The Amenity Migrants of Cotacachi

THESIS

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By

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Abstract

This paper addresses amenity migration in Cotacachi, Ecuador. Amenity migration refers to the increasingly popular trend of North Americans (and occasionally Europeans), who are generally retirees, moving to countries such as Panama, Costa Rica and Ecuador in order to enjoy a higher standard of living at a lower cost. For retirees, a fixed income that would barely provide a comfortable middle-class lifestyle in the United States goes much further in countries such as Ecuador or Panama. The rising cost of health care in the United States is also an important factor, since health services are usually much more affordable in these places. These factors (housing, domestic help and health care) plus the overall lower cost of most goods and services in the host countries make this kind of migration increasingly attractive to many older North Americans.

Using qualitative fieldwork and textual analysis, this paper examines why amenity migrants chose Cotacachi, Ecuador, how they perceive the town and how they perceive themselves in relation to the town. It also explores how Ecuadorians perceive their new neighbors and the effects the migrants have had on the local community. Applying the idea of the coloniality of power, the paper explores the similarities between amenity migration as it is currently practiced and colonial attitudes of centuries past. It concludes with suggestions of how amenity migrants can alter their practices and beliefs to engage more profoundly the community they now live in.
Dedication

For Maureen Ahern, who taught me the things I wanted to know.
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Ch. 1: Introduction

Prologue

For me, Cotacachi is Danny’s café. The sounds of coffee being ground and milk being steamed, the clink-clink as the drinks are served and the music playing in the background. When I listen back on my recordings I can hear all of this, the whirring of the blender competing with the voices of my informants. It is the smell of coffee being made, but also being roasted, an intense chocolate aroma that almost overwhelms the small space. And then stepping out into the street, where the fumes from the buses sometimes made me gag. It is the acrid smell of gas emanating from my hostel’s kitchen making me skittish about using the stove and contrasting with the lemony chemical scent of the cleaner they used daily in my rooms. It’s also, most definitely, the sound of the roosters at 3-4-5 am, and when it’s not the roosters, it’s the dogs and when it’s not the dogs it’s the church bells so you might as well get used to it and get up at 6:30 am. In fact, it’s also the early mornings and early nights of life on the equator, with day and night dividing your life into two equal parts. It’s also the whiz-pop-crack of firecrackers at any hour and pssst-pssst-pssst which is the Ecuadorian version of whistling at a woman. I have also managed to capture the wind, crashing into my microphone before I had the good sense to do all my interviews inside. Courtesy of the wind, Cotacachi is also the dust in my eyes and my teeth and my hair as I trudge along back streets to get my
interviews. It’s the salty crunch of tostados mixed with chochos, tomato juice dripping down my hands, and the chewy rubber of what I think is pig skin, which I ordered once and then never again. It’s the aji and the novelty of putting popcorn in soup. It’s the concentrated intensity of the Andean sun, the constant dryness of my skin in the mountains and the tiny diabolical insects that are too small to see but whose bites wake me up every night for a week after I wore sandals for just one day.

Locating Cotacachi

The canton of Cotacachi sits in the Ecuadorian Andes, two hours north of Quito. The canton, located in the province of Imbabura, has a population of 37,215, with approximately 7,500 living in the town of Cotacachi, the canton’s capital (“Canton Cotacachi”). The canton itself is generally divided into three zones “The Andean zone, which is located on the eastern slopes of the Andes mountain range, has a majority indigenous population… The urban zone, which is inhabited by several ethnic groups, primarily the mestizo population…[and] The subtropical zone, located in the western foothills of the Andes…” (Saltos, 1).

My research took place in the town of Cotacachi and its immediate surroundings, located in the eastern part of the canton. At 8,000 feet above sea level, the town is temperate all year round with an average rainfall of 1800-2800 mm per year (Rhoades, 87). The surrounding mountain peaks make a beautiful and arresting landscape which, combined with the temperate weather, make this area particularly attractive to amenity migrants. To the north, the canton and the town are bordered by the Cotacachi-Cayapas
Ecological Reserve, which is “... considered one of the world’s ‘hotspots’ characterized by an extraordinarily high number of species per unit area (Alarcón, 2001)” (Rhoades, 3-5). Again, this contributes to the physical beauty of the region while also making issues of sustainable development that much more pressing.

Ethnically, the region is primarily comprised of indigenous and mestizo populations, with a smaller presence of Afro-Ecuadorians. While relatively few indigenous people live inside the municipality of Cotacachi, “...approximately 18,000 live in 40 communities distributed around the ‘skirt’ of Mama Cotacachi, a volcano that dominates the landscape and local cosmology” (Rhoades, 3) and these communities “are sandwiched between a growing urban zone around the town of Santa Ana de Cotacachi (population 7500) and the Cotacachi-Cayapas Ecological Reserve” (ibid). Although the relationship between the indigenous communities and the town is not the focus of this work, a few aspects of that relationship are key to understanding the complex effects of amenity migration on the region. Most importantly, the indigenous communities are not under the jurisdiction of the town of Cotacachi. Rather, they operate as independent units within the canton (similarly, I believe, to a township in the United States). As such, each community is in charge of their own infrastructure and policies regarding things such as taxes and land development. As will become clear later on, the indigenous communities’ self-determination has important ramifications for migrant-oriented development in the area.

