

Introduction

“BE SOMEBODY”: THE STAKES OF ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT

Ms. Millerton’s classroom stank. It was the usual mix. AXE body spray, fresh Doritos, caustic hand sanitizer, and vanilla-scented perfume. Five college admissions officers and a handful of Latino college students stood at the head of the classroom, forming a zigzagged line in front of a graying whiteboard.¹ They had come to talk about their universities to a packed house of Latino high school students.

The high schoolers were part of Succeeders, a nonprofit college access program for Latino youth in Nashville, Tennessee.² The students in the program, whom I call the Succeeders, were mostly from low-income Mexican and Central American families. A majority of the students were undocumented immigrants. Another sizable chunk came from mixed-status families whose members had a combination of undocumented, documented, and citizen status. The Succeeders were also poised to become the first in their families to graduate from high school and potentially attend college. Their educational aspirations were rooted in hopeful American Dreams and harsh xenophobic realities.

One by one the collegians, mostly Succeeders alumni, introduced themselves and described their sometimes circuitous paths to college. As the Succeeders and I politely suppressed late-afternoon yawns, Mateo began to speak. His forceful words, delivered slowly at a volume that demanded each of us lean forward to hear him, electrified the sleepy room:

At college, I learned a lot about myself. They developed me to be a better person. If you have the will, the determination, that fire inside you to be something more—make your parents proud. [College] is hard, but it is going to make you a better person.

He then pointed to the standard-issue US flag drooping in the corner of the public school classroom: “You see that flag right there? It stands for freedom. There is no reason you can’t be successful here in the greatest country in the world. It is our responsibility as Hispanic Americans.”³

Following Mateo’s rousing address, known troublemaker Lalo sat down with Liz, the Succeeders program coordinator. Lalo’s sole contribution that afternoon had been confidently answering one admission officer’s question—“What’s our mascot?”—with “*Un güero*” (a blond or a white person). His heckle was an amusingly accurate description of the school’s marketing materials that caused me to guffaw—inappropriately.

As students shuffled out of the classroom, I overheard what Lalo tentatively whispered to Liz. He quietly vowed to graduate, to stop misbehaving, and to make his father proud. In just five words, words that I heard countless times throughout my fieldwork, he expressed the same sentiments and understandings of his education’s purpose that Mateo had: “I want to be somebody.”⁴

Lalo’s terse statement of ambition to “be somebody” and Mateo’s call to success on behalf of kin and country reveal that educational achievement had far deeper meanings for these youth than just getting a diploma. Only through educational success, Lalo believed, could he “be somebody”: a valuable person worthy of the respect of others. Only through educational success could Mateo fulfill his “responsibility as a Hispanic American.” Only through educational success could they both make their parents proud. Over the course of my fieldwork, I would come to understand the ultimate stakes of academic achievement for the Succeeders and their families: belonging in the United States of America.

Succeeders underscored to me that earning academic credentials could disprove the national and local stereotypes of Latino youth as underachievers and their families as interlopers in the nation. Yet as Mateo, Lalo, and others strove in school, they also became sharply critical of their own striving and the somebodies they aspired to be. The individualistic model of success and racist, moralized terms of membership that pushed Succeeders to see themselves, and those they loved, as nobodies misaligned with their lives' reality. It was collective caring that sustained these youth and motivated what they understood to be the communal ends of schooling.

The people that the Succeeders loved—undocumented friends and family, “at-risk” peers, and others stigmatized by racism and nativism—were and are left out of common notions of success, Americanness, and valued personhood.⁵ But they were not left out by the Succeeders. These youth's refusal to leave their loved ones behind in the pursuit of success opposed the petty inclusion offered by a hostile nativist state that breaks families apart through deportation, retracts social welfare from the most vulnerable, and limits inclusion to the “best and brightest.” The Succeeders' ultimate refusal to discard loved ones is a way for us all to rethink belonging as necessarily rooted in caring connections to others. Those connections are forged by the care we share with each other as people who are always, and already, somebody.

