explores how our interlocutors navigate their pasts, presents, and hoped-for futures in light of racial and class scripts they wish to subvert. We think with our varied interlocutors’ sensemaking of the intersecting gendered, raced, and classed structural inequalities that shape their chances of socio-economic mobility as well as their perceptions of their own mobility’s possibilities, limitations, and links to their racialized identities. Tremon’s insightful commentary points to throughlines in our analysis we do not cover here, such as the stakes of urban ethnography. By way of our own conclusion, we wish to underscore four interventions we believe these papers make collectively.

First, mobilities are always and already racialized. Our interlocutors are both conforming to and rejecting racial scripts that accompany upward mobility and its stagnation. In this way, our work testifies to the plasticity of racial scripts. For example, Deng demonstrates how the adult, Italian-born and/or Italian-raised children of Chinese migrants to Italy selectively emphasize aspects of their Chinese identities when asserting their family’s hard-won economic mobility. Flores, Kihika, and Ellison show how ethno-racially marked Latinx, African, and Indigenous individuals respectively distance themselves from negative racial stereotypes and seek to either conform to or

reject Euro-centric expectations around work, consumption, and respectability. In the Brazilian context, Millar shows how debt, race, and ideas of filth and value are intimately linked to notions of the Black body itself. Finally, Wo illustrates how rural Southeast Asian women knowingly subject themselves to racialized desire in western bars in Hong Kong to partially subvert other aspects of their racialization as rural Asian migrants in a global city. In sum, our contributions make clear that racialized mobility is an active process of resistance and retrenchment undertaken by those at the supposed “bottom” of the racial hierarchies that exclude them.

Second, there are material and spatial dimensions of racialized class mobility and orientations toward the future. Ellison and Millar track the legacies of colonialism and enslavement in the Americas on both contemporary orders of racial capitalism and the racialized patterns of conspicuous consumption and access to credit that enable or disable desired futures. Wo, Flores, Kihika, and Deng trace recent transnational migration undertaken with hopes for an imagined future that also inevitably reshapes their sending and receiving nations. More personally, these migrants and their descendants transform what individuals see as the goods, tastes, and practices—including educational attainment, modes of entrepreneurship, professional demeanours, cosmopolitan orientations, and interracial intimate relations—that testify to their upward mobility and successful migration. Collectively, these papers contribute a more holistic account of how individuals make sense of their locations in racialized class hierarchies, deepening our understanding of how mobility is materialized in future-oriented consumption, entrepreneurship, and migration.

Third, while the papers all demonstrate the role of global economic and political systems in shaping our interlocutors’ futures, we also point to how they appeal to cosmopolitan orientations that speak back to global regimes of exclusion. Millar’s paper may be most far afield from the cosmopolitan. However, desires to be enfolded into financial inclusion and to keep one’s kin with them reveal a subtle lived critique of global financial systems. More straightforwardly, Deng reveals how narratives about China’s rise enable a new generation of Chinese-Italians to assert flexible citizenship. Kihika’s Afropolitan nurses rely on this framing of “African belonging in the world” to combat moments of racialized exclusion. The MLM entrepreneurs Ellison researches hope for international travel that is enabled by asserting the value of racial difference. The youth followed by Flores, who dream of travel and multilingual

futures, speak back to a framing of the cosmopolitan as white and upper class. While we could place these all under the framework of cosmopolitanism from below, or vernacular/subaltern cosmopolitanism, we can also see them as claims to a racially different but upwardly mobile cosmopolitanism whose adherents look to insert themselves as equals in a new world order.

Finally, our work demonstrates how our interlocutors' aspirations cannot be reduced to cruelty or complicity. That "cruel optimism" framework, while illuminating and productive, runs the risk of conflating aspiration with a lack of critical awareness about one's own circumstances and the political-economic conditions that contribute to everyday struggles for dignity and enjoyment. Wo, Deng, Kihika, and Flores centre the ways their interlocutors knowingly navigate racialized class terrains, generational tensions, and intimate politics in their pursuit of the good life. Millar and Ellison show how their interlocutors are often recruited into racialized Liberal projects of "financial inclusion" and entrepreneurship, even as they contend with racialized class prejudices and their many constraints in the process. As Deng writes, "people's aspirations regarding their futures fluctuate between hope and precarity, expectation and uncertainty, and privilege and disadvantages amid racialized class terrains, generational tensions, and geopolitical transformations of the world order."

Taken together, these articles illustrate the imbrications of class and race as people across the globe seek mobility. Our interlocutors' efforts to get by and get ahead are also efforts to remake social orders that exclude them because of poverty and race. We argue that their sensemaking is transformative: though people may believe money lightens, it doesn't have to.

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Acknowledgements

This issue is based in part on a panel we organized for the 2021 Annual Meeting of the American Anthropological Association. M. Bianet Castellanos served as a panel discussant, and we are most grateful for her thoughtful remarks. We thank our panellists-contributors for their fine work in the making of this issue. We would also like to acknowledge the generative reviews from all of the reviewers engaged in the peer review process for each contribution. Alexandrine Boudreault-Fournier has been an enthusiastic supporter of this issue. We are

grateful for your and the entire *Anthropologica* team's support. Finally, we would like to recognize the important co-theorizing of our collective interlocutors. We hope to have done well by your good lives.

Note

1 Robison's theory of racial capitalism demonstrates how capitalism, from its start in feudal Europe, is premised on the unequal valuation of racialized groups and the exploitation of their labour, resulting in racism suffusing the "social structures emergent from capitalism," including blocking racial others from accessing the raw materials of mobility (2000 [1983], 2). See also Kelly (2017); Melamed (2015)

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