Additionally, many of the employment opportunities created by amenity migration are filled by members of the indigenous communities, particularly in the areas
of domestic help and manual labor. I would like to note here the importance of understanding that the significant indigenous presence, their relative autonomy and also the historical conditions of their oppression all create a specific dynamic in relation to the amenity migrants, and one that is distinct from the relationship between migrants and mestizos. In other words, indigenous people experience the costs and benefits of this migrant stream differently than the mestizo townspeople and this must be taken into account when examining the amenity migration issue.

Finally, present-day Cotacachi is the product of over a decade of good governance. Again, this will be discussed in a later chapter, but it is important to comment on when explaining the place of Cotacachi. Auki Tituaña, the town’s former mayor, was elected in 1996 and took a number of steps to improve the municipality. There was investment in infrastructure and services, making the buildings nicer and the streets cleaner. During his tenure, the town was awarded an International Cities for Peace Prize by UNESCO, along with a medal for being free of illiteracy. Under his leadership, in 2000 “…Cotacachi’s multiethnic community declared itself an ‘Ecological County’ via municipal ordinance intended to protect the environment and… cultures” (Rhoades, xi). He also introduced a participatory budget process for the canton and helped create a Cantonal Development Plan (Saltos, 2008).

The town is also home to UNORCAC, which stands for The Union of Peasant and Indigenous Organizations of Cotacachi. Founded in 1977, the organization describes its mission this way: “The conditions of discrimination and poverty in which the majority of the area’s indigenous peasant population was living in and the decision to change that
situation were what motivated us to achieve unity among the communities and begin the struggle” (“¿Quienes Somos?”, my translation). In Development with Identity, a publication that is the result of collaborative research between SANREM-Andes (Sustainable Agriculture and Natural Resource Management) and the indigenous communities of Cotacachi, the area is described as a “‘hotbed’ of development activity involving UNORCAC, the cantonal government, dozens of NGOs and international and national government projects…targeted specifically at indigenous communities. The focus is on education, health and nutrition, rural infrastructure, income generation projects, tourism, agriculture [and] natural resource management” (Rhoades, 8).

The point here is that quite apart from amenity migration, the citizens of Cotacachi (both town and canton) are organized and actively pursuing a model of sustainable development and participatory democracy and they have been internationally recognized for their efforts. I’ve presented this information because I think it creates a very telling contrast to the ways in which town is marketed to amenity migrants and consequently how it is understood by them. Their silence (and ignorance/disinterest) about this side of Cotacachi speaks volumes about the true nature of amenity migration and calls into question the “love” of the town and its people that many migrants profess.

Cotacachi and Amenity Migration

I first arrived in Cotacachi quite by accident. When my initial plans for my trip fell through, I found myself in Baños, a town a few hours south of Quito, with two weeks
in Ecuador and nothing to do. In desperation, I emailed an Ecuadorian with whom a mutual friend had put me in touch and she invited me to come visit her in the town she was staying in while conducting research for her dissertation. As we walked around the streets of Cotacachi my first night there she gave me a kind of sociological tour, mentioning that there was a sizable “gringo” population in the area and that it would make an interesting research project. At the time, I didn’t find the idea particularly appealing- after all, why go all the way to South America and then surround myself with “gringos”?

However, over the course of my visit, which lasted less than a week, a few things happened that made me change my mind. Firstly, it was truly astonishing just how many gringos there were in such a small, somewhat remote Andean town. It is not a tourist destination, so it was unclear what the North Americans were doing there. When I realized that virtually every North American I met either lived there or was thinking about living there, I became even more intrigued: Why did they leave the U.S.? Why did they choose to retire in a country where they couldn’t speak the language? How did they even find out about this little town in the middle of the Andes?

Secondly, I found myself in a handful of interactions that were somewhat troubling- gringos complaining bitterly about Ecuador, a potential expat photographing an indigenous woman without her permission, a conversation with a mestiza in which she excoriated her former (North American) employer for being racist and patronizing. These experiences made me wonder about the relationships between the expat and local
community and the implications for both groups of having (or being) a sizeable foreign community in a relatively small town.

Finally, as I began to ask people how they had heard about the town, everyone answered in the same way: the internet. In particular, most people had found out about Cotacachi through a website called International Living which promotes retiring abroad. Given that where one lives is one of the most fundamental aspects of human existence, and it is a very immediate, very concrete part of daily life, it was remarkable to me that people were making that decision based on, quite literally, a virtual reality.

When I discussed my observations with James, a North American who runs an organic farm and several NGOs in the region, he called the North American community of Cotacachi “amenity migrants”, explaining that the term is used to describe people who move somewhere in order to enjoy any number of “amenities” (weather, beautiful natural environment, etc) at a lower cost of living. In actuality, there are a variety of terms to describe this phenomena, including “lifestyle migration” “lifestyle mobilities”, and “international retirement migration”. In the following section I will give a more thorough definition of this phenomenon, explain why I’ve chosen this particular term and discuss the most important contribution on amenity migration in Latin America to date.