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This book centers on the Succeeders' defiant political critique of what it means to belong—a critique that unfolded in their everyday acts of striving. By striving, I mean the emotional effort, concrete actions, tests and homework, talk, care practices, and daily struggles that youth purposefully and hopefully undertook as part of their work toward the future.⁶ There is, however, a clear paradox at work. I argue that the Succeeders' striving was both reproductive and transformative of the existing terms of membership. Striving is both exclusionary and inclusionary. Succeeders' lived critique of the existing moralized and racialized terms of success-based belonging emerged in contradictory fits and starts as they both conformed to and challenged these terms. These fits and starts reveal just

how narrow the paths are that Latino immigrant and immigrant-origin youth must tread to make their personhood and right to belong legible to those who would deny it and them.⁷

I tell two stories about belonging through the Succeeders' experiences: one about what belonging currently *is* and one about what it *could be*. The first story is rooted in how these youth strove in school toward a moving target of excellence as a prerequisite for belonging. As they did so, they felt that they must prove their difference from other Latinos to prove their Americanness. In that process, they relied on and enforced the very same Latino stereotypes about others, including academically struggling friends, that they wished to disprove about themselves. The Succeeders' efforts demonstrate that Latino immigrant-origin youth themselves can be gatekeepers of the modes of membership that also exclude them.

The second story, which forms the heart of my argument, is born of the Succeeders' own epiphanies. As they strove for and alongside stigmatized parents and vulnerable siblings and peers, Succeeders came to value care and connection rather than quantifiable accomplishment as the raw material of an encompassing belonging. They thus pointed to another way of forging national belonging, recasting its terms as the obligation to care for related and unrelated others. This mode aligns with and challenges a vernacular understanding of national inclusion as being "like a family."

This book draws these two stories together, tracking youth's acts of resistance and social reproduction. I show that youth are primary actors in determining the parameters of national membership in everyday, but highly political, ways. The Succeeders' actions have consequences for how we all think about what it is to belong—namely, that meaningful national belonging can be based in caring obligation to others rather than in meritocratic markers of success.

**"WHERE ARE YOU *REALLY* FROM?":
DEFINING BELONGING IN EVERYDAY LIFE**

In describing *belonging*, which I also gloss as inclusion and membership, I mean two things.⁸ One is the feeling of "emotional attachment" to the nation that manifests in "feeling at home" in it.⁹ The other is a sense of

incorporation as a socially valued participant in the daily life, culture, and institutions of the nation regardless of juridical citizenship status or socio-cultural identities and heritages.¹⁰ Institutions—including educational institutions—matter to belonging because it is through access to them and the daily routines within them that belonging as an abstract category is translated into the more concrete comings and goings of our day-to-day lives. It is in these contexts that we feel we belong. While legal citizenship was forefront in the minds of undocumented youth and youth in mixed-status families, all youth regardless of status had a desire to be seen by others as a part of the national community, especially within their schools.¹¹

We may feel at home in the nation, but how do others know we belong? As my definition suggests, belonging isn't limited to a legal category but is something that is reckoned in daily life through our contact with others in places like our neighborhoods and institutions like our churches, workplaces, and schools.¹² Moreover, we often judge each other as members of or outsiders to the nation through our judgments of ordinary actions in ordinary space. Shared slang; collective cultural references; the routines of a school day; and even dental hygiene, parenting, and prenatal practices are viewed as the way "we" do things as a nation.¹³ Moreover, we often ascribe moral value to these behaviors and beliefs, imbuing our actions and our nation with virtue and those outside the nation with the reverse.¹⁴ Exclusion from the nation becomes moralized as we attribute these categories of "good" and "bad" to practices and people.

These notions of who belongs and what constitutes shared national identity are circulated and produced by us all. Be it by the powerful with a pulpit—such as politicians, sitcom writers, and journalists—or by our closer community counterparts, like a neighbor who asks "But where are you *really* from?" to the dark-skinned citizen child of the foreign-born homeowners next door. As this last un-neighborly example suggests, commonsense notions of belonging are exclusionary along lines of race and nativity. As I demonstrate, the pairing of immorality and racial difference defines US belonging.

The circulations and performances of ideas regarding membership, and members, matter. They articulate who we are as nations, for each other by each other. They are also our opportunities to reformulate these ideas in ways that are less hostile to difference. Therefore, these circulations are

highly political in their ends. It isn't, however, only those in power—like politicians, journalists, and (though not all will agree) sitcom writers—who matter in this political process. We matter.

