

Transcript - On Becoming Upwardly Mobile: Reflections from a Daughter of Working-Class Immigrants

Rosemary Ferreira:

Hey y'all. Welcome to The Table podcast where we unpack questions regarding race, ethnicity, culture, norms, and current events. This is Rosemary Ferreira and I'm going to get pretty vulnerable for this episode. I'll be using this space as a journal entry of sorts, specifically as a way for me to unpack an identity of mine that holds many emotions for me, my social class identity. In this episode, I'll be reflecting on my experiences with upward mobility as I transitioned from being a working-class child of immigrants to a first-generation college graduate and now to a higher education professional.

I also invited my mom, Maria Ferreira, for this episode. We've touched on this topic before in our private conversations, I wanted to elevate my mom and her voice on this platform as well. My hope is that her words resonate for upwardly mobile children and their working-class parents.

I wanted to get started with a song that, in my opinion, got a little overplayed. Empire State of Mind by Jay-Z featuring Alicia Keys has become a New York City anthem. It's played during large sporting events and after the ball drops in Times Square in this ode to New York City, the very first words Jay-Z raps is about becoming upwardly mobile:

[Verse 1: Jay-Z]

Yeah, I'm out that Brooklyn, now I'm down in Tribeca

Right next to De Niro, but I'll be hood forever...

If you know me, you know that I'm a really proud New Yorker. That's because, like Jay-Z is rapping about in Empire State of Mind, New York made me who I am. It's in my voice, my language, the way I move my body, and how I perceive the world. But the New York that formulated my identity isn't the glamorous one you see in Sex and the City or in Gossip Girl, it's the working-class immigrant neighborhoods that I grew up in in Queens and Brooklyn.

My social class identity is something that I've thought about since I was a young child, even when I didn't have the language to make sense of what it was. I just knew we weren't "normal" because normal was a house with stairs, a basement, a backyard, my own room with posters hanging on the wall. It was the big house with a giant lawn featured in shows like *7th Heaven*.

I grew up instead in an old rail-road style apartment where one room opened into the other like train carts. My sister and I shared a room with no doors. We had crooked floors and sometimes the hot water didn't work, but we never went hungry. My father has worked in bodegas or corner stores since the moment he arrived to New York from the countryside of the Dominican Republic in the 1970s. My mom, who also immigrated from the Dominican Republic, stayed at home with us until I entered Kindergarten. She then bounced around jobs for a little while before landing at a senior housing center working as a cook and eventually being promoted to a front desk manager.

Growing up, my parents worked long hours and my older siblings were off doing their own things, so I poured myself into school. School was the place where I felt validated and affirmed by my teachers, and I was eventually tracked into the gifted and talented classes, where I failed miserably in math but excelled in my reading and writing. My relationship with school is something I think about quite often because I wonder what would have happened if I sought the love and attention that I was looking for from my family elsewhere, from places that weren't as socially acceptable as school was but are more accessible to kids like me, like "the calle" or the streets as my mom consistently warned me about.

I became one of those brown kids who was made fun of for "acting white." According to some of my peers, reading books, raising my hand during class, and wearing Converse and Keds instead of Nikes and Jordans was considered pretty white behavior. And to be honest, I don't completely fault them because in a way I was trying to distance myself from them. I had internalized racism and classism and was ashamed of where I came from. I wanted to be an upper middle-class white girl because I associated whiteness with good things. I wanted that girl's independence, her nice house, clothes, and good education.

It was this line of thinking that pushed me to go away for college. I wanted to leave New York City and be where the white folks were. That brought me to Bard College, a small private liberal arts college in the Hudson Valley of upstate New York. Bard is a historically white college that costs over \$70,000 a year, way more than what my parents ever made. I was fortunate to receive a full-tuition scholarship but took out loans to cover room and board.

Once I got to Bard, I was hit with a wave of culture shock. I felt intimidated by my professors and peers. I didn't know what they were talking about as they analyzed Franz Kafka's *Metamorphoses* during our first-year seminar. Wait, so he becomes a giant cockroach? Is all I could think to myself. The years of being told that I was a strong writer and reader by my teachers began to unravel itself and I felt like I had been lied to. I struggled to keep up in class and I felt ashamed of myself so I began to close myself off from people.