(De)constructing Paradise: McWatters and Residential Tourism

In 2009, Mason McWatters published Residential Tourism: (De)constructing Paradise, which looks at amenity migration, or what he calls “residential tourism”, in
Boquete, Panama. To my knowledge, this is the most thorough examination of this phenomenon to date and as such is worth discussing in some detail.

Firstly, I’d like to look at the concept of residential tourism, which he defines as

…The enduring practices and lifestyles which result from a channeled flow of consumption-led, permanent or semi-permanent migration to a particular destination. Within the specific socio-geographical context of this work, residential tourism may be more precisely characterized as the lasting effects which result from the process of international, consumption-led migration undertaken by individuals -primarily retirees- from North America and Western Europe to Latin America. Paramount to residential tourism are two components: it is comprised of a lifestyle that is oriented around patterns of leisure and consumption…and it takes place permanently or semi-permanently in a particular destination, outside one’s traditional sociological milieu”. (3, emphasis in original)

Although I have chosen a different term, this definition can also be applied, quite accurately, to amenity migration and should be referred to use as I use the term throughout this work. I opted not to use residential tourism because, in McWatters’ work, he emphasizes the relationship between traditional tourism and residential tourism, saying “…there exists a well-documented and established correlation between the evolution of short-stay vacation tourism, the development of consumer-oriented amenities and services, and the creation of distinct flows of more permanents forms of consumption-oriented migration to a particular destination…” (9). However, this is not the case for Cotacachi, which was not a significant tourist destination before becoming a popular retirement destination and the majority of tourists who do visit come precisely because they are thinking about moving there. Moreover, in using the term “migrant” I emphasize the outsider status of the North American community, which I believe is important to keep in mind when examining both their attitudes and effect on the host community.
In many ways, McWatters’ findings mirror my own. Like Cotacachi, a “grand promotional image” of Boquete has been created—particularly on the internet: “In this virtual world, Boquete is…represented not as a living place, but rather as an ambiguously generic consumer’s paradise where audacious residential tourist dreams and fantasies are manufactured and commodified” (81) and some of the same images, such as paradise and what McWatters calls “the trope of the authentic village” (86) are employed in the promotion of the town. Most of the residential tourists of Boquete do not speak Spanish and have superficial, primarily transactional relationships with Panamanians, although they “profess profound respect and admiration” for them (101). As will be discussed in the following chapters, the same is generally true for the amenity migrants of Cotacachi. Additionally, some of the negative consequences for the host community are the same for both places—namely rising real estate prices and environmental degradation.

One of the main differences between my findings and McWatters’s is based on the timing of our respective fieldwork. McWatters conducted his research in the summer of 2005, a full three years before the economic crisis and housing market crash of 2008. I did my research in the summer of 2012, four years after the crisis, and I believe sufficient time has elapsed so that we can now see how people are responding to the financial implications and subsequent new economic reality of the Great Recession. Based on McWatters’s findings in Deconstructing Paradise, it seems that the amenity migrants of Boquete Panama were primarily drawn to the ‘good view’ and beautiful landscape of the region and that, while the low cost of living was a factor in their decision, it was not their primary motivation for relocating outside the U.S. The reverse is true for the amenity
migrants of Cotacachi, Ecuador. While everyone appreciates the beautiful scenery, the decision to leave the United States and the decision to move to Ecuador (as opposed to somewhere else) was always a financial one. Indeed, the choice of Ecuador reflects the non-elasticity of their budgets - many migrants considered Panama and Costa Rica but realized those places were beyond their means. As one woman put it “Costa Rica and Panama are for the rich people. We’re not rich here” (field notes).

For me, McWatters’ most interesting contribution is his exploration of the history and various meanings of landscape and how that idea can help explain the way Boquete’s residential tourists relate to their surroundings. He explores the different functions landscapes have served over the years, considering how landscapes have been symbols of power (he refers to Raymond Williams’ work here), have become commodities, presented a “restrictive “good view”, and a kind of “rural idyll” that creates nostalgic longing in today’s urban world (27-40). He also discusses how landscapes can create an “alienated perspective”, reflecting that

This visual appropriation of land and those who appear on the land creates a distant relationship which makes understanding these objects limited at best…This process of screening and framing our visual encounters with the world to create a landscape is what Andrews (1999) characterizes as a constructionist approach to landscape perception…this approach supports the conclusion that landscape is a subjective, cultural, creation that we construct, rather than an objective, natural creation that we simply encounter and observe. (34)

Eventually he connects this kind of alienated landscape perspective with how residential tourists experience Boquete, concluding:

Residential tourists fundamentally experience Boquete not as a place, but rather as a landscape from which they are alienated in a number of ways. The underlying implication of this experience is that the meaning residential tourists assign to their immediate surroundings- both human and physical- is derived not from direct
engagement but rather from a passive, disaffected perception of their surroundings from a distance. Whereas meaning derived from experiences of direct engagement with the surrounding world is created through processes of collective interaction, sharing and negotiation, meaning derived from experiences of indirect engagement with the surrounding world is created through the passive and individualized processes of selective vision and the projection of personal ideals and desired meaning onto objects in sight. As such, by fundamentally experiencing Boquete as landscape, residential tourists’ experiences of and meanings for their surrounding world are more informed by personal ideals and remote perception than by shared experience and collective meaning derived from active engagement. (80)