Our actions are how belonging occurs. We are in charge of extending belonging to those around us. I frame my discussions of belonging in terms of including or excluding to highlight two points. First, belonging is an active category and not an abstract one. We actively create or inhibit belonging through our decisions about how to treat, talk to, and care for those around us. In this way, we all participate in creating belonging. Those subject to exclusion, like the Succeeders, can themselves enact forms of belonging and exclusion. Second, if belonging is actively made, it is a continual process. It can be made, unmade, and remade. As a shifting category, it can become more and less expansionary in its terms. Highlighting belonging as an active process that we undertake in our choices to either include or exclude illustrates that belonging is not a fixed category but rather one we have agency over. Belonging is something we can make and make over.

In this book, I devote a notable amount of attention to language and to the powerful narratives that Succeeders responded to and created while striving. Casual conversations, admissions essays, and the very words Succeeders used to describe themselves and their aspirations may seem insignificant. However, such acts of storytelling are moments of world making. They are how we as individuals fit ourselves into our communities and make our communities fit us. They are how we include or exclude and thus how we make, unmake, and remake belonging. I trace how the Succeeders accepted and contested common, powerful discourses about Latinos and race, success and Americanness, and family and care to demand their and their loved ones' membership in the United States. I outline these particular discourses later in this introduction.

Similar to how we narrate our worlds, how we act in them matters.¹⁵ My other main area of focus is Succeeders' care for others as a mode of striving and means to include. Enrolling a sibling in a high-quality elementary school, urging a friend to join the Succeeders program, and maintaining ties to the program long after college graduation are powerful ways that Succeeders enacted their revisions of membership. Through these actions,

Succeeders built a more expansionary form of belonging by enabling the well-being of others. Caring for those who face exclusion may not be as dramatic as a sit-in or protest, but it is how youth on the educational periphery and at the core of ethnoracial anxieties surrounding immigration attempt to change a world that seeks to change them.

Given the experiential nature of belonging and the potent power of our everyday actions and words to shape it, the Succeeders' striving takes on heightened social significance.¹⁶ In certain modes of their striving, Succeeders attempted to prove that they and their loved ones fit in with the existing exclusionary values and practices of US belonging. They were engaging in what Sébastien Chauvin and Blanca Garcés-Mascareñas term "performance-based deservingness."¹⁷

Recognizing the lived nature of membership, Chauvin and Garcés-Mascareñas offer a framework for understanding how belonging is judged in daily life.¹⁸ As an example of their theory, they argue that undocumented adult immigrants' reliability as workers, taxpayers, and law-abiding residents serves as evidence of their deservingness to belong. Alyshia Gálvez has termed this notion "sweat equity" in the nation; that is, immigrants are seen to earn their right to belong through their "laboral contributions" to their new sites of settlement.¹⁹ Immigrants and their allies leverage these performances and the rhetoric that surrounds them toward membership claims. They do so by showing how immigrants' performances—at work, church, school, and other sites—have consonance with moral values that are assumed to be national ones, such as a belief in hard work. To be successful, deservingness claims must be responsive to context, particularly what anthropologists Sarah Willen and Jennifer Cook term a "vernacular moral register."²⁰ For example, if paying taxes wasn't a mark of civic responsibility and good citizenship, then emphasizing taxpaying status would be a moot strategy for proving the right to belong. Moreover, a sense of "social proximity" must be built between the supposedly disparate parties of the supplicant for belonging and the gatekeeper of it.²¹ I now turn to two of the outsized narratives of US membership that Succeeders appealed to in their own membership claims. These narratives operate within the existing moral and racial registers of belonging in the United States.

LATINO THREATS AND AMERICAN DREAMS: RACIAL AND MORAL TERMS OF BELONGING IN THE UNITED STATES

On June 16, 2015, a few sentences uttered by the soon-to-be 45th president of the United States revealed how the terms of American belonging are both moralized and racialized: “When Mexico sends its people, they’re not sending their best. They’re not sending you. *They’re not sending you.* They’re sending people that have lots of problems, and they’re bringing those problems with us. They’re bringing drugs. They’re bringing crime. They’re rapists. And some, I assume, are good people” (emphasis added).²² Here was the truth of how some in the United States imagined not only Mexicans, but all Latinos as a panethnic category.²³ “*They’re*” not “*you.*” Latinos are criminal, moral reprobates whose practices are wildly opposed to those of morally upstanding, “problem-free” Americans. Exceptions can perhaps be made for the very few who are “good people”—those whose lifeways, aspirations, and presumed morality align with what Donald Trump left unspoken. The unspoken haunting this speech was an assumption many Americans hold regarding who can belong in the United States. In casting Mexicans as not and never “you,” Trump more than obliquely signaled this assumption: his “you” is a white you. Mexicans, due to moral and ethnoracial difference, can never be Americans. White Americans are “real” Americans. Racialized others, “good people” or not, are forever and almost automatically left out of American identity.²⁴