Things began to turn around when my academic advisor suggested I take a course entitled Post-Colonial Geography. I had no idea what that even meant, but my advisor believed it would be a good course to take after I shared with him my interests in food deserts in New York City. The course was a part of the Environmental and Urban Studies department, which would eventually become my major. Studying cities, in particular my own city of New York, completely changed my life. It taught me that every single space on this Earth has meaning and has a complex and delicate web of social, cultural, political, and economic histories. Learning these histories healed my deep wounds of internalized racism and classism. Learning how to love my city taught me how to love myself.

I am grateful for the professors who spent their time with me in their office hours offering me feedback, teaching me how to work on my outlines and drafts, and helping me to hone my voice. They pushed me to think beyond what I was ever taught, and as a result they gifted me with a critical lens that revealed multiple deep truths about the world. It felt like they gave me the red pill and I was seeing the matrix y'all.

I also found community in my scholarship program, which brought together mostly low-income Students of Color from New York and other parts of the U.S. It was here where I learned that I was a first-generation college student, which allowed me to make sense of how being the first in my family to go to

college resulted in the marginalization I felt both inside and outside of the classroom. It was also where I came to understand myself as a woman of color, an identity that holds both personal and political power.

My experience in college taught me how much I was robbed of because of white supremacy and capitalism. My siblings and I were robbed of our parent's time and our parents were robbed of their time with us and also of their dreams. However, although I had spent the past four years unlearning and rebuilding my understanding about my community, I couldn't help but feel even more distant. While my parents worked long laborious hours at their jobs, I sat around wooden tables and discussed theories from scholars like Jane Jacobs and Michelle Foucaut, I traveled abroad to Palestine and India, and developed relationships with faculty and staff members that would open a multitude of opportunities for me. After all of these years, was it too late for me to come back?

Jennifer Morton is an associate professor in philosophy at the University of Pennsylvania. She recently wrote a book entitled *Moving Up Without Losing Your Way: The Ethical Costs of Upward Mobility*. She argues that students experiencing upward mobility often have to make sacrifices in many parts of their lives, including their relationships with their family and friends, their sense of community and cultural connections, and with their own identity. These sacrifices have to be made in order to gain educational and professional opportunities that propel students into the middle and upper-class. Dr. Morton suggests talking to historically marginalized students about these sacrifices, rather than hiding them or avoiding them.

While I agree that we need to hold more spaces on college campuses for first-generation and low-income students to make sense of their transitioning social class identity, the question that rises up for me is why do we need to sacrifice ourselves, our identities, and our communities in order for us to be successful when success is tied to white, middle-class norms and values that have historically hurt our communities? Instead, I dream of a world where working-class People of Color don't need to pick up their pants, or learn how to speak "proper" English, or have to hide or change any parts of who they are in order to be validated as human beings and have access to financial resources, quality housing, education, and health care.

Unfortunately, that's not where we are as a society. The reality is that social class, especially when intersecting with race and ethnicity, dictates a lot about our lives.

What I've noticed about now being a part of the professional middle-class is that I have choice. I can choose to buy the more expensive brand of oat milk, and I can choose to rent an updated rowhome with updated appliances and floors where a marble can't easily roll from one side to the other. I can do these things without the heavy weight of survival on my mind.

My recent move to Baltimore for my job at the University of Maryland also raises my awareness of being someone with socioeconomic privilege in a city experiencing gentrification. Gentrification is the process in which areas of a city that had been structurally disinvested in are redeveloped to meet the needs and desires of middle and upper-class people. This results in working-class people and their homes and businesses being displaced.

I made the decision to a 2-bedroom rowhome in the predominately Latinx part of Baltimore. I'm on a block that plays rancho, bachata, and reggaeton music out loud in speakers, children play in the

streets speaking Spanish with one another and to the adults supervising them on the stoop steps, and all of this brings me great joy. But I can also pick up that I'm on a working-class block because of the trash that litters the street, the cracked and jagged sidewalks that look like broken pairs of teeth, and the lack of planted trees. I only need to walk a couple of blocks to streets near Patterson Park where it's more white and middle-class and I can immediately pick up the difference. There are tons of trees that line the street, no trash floating around, and clean, smooth sidewalks. This isn't because working-class People of Color are more likely to trash their own streets, it's because of a history of environmental racism and classism that denies particular areas of Baltimore the same level of resources as others.