I dwell on this for two reasons. First, because it provides an interesting and useful perspective on how residential tourists or amenity migrants relate to their surroundings and reflects many of the ways my informants discussed Cotacachi. It highlights the challenge of amenity migration, in that people are living in a place, and altering it, without ever really engaging with that place or considering how their choices affect the people who already live there. Secondly, while McWatters does well to consider landscapes as “subjective, cultural, creation[s]”, he stops short of asking how these creations come to be. He does not investigate why Boquete is promoted in this particular way or question what makes that particular landscape so attractive to North Americans. Additionally, while he discusses the history of the region, he does not connect the current practices of development with Panama’s colonial history or its conflicted relationship to the USA.

In many ways, this is where my argument begins, since I am interested in understanding how today’s global economic inequality (which is what makes amenity migration possible) can be connected to structures of power that were created during the time of colonialism. I am also concerned with how the images and tropes of Latin
America, created during the colonial period, have been rearticulated in today’s world, serving as powerful marketing tools while also influencing amenity migrants’ perceptions of their neighbors and the place they’ve chosen to live. In the following section, I examine both these issues, drawing on both colonial texts and Quijano’s concept of the coloniality of power to demonstrate how the colonial foundations of the ‘New World’ inform today’s practice of amenity migration.

Colonial Imagery

To understand the ways in which amenity migration reflects colonial practices, we must first identify what those colonial practices are and what they looked like in their original form. In this section, I detail particular ways of representing Latin America that were born during the Conquest and colonial encounter but which have survived, in some form or another, to the present day. The ways in which these tropes are employed to promote Cotacachi and Ecuador will be explored in the following chapter.

Firstly, we have the depiction of the New World as paradise or a Garden of Eden, with an emphasis on the beauty, lushness and fertility of the natural world. In *The Armature of Conquest*, Beatriz Pastor Bodmer states that Columbus’s descriptions of the Caribbean “Often…consist of no more than a simplified version of familiar Paradisiacal images of the mythical garden” and notes that in particular “The land in Columbus’s account of his first voyage appears to be characterized only by its size, fertility and topography. The islands are ‘large’…’green’ and ‘extremely fertile’” (29-30). As I will
discuss in the next chapter, similar adjectives (and indeed sometimes the exact same ones) appear in contemporary marketing descriptions of Cotacachi.

An important corollary to the celebration of superabundant nature is the general erasure of the original inhabitants of the Caribbean and Central and South America. While nature is ever present, human beings are absent, thus presenting a blank slate onto which Europe can project its fantasies. Discussing the effects of Columbus’s writing style in his first description of the Indies, Stephen Greenblatt notes “According to medieval concepts of natural law, uninhabited territories become the possession of the first to discover them…Columbus’s formalism tries to make the new lands uninhabited…by emptying out the category of the other” (60).

Mary Louise Pratt notes a similar gesture in the descriptions written by Alexander von Humboldt during his travels in South America during the early 19th century. Such descriptions “…present[s] a landscape imbued with social fantasies…all projected onto the non-human world…the human inhabitants of the Llanos are absent. The only ‘person’ mentioned in these ‘melancholy and sacred solitudes’ is the hypothetical and invisible European traveler himself” (125). While it is true that Humboldt is writing centuries after Columbus, his work is undeniably influenced by the images and tropes created during the initial Conquest. Pratt acknowledges this, saying “Nineteenth century Europeans re/invented America as Nature in part because that is how sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Europeans had invented America for themselves in the first place…They, too, wrote America as a primal world of nature, an unclaimed and timeless space…” (126). Although these images have been rearticulated multiple times
since Humboldt’s travels, the basic kernels are still present in contemporary portrayals of Latin America, and they appear in force in depictions of Ecuador and Cotacachi.

When people *are* mentioned in European writings about America, they tend to be either romanticized and exoticized or depicted as obliging supporters of European aims and expeditions. In the first category, we can look at Columbus’s descriptions of the indigenous peoples he encounters during his expeditions: “They go as naked as their mothers bore them… [the] young men…were well built, with handsome bodies and fine features“ (29) and “They are people…completely without evil or aggression, naked every one of them…They are very good looking” (73). As Greenblatt notes, Columbus easily transitions from such observations to celebrating their potential to be “good and intelligent servants” (77). Pratt also discusses this tendency in Humboldt’s work, observing that “Americans, both masters and slaves, come alive, but only in the immediate service of the Europeans…the *Personal Narrative* naturalizes colonial relations and racial hierarchy, representing Americans, above all, in terms of the quintessential colonial relationship of *disponibilité*” (130). In the following chapter we will see similar representations of Ecuadorians, in which bloggers and websites rhapsodize about the indigenous people and their “beautiful smiles” or celebrate them as remarkably obliging and accommodating to foreigners.