The Succeeders’ striving predates the candidacy and presidency of Donald Trump. Trump is just the latest incarnation of the naked nativism and dangerous racism that have always been present in US membership since the white settler nation’s very founding on the backs of enslaved Africans and Indigenous people. The association of whiteness with success, morality, and belonging in the United States has long been premised on the degradation and negation of nonwhite others’ success, morality, and very personhood.²⁵ The Succeeders’ striving to be “good people” or, as Mateo put it, a “better person,” shows that they deeply and painfully understood this truth.

Trump’s rhetoric is an example of one of the main discourses of US membership that the Succeeders are reacting to, and replicating, in their striving. It is what Leo Chavez terms the “Latino threat narrative.”²⁶

According to this narrative, the increasing number of Latinos—immigrant and citizen alike—represent a problematic demographic transition away from whiteness. The people behind this demographic shift are a fundamental challenge to an assumed core of white, Protestant culture and moral values that characterizes the United States.²⁷ Making this threat particularly strong is the fact that large numbers of Latinos have increasingly settled in areas that are assumed to be the very home of these core values. These are the places in the South and Midwest that demographers term “new destinations”: places like Nashville, Tennessee.²⁸

In political, academic, and passing discussion, Latinos are stereotyped as immoral criminals, clannish thinkers, uneducated high school drop-outs, and out-of-control “breeders” who cannot become reliable, self-made Americans.²⁹ Moreover, some Latino immigrants’ “illegal” presence in the nation—and what this illegality portends about all Latinos’ morality—casts further doubt on Latinos’ ability to be “good people” and successful Americans.³⁰ The perceived moral lack, racial incongruency, and cultural dissonance that these stereotypes are thought to signal become the justification for Latinos’ exclusion from belonging.³¹ “They” aren’t “you.” When Succeeders claimed they weren’t “that kind of Latino” in their college admissions essays, they reasserted and capitalized on the power of these harmful anti-Latino images.

In 2012–13, when I conducted this fieldwork, the Latino threat narrative was present, though perhaps less obviously venomous than it has since become. At the time, under President Barack Obama’s administration, immigration policy *looked* to be somewhat more inclusive of immigrant families’ right to belong to the nation and to remain with each other in it. Priorities for deportation were supposedly not focused on the parents of citizen children. Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA), the executive order that allowed certain undocumented youth to acquire renewable relief from deportation and access to a work permit, had just rolled out.³² There was hushed talk of plans for expanded deportation relief.

At the same time, deportations were happening in record numbers resulting in the painful separation of immigrant families—and Latino families in particular. In 2012 alone, 419,384 people were removed from the United States, 98 percent of whom were from the Caribbean, Central

America, Mexico, or South America.³³ While DACA provided relief for many, there were restrictions on who was eligible, including some based on education. Failed DACA applications pointed out how very limited that policy window to inclusion truly was. Relatedly, at the center of broader immigration policy debates was the question of whether or not family ties or “merit”—defined as chances of economic success—should be the basis for immigration policy. In the intervening years, these circumstances have only hardened. Families have been disastrously separated at the US-Mexico border, including more than one thousand children whose whereabouts were unaccounted for by the federal government for years.³⁴ DACA, though protected in 2020 by the Supreme Court, remained at legal risk and continued on as a legal stopgap for those it covered. Perceived merit came to the fore in immigration priorities through the now-defunct expansion of the public charge rule.³⁵

Amid the public vitriol targeted at Latinos and the contradictory politics of the Obama era, Succeeders invoked another extraordinarily potent “vernacular moral register” when they made claims to belonging in their lives.³⁶ That register is the American Dream and its rendering of quantifiable success as a moral mark of membership.³⁷

The American Dream is the mythological understanding of the United States as a land of opportunity where any self-possessed person can succeed individually on their own merit.³⁸ At the core of the American Dream is not just the ability to achieve success economically, in a given meritocracy or in any other way that can be measured, but what this success represents. To dream the American Dream is to be an American, to be seen by others as an American, and to belong in America. To be a success is to be quintessentially American.