My 85-year-old neighbor who has lived on the block for 43 years tells me she's seen the neighborhood go through its ups and downs and is happy to see younger people like myself move into the area. I'm grateful for her kindness, but I can't help to think about how younger people who move into my neighborhood in Brooklyn aren't always aware of their socioeconomic privileges. I can't help to think about the landlords who are deliberately pushing out people like my parents by raising the rent each year. A huge wave of guilt washes over me as I think about my social position in Baltimore vs that of my neighbor's and that of my parents in Brooklyn.

To make sense of these feelings, I called my mom because I wanted to know what she thought about my upward mobility, especially since so much of my guilt rests in her and my father's well-being. Our conversation touches upon upward mobility, my experience in college as a first-generation student, and her own experiences as an immigrant from the Dominican Republic.

Rosemary Ferreira

Hi Mami, thank you so much for taking this time to talk with me.

Maria Ferreira

Hi Rosie. Yeah, it's a pleasure. It's good to just talk to you always.

Rosemary Ferreira

So I wanted to we kind of already did some pre work around this. We've talked about this a few times in the past. I've shared with you more recently around how I feel guilty about moving into my new house, especially because I know that you and Papi are still working really hard to be in New York City and afford the rent that just keeps on increasing. So I wanted to ask you, how do you feel about me getting this new job where I'm making more money? And that I can afford to live in this larger house?

Maria Ferreira

I just feel so proud. I know I had told you this before, but yes, it's something that I know you have been working so hard for it and especially when you left home for college the first time until now it has been a while, but now that you get this job and I feel like it's, uh, you deserve it because you has been working so hard when you are studying and struggling with all the schoolwork, and now that you are working and another jobs and then you change for this one and it was a surprise for us. Well, they saw all the, you know, the values and all that you has been doing all these past years. They saw in you the potential so I'm so proud of you. Definitely. I congratulate you because that's something that really you really deserve.

Rosemary Ferreira

Thank you Mami. I appreciate that. And I know this isn't the first time that I've been living away from home. We talked about when I moved away for college. Was it hard for you to see me go away for school and to leave New York?

Maria Ferreira

Sure I can't. I still can't accept that. I want you to come back home and your room is still waiting for you. Because yeah, my home is your home but yes, it was hard to let you go. And I struggle so hard when you told me that you want to go away because you need to live your own experiences and that make you... there was going to make you grow your own personality and that was what I see like, yeah, OK, let me just accept that she really had to live her own experiences. I just can't regret it because I know you have been grow actually as a great person and you has been doing so many things to help the community and the people that meet you and yeah so, I just still miss you a lot. And it was hard, and it is still hard to see you living away from home. That we cannot be together anytime when we want. But uh, yeah, it's it's at the same time I feel like you are mature. And you can do it. You can, you can do well.

Rosemary Ferreira

Thank you for that. Yeah, I think, you know the reason why I asked that question is because when I read about what it means to be first to go to college, oftentimes it's for first generation students and students who come from low-income backgrounds or who are People of Color. They come from communities that are more focused on the collective. So, on the larger community, whereas you know when you go to college and a college campus and it has more of the dominant culture which is predominantly white and middle class or upper class, those tends to focus more on the individual and so for me growing up as someone born and raised in the US, I thought that it was normal, you know? To go away for college, and I wanted that experience so that like what you said, I could gain that independence. But I also know it, it was really hard for you, and I know it's hard for a lot of other children of immigrants, first generation students to go away for college because their community and their family are so important to them.