One of the biggest (and possibly *the* biggest) marketing strategies employed by companies like International Living when they promote somewhere like Ecuador is the possibility of living a luxurious lifestyle at a very low cost. Indeed, the motto for their “Ecuador Report” is “Live Like Royalty on Your Social Security”. This will be
discussed more in the following chapter, but I mention it here because it echoes an important component of the colonial fantasy about the New World. Greenblatt describes it this way: “The European dream, endlessly reiterated in the literature of exploration, is of the grossly unequal gift exchange: I give you a glass bead and you give me a pearl worth half your tribe…Objects of little value provide access to objects of immense value” (110). While the objects have been replaced with money in today’s discourse, the idea remains: By retiring somewhere like Ecuador, you can consume things of great value - expensive meals, luxurious accommodations, domestic help- at “bargain” prices, at least by North American standards.

The Coloniality of Power

We must recognize a very basic truth of amenity migration: as a phenomenon it is the product of the coloniality of power, of centuries of colonialism which created both the economic and political structures that configure our world today. In his article “Coloniality and Modernity/Rationality”, Anibal Quijano states

With the conquest of the societies and the cultures which inhabit what today is called Latin America, began the constitution of a new world order, culminating, five hundred years later, in a global power covering the whole planet. This process implied a violent concentration of the world’s resources under the control and for the benefit of a small European minority -and above all, of its ruling classes. Although occasionally moderated when faced with the revolt of the dominated, this process has continued ever since. (1)

Eventually, Quijano came to call the contemporary manifestations of colonial structures “coloniality of power” which refers to the fact that while formal colonialism has disappeared, the structures and inequalities it created have been maintained (see Quijano
“Coloniality of Power, Eurocentrism, and Latin America”, 2000). In an article examining Quijano’s work, Pablo Quintero describes the distinction this way:

Colonialism designates a political and economic relationship in which the sovereignty of one group resides in the power of another group or nation. In contrast to this, coloniality refers to a pattern of power which emerged as a result of modern colonialism, but instead of being limited to a relation of power between two groups or nations, it refers to how the form of work, knowledge, authority and intersubjective relations articulate themselves through the world capitalist market and the colonial difference. As such, although colonialism precedes coloniality in time, coloniality as a matrix of power survives colonialism. (my translation9, my translation)

If we lived in a world that had managed to evolve past the ravages of colonialism, there would be significantly more economic equality and the financial incentive for North Americans to retire abroad would diminish, if it existed at all. In this hypothetical world, the colonial projection of Latin America as a pristine paradise, untouched by the ills of the modern world would also be displaced, making the fantasy of amenity migration much less powerful. The systemic imbalances of power and resources that underpin our contemporary world are colonial in origin and they are what make amenity migration possible. It is this context that is invisible to the amenity migrants themselves, which means they are blind both to the colonial foundations of their global privilege and the ways in which they perpetuate the colonial privilege in their lives as amenity migrants.

In other words, not only is amenity migration created by the coloniality of power, many of the daily practices of amenity migration also reproduce colonial economic and social structures. This can be seen in the economic repercussions for the town (i.e. the creation of a service economy based on the migrants’ wants and needs and the fact the much of the employment is low skilled, temporary and poorly paid), the “alienated
landscape perspective” demonstrated by the migrants, which emphasizes their consumption and comfort as opposed to meaningful contributions to the town, the built environments created by the migrant community (isolated, fortified, and ostentatious), and the expectation of unidirectional change on the part of the migrants, in which they expect the town to adapt to their presence but show little motivation to adapt themselves to their host culture.

However, I also believe that physically being in a place (as opposed to consuming it virtually) does require some adaptation and shifting of understanding and expectations. It is impossible to fully insulate oneself from the physical surroundings and culture in which one lives. I constructed my prologue to demonstrate this, hoping to communicate the unavoidable immediacy and physicality that comes with being in a place, no matter how short or superficial one’s relationship. Many migrants told me “you have to adapt to their culture”, displaying at least an intellectual awareness of the implications of living abroad and the existence of some shift in their perceptions of Cotacachi. This proves that while what Doreen Massey calls “geometries of power”\(^1\) of amenity migration are certainly imbalanced, the results are not unidirectional -Cotacachi does act on the amenity migrants, although perhaps less obviously and certainly less violently than the migrants’ acting on Cotacachi.

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\(^1\) “Global space, as space more generally, is a product of material practices of power….What are at issue are the constantly-being-produced new geometries of power, the shifting geographies of power-relations…Space- here global space- is about…relations, fractures, discontinuities, practices of engagement. And this intrinsic relationality of the spatial is not just a matter of lines on a map; it is a cartography of power” (Massey, 85)
Furthermore, to condemn amenity migration as irredeemably colonial in theory is to disempower any potential responses in practice. Such a position would advocate extremely protectionist immigration policies on the part of countries like Ecuador. Given the oncoming retirement of the Baby Boomers and the increasing fragility of their retirement funds, the demand for amenity migration locations is only going to grow in the coming decades and the expectation that potential host countries will resist such a demand is simply unrealistic. Instead, the task should be to identify the ways in which amenity migration, as currently practiced, reproduces colonial structures and then suggest alternatives to such practices. While it’s important to be explicit that amenity migration is a manifestation of the coloniality of power, it’s also important to remember that, like all migration, it creates new spaces, and thus carries with it the potential for reconfiguring, on a very small scale, those self-same geometries of power.