Embedded in this belief in a scrappy individual’s ability to triumph is an understanding of success as tied to moral personhood.³⁹ This linkage is why Mateo believed the success represented by his collegiate achievements made him a “better person.” As public speakers from Ben Franklin to Mateo have asserted, successful American people are those who demonstrate moral virtues, such as hard work and responsibility.⁴⁰ Since success is understood to be won through one’s own moral effort, it is thus a sign of one’s virtue to others.⁴¹ If success is tied to both moral personhood and US belonging, the converse is also true and ever present. Those who

fail in the United States, be it in school or the job market, fail precisely because they lack moral fiber.⁴² In the process, they show themselves to be less than ideal Americans.

Relatedly, in the American Dream mythology there is no racism, ableism, or other “ism” great enough to keep the moral and meritorious individual down. Mateo echoed this sentiment when he claimed there was “no reason” the Succeeders couldn’t achieve in the “greatest nation in the world.” This aspect of the American Dream is insidious because it clearly ignores the structural disadvantages foundational to US legal, social, and economic systems and its meritocracies.⁴³ In this model, it is individual moral failings—not white supremacist racial hierarchies, gender inequality, or the inequitable education system—that make structurally disadvantaged individuals fail. This rendering of success ignores difference and how it shapes our lives and life chances. As historian Cal Jillson argues, who can actually achieve the American Dream is fundamentally tied to broader “patterns of exclusion” regarding who gets to have equal opportunities to succeed.⁴⁴

Consider the example of minority women reliant on welfare in the United States. Pundits, politicians, and some among the American Dream—believing public attribute these poor minority women’s poverty and failure to thrive economically to individual moral flaws alone.⁴⁵ These racially marked “welfare queens” are said to have out-of-control sexuality; eschew hard work; lack personal responsibility; and be mired in collective attachments to family, clan, or race that inhibit them from achieving the American Dream and perhaps full Americanness.⁴⁶ It is these individual moral failings, not structural disadvantages due to race, gender, and class, that make them national failures.

Thus, while the American Dream and its attendant image of Americanness are popularly imagined as open to all comers, these categories are built on exclusion. These exclusions are moralized. Americans demonstrate their worthiness to belong through a shared understanding of success as proof of the good morality necessary for US membership. This exclusion is at the same time racialized. Latinos and nonwhite others are fundamentally not Americans, and race-conscious understandings of success and failure, like the trope of the “welfare queen,” only prove that fact.

The resurgence of what Lindsay Pérez Huber and colleagues term “racist nativism” at the turn of the twenty-first century has rearticulated the

historical exclusions of US belonging.⁴⁷ Americans place a high value on success as a sign of moral personhood and suitability for membership. Success's prized status makes being successful a fitting strategy for nonwhite immigrants and their children to prove their "deservingness" to belong.⁴⁸ Success makes immoral, failing Latinos into moral, achieving Americans. The Succeeders looked to do precisely this as they strove toward educational achievement and talked about that striving, their racial exceptionality, and personal moral merits.

This strategy is not only reactive but also finds its origins within Latino immigrant communities. In her work with pregnant Mexican immigrants in New York, Gálvez demonstrates how immigration is rooted in the aspiration of familial *superación* (betterment), which can also be read as chances for greater success.⁴⁹ An unintended consequence of desiring *superación* is seeing the Latino self as inferior and thus in need of betterment. This deficit conception of self can lead to overzealous conformity with dominant social norms and the harsh "stripping away" of protective cultural resources.⁵⁰

Success is thus integral to youth's remaking of belonging. It is too omnipresent in American life for it not to be. However, youth refashion success itself toward their own ends. In this way, they take control of the founding myths of the nation and use them to their own advantage. Striving, repurposed away from meritocratic success and toward others' well-being, can be a powerful tool for achieving a reimagined inclusion.

The location of Succeeders' striving—their education—is an apt place for young adults to make claims for inclusion. Educational settings are among the first places where we are brought into the system of supposed meritocracies that define US life. These are sites where our cultural and social resources can be derided and stripped from us, endangering our success.⁵¹ They are also sites where we can find we belong and are valued. In these ways, education is also an apt place for the Succeeders to reject the very terms of betterment and inclusion they seek to meet.

EDUCATION AND *EDUCACIÓN'S* LESSONS IN BELONGING

Educational institutions are key sites of socialization, or where we learn how to behave in formal organizations and how to engage with unrelated