Maria Ferreira

Definitely for me it was scary because, we... our culture, or maybe from where I come from. We always want to keep our children in the house. You know, we want to keep them with all together like OK they can go to school but they come back home at the end of the day, but just accepting that you were going away, far away from home for years it was very difficult for me. And knowing that you were the younger of the family too, and that was – that add more of my concerns about like being maybe thinking about if you getting sick, you don't have somebody to help you or not being able to be there with you and maybe the peers or the other friends or the people how they're going to treat you. If they gonna support you or just bully you? You know things like that it would concern me all the time. Yeah, but uh and I know and some way you taught me that sometimes you feel the pressure from the high, uh, no the majority. The white people yeah, so that that made me feel very sad and I know that you when I know that you wasn't feel well for that situation. I remember when you told me that you write in the in the newspaper in the school that you get like criticized. Yeah, negativity. Sorry about that. Yeah about that about the writing that you did. Yeah, so I feel so scared that you can get like some kind of... that you get hurt for it. But I know you, you were like so strong and you can you get over that. And you keep writing

over the same thing. And you never, never stop, and that make me proud at the end of the day I feel just so proud of you. Like you can no, nobody stopped you nothing stopped you so instead of making you like feel down, it was the opposite. I mean for the moment, maybe you feel like, oh that – that hurts me, but you get over it and you keep moving on and that's all I mean something to celebrate. I mean yes.

Rosemary Ferreira

Did you feel like when I came back from college that I changed in any way? Or do you feel like I became more distant in any way and again this question comes up because of research and studies where first generation students and their families they feel like there's distance that grows right? Because students are having this very different experience in college, which is again predominantly white middle upper class and so it's a very different experience from how they grew up, which is more like working class People of Color. And so it's hard for students who feel like their parents don't understand what they're going through or their family, and vice versa, right? Like the family doesn't really understand what their children might be going through so. Do you feel at all that I changed or do you feel like there was any distance that grew between us?

Maria Ferreira

Actually, I think... I didn't feel like you changed, uh in a bad way, but I see that you get more like mature like you get... you gained more independence. That was what you was looking for when you went to college and I saw that in you, I mean even if it's a little different now because you are an adult and now you are ready to go get a job and to move on to move in your own place. In that way yes, you can say you are different now. I remember when you end the school, the bachelor's, that I told you OK, so you ready to come home? And you just say no mom, I'm ready to live in my own place now. So that hurts, you know somewhat because I'm expecting you like you will be back home after four years, but you know, at the same time I feel so proud again that you are capable to do that and you want to do. I think the good...t was a good position for you. Yeah, so uh, it's not like you change for in your personality or **no** you keep being the same nice and gentle and...

Rosemary Ferreira

Sensitive...

Maria Ferreira

Sensitive person yeah. Yeah, that that part of you never changed.

Rosemary Ferreira

I appreciate that, thank you. So I know we've been talking a lot about me and my college experience, but I also wanted to hear about you. You immigrated here to the U.S. from the Dominican Republic in your early 20s, which is you know for me I mean I started college when I was 17/18, but it was still, you know, around the same age we both had like this kind of transition in our lives. What were your dreams or goals moving here to the U.S. and do you feel like you were able to reach them?

Maria Ferreira

Uh, well when I came I first came here I thought that I can continue working on the same field that I was working when I first came when I was in Dominican Republic because I really liked what I was doing

there. And it was difficult when I came because I didn't know the language and I didn't have the chance to go to school to learn more English. So I couldn't work where I want. But yeah, and in that way I couldn't achieve what I was... maybe what I want.

Rosemary Ferreira

Could you talk more about like what you did in the Dominican Republic and what you wanted to do here.

Maria Ferreira

Well, I when I was on high school there. I was taking the classes to be a secretary. So I when I graduated from high school, I graduated from that commercial school too. So I went to... I got a job and I worked there like three years before I came here and that that's what I thought I can keep continue doing here, but it I... It was hard, but I couldn't speak English because being a secretary means that I had to write and speak English all the time. Yeah, and uh, I still can't do it very well because...

Rosemary Ferreira

No, you're doing a great job.

Maria Ferreira

I'm sorry about it. I tried.

Rosemary Ferreira

No need to apologize. You're doing a really great job. So do you feel like you have to... So you talked about kind of having to sacrifice this dream then of being a secretary or doing similar work in the U.S. because of the barriers... the English barrier. Do... are there any other sacrifices you feel like you have to make being an immigrant or being a mom of children?