In her book *For Space*, Massey argues that “…precisely because of the elements of chaos, openness and uncertainty which they both embody, space, and here specifically place, are potentially creative crucibles for the democratic sphere. The challenge is having the confidence to treat them in this way” (153). She then refers to Chantal Mouffe’s work, saying

Instituting democratic public spaces….necessitates operating with a concept of spatiality which keeps always under scrutiny the play of the social relations which construct them. ‘Instead of trying to erase the traces of power and exclusion, democratic politics requires that they be brought to the fore, making them visible so that they can enter the terrain of contestation’ (Mouffe, 1993, 149). (ibid)

In examining the relationship between past colonial practices and their articulation in today’s amenity migration, this is precisely what I am trying to accomplish
with my work. My goal is not to condemn the amenity migrants, many of whom are kind, courteous and conscientious, but instead draw out the “traces of power and exclusion” present in the way such migration is currently practiced. In doing so, I hope to create a conversation about alternative ways the space and place of Cotacachi can be understood and lived, for Ecuadorians and North Americans alike.

Figure 1. Sign outside one of the gated communities (image mine)
Figure 2. Outside and inside one of the gated communities (images mine)
Figure 3. Inside the grounds of Primavera I, one of the first migrant oriented developments in Cotacachi (image mine)

Figure 4. Although the region was experiencing a drought during my visit, the grounds of amenity migrant developments are green and flourishing (on the previous page, you can see the hoses used to water the yards, images mine)
The Other: Marcel’s disponibilité

The final set of concepts I’d like to introduce before turning to my methodology revolves around ideas about, and approaches to, the other. A significant aspect of amenity migration involves being confronted with others in the form of the people whose culture, language and history are radically different from one’s own and yet who now populate, to varying degrees, one’s daily life in a foreign country. And yet, as I have already discussed, many migrants frequently deal with this challenge by adopting an alienated landscape perspective, in which their “…engagement with the surrounding world is created through the passive and individualized processes of selective vision and the projection of personal ideals and desired meaning onto objects in sight” (McWatters, 80). The result is that while amenity migrants may interact with Ecuadorians on a regular basis, their actual relationship to them is superficial and clouded by personal projections of what Ecuadorians should be like.

In researching different approaches to the other, I came across Brian Treanor’s Aspects of Alterity, which compares Levinas’s concept of the other (which Treanor calls “absolute”) to that of Levinas’s contemporary, Gabriel Marcel. Although their philosophies overlap in a number of ways, Treanor argues that unlike Levinas, Marcel advocates for a concept of “relative otherness” in which “…there is an underlying unity that links the same and the other, allowing for relationship…however, we must add that the other always eludes any attempt by the self to comprehend, grasp, or otherwise pin it down” (218). Marcel’s concept of the other reflects in many ways my own philosophy
and his model for interacting ethically with others provide an interesting lens through which we can examine amenity migrants’ current behaviors and discourses.

Most crucial for my work is Marcel’s concept of disponibilité/indisponibilité. Not to be confused with the term as Pratt used it, Treanor describes Marcel’s disponibilité as “…the measure in which I am available to someone, the state of having my resources at hand to offer…” (73). To clarify his concept in English, Marcel sometimes used the words “handiness” and “unhandiness”, which “…refer to the availability of one’s resources -material, emotional, intellectual and spiritual” (ibid). Ultimately, the term means “both openness to(ward) the other and openness to the influx of (from) the other…” (77). By contrast, someone who is indisponibilité is ““encumbered” with himself…it…is a withdrawal, a closing off of oneself from communication…and a denial of presence…” (73).

Significantly, for my purposes, “For the person who is indisponible, other people are reduced to examples of other persons rather than being encountered qua other. Instead of encountering the other person as a Thou, the other is encountered as a He or She, or even as an It” (75). Treanor expands on this concept, saying “When I treat the other person as a He, I treat him not as a presence, but as an object or an example…If I treat the other person as purely external to me -as a Him, a generic Mr.X- I encounter him ‘in fragments’ as it were” (ibid) and “relating to the other person as a She or He, as only a case or example of a genus, I engage in a discourse with myself about the other. I encounter the other like a thing…” (78).
I dwell on this because I believe it reflects quite accurately the ways in which the amenity migrants encounter the others around them. As we will see in the coming chapters, there is rarely any specificity to their characterizations of Ecuadorians, and the Ecuadorians are encountered “in fragments” thus reducing them to “examples” of kinds of people (housekeeper, taxi driver, smiling indigenous child, etc). And, as Treanor points out, in doing this the real encounter in these situations is not between self and other but between the self and its “discourse…about the other” (ibid).