Maria Ferreira

Yeah, well, uh. After like months after I get married and then I start my family very earlier early. So I just stood home for many years and it was – I had to, yeah, leave my job and I couldn't go to school at that moment because I had to be with you guys at home. And I'm so proud of it. I mean, I just. I don't regret anything. I think that was, uh a good time. When I stay home with... I took you I take all of you to school and go to the field trips and go to all the school plays you know, being there with all of you, the three of you uh, my children. It was, I mean – It's something that I never regret. It makes me feel so happy that I could be there for you guys. For you, all of you. So I remember when you went to kindergarten and then I started school like when you are school I went to my English classes so I can start learning the language. That's why I can't do it very well yet. But yeah. But it's something that even if I sacrificed my career, I don't regret any of the things that I did at that time. So now I think that when I see you or one of my children living the dream I feel so happy for it, uh, because I know that I couldn't do that in my early years, but now you can do it, you know, and it's something to celebrate, yeah, as a family.

Rosemary Ferreira

Yeah, I think for me like, I remember when I was younger, like you were able to come to our trips, but then when I got older you started working more and so like.

Maria Ferreira

Oh yeah.

Rosemary Ferreira

I would come home and then like it would be my older sister, Yesenia, yeah like she would cook for us and so how was it then transitioning to working full time and then seeing us less and less? Because I know for me it was hard. You know not being able to be with you, or, you know, Papi was also working a lot of hours so how was it for you transitioning?

Maria Ferreira

Oh, it was hard. Definitely, uhm yeah, leaving every day and you know like just not knowing what is going to happen with the day when I'm away and coming home late and every you know it's something that I couldn't change because of the work schedule. I cannot change, so I had to accept that. It was hard for me knowing that you guys all of you are alone or with with my neighbor and try to do their homework or you know behave well while I come back home at night every day. So it was very very hard for me. And I know because you just you always tell me that it was hard for you to that you were the younger one and I know maybe for the other one was the same thing, right? Like all three of you. I guess it was, it was hard for all of us, yeah, but again I'm so like grateful that you can you keep doing the good work at school and yeah, I'm just I just so proud of it, you know. That we get through that, but we made it.

Rosemary Ferreira

Yeah, yeah, I mean, I think. Well, I struggle with that because I feel like yes, like you know me and my siblings you know we are making more money. We you know... we have our own places, you know, Yesenia has her own family, I think sometimes, like the guilt comes like but did you know you and Papi make it? You know, like sometimes I feel that struggle because you know you guys are still working really hard. You know Papi works six days a week. You wake up really, really early just travel to the Bronx every day. Like you know you, you guys are still working so hard to survive and live in New York City, especially as the rent continues to increase and increase and increase every year. Uhm, so yeah, I don't know if you have any thoughts about that.

Maria Ferreira

Well, uh. I just feel that even if we are older now and we're not young anymore, but we still can do it. You know, I mean, I guess we get used to live in this city and we used to all of this craziness. I'm taking the trains and being on time and running around for everything. We just we used to, we have been doing this for so many years that I mean, even if it's hard, it's not that easy, but we get through every day and yeah, every day you get up and start over again. And even if it's not easy for us like seeing every all everything is raising like the rent, everything is more expensive now. Uh, we are Uhm, well we still can manage and even if we're not... We have some many health problems or issues we still can do it. So it make us feel like we we still can be productive. So don't worry about it. One day we just gonna get some rest.

Rosemary Ferreira

Yeah, I mean, that's what I hope. That's what I want for you now. You know, like I want for you and Papi to be able to just rest and relax and you know, be able to take care of yourselves without the stress, because it is a lot and I think that's why you know I try my best to, you know we went to the spa the other before COVID happened, you know I want to do my best to try to give you the experiences that you know now I can afford to give you so that we can center your rest, but I'm still not at that place where like I can – I can say Mami you can stop working. You know, like you can retire. Like you and Papi don't need to work anymore. You know I'm not there yet, but I wish you know that I could do that... yeah, because I do want to say, you know, you've told me how proud you are of me this whole time, but I just want to say how proud I am of you. You know everything that you've been through. From, you know, immigrating from, you know your life in the Dominican Republic to moving here, immigrating here to the US, and then you know, being a mom to us and now being like a leader in your church like you've done so much and you're also a really great employee, right? Like you do so many great things for the residents that you work with. So, I just I also want to share how proud I am of you, and I wouldn't – literally I would not be here if it wasn't for you, but also just I wouldn't be who I am today if it wasn't for you and for your love.