According to Treanor, “relationships of disponibilité are characterized by presence and communication between persons qua other, qua freedom… (75)” and this observation simultaneously serves as a framework for a way forward and critique of the present situation. The majority of migrants are monolingual and demonstrate little motivation to improve their Spanish skills, which means one of the main requirements for a relationship of disponibilité -communication- is already absent. The other requirement is presence, and yet the majority of amenity migrants quite literally absent themselves from spaces and situations where they could potentially engage with Ecuadorians. By living in isolated gated communities and socializing almost exclusively with other migrants, they make themselves impermeable to the possible “…influx of (from) the other…” (77). Additionally, “the person who is disponible…acknowledges his interdependence with other people” (75) and as we will see in the migrant discourses about Ecuadorians, such interdependence is not, generally speaking, part of their worldview. Ecuadorians are seen as “external” to the migrants and narratives of solidarity on the part of the migrants are rare. Without such an acknowledgement, the
migrants largely act in their own interests without considering how such actions affect those around them.

Finally, for Marcel there is an affective element to a relationship of disponibilité, but, crucially, he “…insists that love really applies most properly to a relationship with a specific individual. He notes, quoting Charles Péguy, ‘the person who loves only humanity does not love; he only loves who loves a specific human being’” (87). Therefore, “The love of humanity is, in some sense, merely an extrapolation and expansion of our love for individual humans” (ibid). This is extremely relevant because, in the case of the amenity migrants, many claim to “love” the people of Cotacachi (and particularly the indigenous) and yet the vast majority have no individual relationships with said people. Instead, as noted above, they perceive Cotacacheños as examples of people, but are unable to “…encounter the other qua other, as a Thou… someone with whom [they] can have a dialogue…” (78). Marcel’s assertion both questions their current claim while also creating the possibility for a more genuine relationship in the future -one that is based on disponibilité, in which there is “…commitment, communication and communion between separate beings” (70-71).

Methodology

The research for this project consists of both qualitative research and textual analysis. The textual analysis is based on websites, blogs, emails, and online videos about Cotacachi. This includes websites marketing Cotacachi as a retirement destination, blogs by amenity migrants and videos of municipal meetings between the migrant
community and the local government. While I have a few personal emails shared with me by an Ecuadorian, the majority come from newsletters you can sign up for on promotional websites. Such research is particularly relevant for this project because the vast majority of migrants first experience Cotacachi online. Receiving promotional emails and analyzing migrant blogs allows us to understand how the virtual Cotacachi is constructed, which in turn influences migrants’ expectations and perceptions of the town in actuality.

The qualitative research was fieldwork conducted in Cotacachi in July, 2012. Over the course of two weeks, I used a variety of the methods described by DeWalt and DeWalt in *Participant Observation: a guide for fieldworkers* (2011). This included participant observation in which “…a researcher takes part in the daily activities, rituals, interactions, and events of a groups of people as one of the means of learning the explicit and tacit aspects of their life routines and their culture” (1); unstructured, unrecorded interviews in which “…the researcher typically has a plan for the interview and may have a brief interview guide that includes the topics to be addressed…but he or she presents topics in an open-ended way…” (139); and also, semi-structured, recorded interviews where my “…interview guide include[ed] a list of questions and prompts in order to increase the likelihood that all topics will be covered in each interview in more or less the same way” (ibid). The result was forty recorded interviews with fifty one different participants. Of these, thirty one were amenity migrants living in Cotacachi, two were potential amenity migrants visiting Cotacachi with the idea of possibly moving there and the remaining eighteen were Ecuadorian residents of Cotacachi (this includes the canton
and the town). Of the eighteen Ecuadorians interviewed, I spoke with five indigenous women and one indigenous man and the rest were mestizos.

My participant observation included spending time in migrant-frequented coffee shops and restaurants, participating in a ladies poker-night held in one of the migrant condominium complexes, attending a bi-lingual Evangelical church service and observing the Liars’ Club, an informal breakfast where migrants gather with the express purpose of telling tall tales. Because Cotacachi has a small, centralized downtown, spending time on the streets and in the plazas allowed me to observe many of the migrants’ patterns of use in the town- where they shopped, who they greeted on the streets, and who I regularly ran into and where all informed my understanding of how the migrants live in Cotacachi.

The interviews took place in a variety of settings and times. I interviewed many of the migrants at Danny’s coffee shop, where he graciously agreed to let me set up a kind of informal office. I visited a few migrants in their homes, sometimes sharing meals with them as well. While the public nature of the interview space probably somewhat affected the results, I didn’t notice substantially different content when the migrants were interviewed in their own homes. Being relatively unfamiliar with the town, it was easier for both parties to meet in a well-known, central location (as opposed to them trying to guide me to their sometimes difficult to find homes) and, as a young woman working alone, I felt more comfortable doing so. I interviewed most of the Ecuadorians at their places of work- the implications of which I will discuss below.
Because I had briefly visited Cotacachi the previous summer, I had a small number of contacts and a basic idea of where to look for interview participants. I approached amenity migrants in the coffee shops and restaurants they frequent, introduced myself and asked for interviews. This created a snowball effect, in which interviewees would introduce me to their friends or suggest people I might want to interview. Eventually, an email describing my project was sent to the “gringo list serve” which reached over two hundred migrants living in the area. This helped me reach a wider range of migrants than what otherwise might have been possible and gave me the opportunity to speak with a variety of people. The snowball effect also helped me find my Ecuadorian participants. This included Danny suggesting other shopkeepers I might want to speak with or introducing me to Ecuadorian patrons of his café. I also asked amenity migrants for assistance in finding Ecuadorian contacts and this gave me access to the migrants’ domestic help as well as Ecuadorian business owners who have a significant migrant clientele.