Maria Ferreira

Thank you. Thank you, Rosie.

Rosemary Ferreira

So I just have a couple more questions because I know this is something we've also talked about, or you've vented to me before where you know you got frustrated with working with you know people who, you know are Americans whose English is their first language who make assumptions about you and other people who are working class immigrants. What do you wish people knew, specifically upper middle class white folks, people with privilege, what do you wish people knew about working class immigrants?

Maria Ferreira

Oh well, uhm. Uh, I think that we hear people with values with, we are smart people too, like we capable to do so many jobs. That I would like them to know that we are we deserve the same opportunities that other people has, you know. And if even if we maybe we need more school or knowledgement that doesn't mean that we cannot do the same jobs you know. Just because we don't have maybe the school that doesn't mean we don't deserve it, we we just we came here with the same desire of you know grow up you know and have our family and live a better life so we deserve to have the same opportunities.

Rosemary Ferreira

I agree. So what would you want to say to other people who are like me who come from working class backgrounds, went away from college, they're now making more money than their families. Sometimes maybe they might feel guilty like I do, or they feel sad or bad or, you know, have you know are experiencing some heavy emotions. What would you want to say to them?

Maria Ferreira

I'm just going say that instead of being feeling, feeling guilty or sad, you should feel proud of yourself because whatever you achieved, that is the product of what your family and your working family have provided for you you know and the support that they have given you plus the hard work that you have been doing so, it's like instead of feeling guilty I think what I can say is just keep getting prepared, like getting the knowledge or try to keep your school instead of dropping from school just keep working hard and looking for you goals, to achieve your goals. Don't don't give up just keep going till you can get at the point where you can feel like the same way that you can do what you you're doing now, like having your own place, you can save you money for your retirement, your early retirement instead of working too late, you know, for longer years. You know, enjoying life, like travels or whatever you like. So, whatever life offer you, you just have to work. Keep working on getting there getting to the you know place where we can now work and get a better job and yeah so better opportunity, so just keep going to... going to school, don't give up.

Rosemary Ferreira

Got it OK. So I mean, I think what's so valuable that I want to highlight from our conversation, is that while yes, it's difficult you know for you know children who are becoming upwardly mobile to go from being in a community based culture to an individual based culture like I think it's important for us to remember that you know us achieving our goals is us achieving our goals for the whole family right?

Maria Ferreira

Yes, yes.

Rosemary Ferreira

That like me... You know getting this job, graduating with my bachelors and my masters getting this new home that I'm in that I never imagined... you know I used to dream of a house like this. I never thought I could actually live in one now. You know, that all of this isn't just me right like this is also your dreams and your goals that I get to now live.

Maria Ferreira

Exactly I think all that all you are celebrating now is for the whole family, including the extended family like my siblings I mean they all feel proud of you too and it's I think there's something to celebrate for all of us. And yeah, so I, I think for all the working... work class families. When one of our children you know achieve what you have achieved, it's something to celebrate all the time, you know. Because maybe for us we don't have the chance to get prepared or to go to college in our early years, but we can support our children to do it. And they can do the other part, that is, it's the hard work and studying and all of the... it's a part of it. So, at the end we all can have our, you know goal, yeah. Achieve goals, right? So all of us need to feel proud of it, yeah.

Rosemary Ferreira

Thank you so much. I appreciate you so much and I love you very much.

Maria Ferreira

Thank you, Rosie. You know that I love you more.

Rosemary Ferreira

For my fellow upwardly mobile first-generation college graduates from working-class immigrant backgrounds, I hope that there 2 things you get from this episode: One, if you experience guilt as I do, it is because we grew up in collectivist cultures where we care deeply about our family and our communities. Remember that our achievements as individuals are achievements for our family and our whole community. So, what can leaning into our collective joy and abundance look like for us? Two, recognize and reflect on your newfound class privilege. While many of us are likely not part of a billionaire class, we do now hold some level of access and power over others in our society, so it's important to critically think about the ways our privilege shows up in our bias. The more we openly discuss our social class identity, the more we can raise our class consciousness and build solidarity with folks who are the most marginalized. Thank you so much for listening.