Here I would like to note that in the chapter on the Ecuadorian interviews, I have chosen not to use names (even pseudonyms) or give any kind of personal context to the quotes that offer critiques of the migrant community. I’ve done this to protect the identity of those who shared their thoughts with me. Many of these people work for or with amenity migrants and because the town is so small even the most basic details can identify the interviewee. Although this creates a very one-dimensional understanding of the Ecuadorians I spoke with, many migrants have asked to see my final work and I feel
this decontextualizing is the best option for me to provide the anonymity I guaranteed to my informants.

My Position

Before continuing, I would like to acknowledge my own position and reflect on how such a position quite possibly affected my conversations with my interviewees. I am a young, white, North American woman. I suspect these factors made me less threatening for the amenity migrants while also making them particularly well-disposed towards me. Quite a few told me that I reminded them of their daughters or nieces and expressed a desire to help me since they would want someone to do the same for their own family.

For the Ecuadorians, my position automatically identified me with the town’s amenity migrant community. Many people were surprised that I spoke Spanish and a great number assumed I lived in Cotacachi. Many of the Ecuadorians I interviewed were introduced to me by the North American amenity migrants, further consolidating my identification with that group. The conditions of the interviews also influenced their content. I interviewed the staff at one of the migrant restaurants while they were at work, sitting in the kitchen as they prepared food, and pausing when they had clients to attend to. Occasionally, I spoke with Ecuadorians literally inside migrant houses -some were housekeepers, while one indigenous couple rented an apartment to an amenity migrant. As should be obvious, these were less than ideal interview conditions in which it is doubtful the participants truly felt free to speak their minds.
While I will never know precisely how my position and the interview conditions affected the responses, it is still possible to hazard a few guesses. The people who were most critical of the amenity migrants, and most concerned about their impact on the town were all mestizos who belong to what can be considered a cultural elite. These are people who are well-educated and well-traveled and as such may have felt less intimidated talking with me. In contrast, when I approached indigenous women for interviews they commonly responded by saying “But I don’t have any answers”. When I explained that I only wanted to hear their experiences, they still seemed doubtful about their ability to “help”. It is also not hard to imagine that those who were employed by migrants would be less forthcoming about possible complaints, fearing that I would share their criticisms with their employers. While those who shared concerns also benefit economically from migrant patronage of their businesses, they do not have amenity migrants for bosses. Additionally, I had previously established relationships with some of the people, thus making them perhaps more comfortable in speaking with me.

The Un-Interviewed

It is also worth mentioning who did not get interviewed. The email to the amenity migrants reached approximately two hundred people, and of those two hundred perhaps a dozen responded. While the remainder didn’t outright refuse a request for an interview, nor were they particularly interested in talking with me. Thus, my amenity migrant participants were very much a self-selecting group made up of people who, for whatever reason, were open to sharing their experiences. It is possible that those with an especially
negative perception of Cotacachi were less interested in talking to an interviewer than those who are generally happy with their new home. Additionally, there are a handful of people who said no when approached directly for an interview. Three of the four migrants who refused all work in real estate, which I believe is significant. While the majority of amenity migrants benefit from the lower cost-of-living in Cotacachi, they are not actually making money. The financial gains of amenity migration are made by those who sell and develop land for the migrant market, and, with one exception, it was precisely these people who wouldn’t speak with me.

Just as telling are the Ecuadorians who didn’t want to be interviewed. Of the three who said no, two were gardeners for a migrant-owned condominium complex. A migrant asked them if they would be open to talking with me and made it clear our conversations would be confidential. According to her, their answer was a very emphatic “no”. While it’s impossible to know their true motivations behind this decision, I believe at the very least it indicates distrust on their part towards “gringos” and a disinterest in any unnecessary contact with that community. Even more revealing was the response of a member of the municipal government whom I approached at a local canteen where many members of the city offices eat lunch. I had been eating there for much of my visit and became friendly with a handful of municipal employees, chatting with them over our meal. One day, another employee sat down with us and my acquaintances introduced us, saying I should speak with him because he is working on precisely the city project that is of most interest to me - developing land-use regulations to address the substantial and unregulated growth brought on by migrant-oriented developments. He barely
acknowledged the introduction and with a wag of the finger indicated he had no interest whatsoever in speaking with me.

With so little information, attributing any particular motive to him is basically pure speculation - it’s possible he was having a bad day or in a great hurry. And yet, in a culture that is generally very cordial, his absolute stonewalling suggests otherwise. I believe his response demonstrates, again, a distrust of someone who is identified with the “gringo” community. Moreover, his response combined with the lack of participation on the part of the realtors, shows how amenity migration creates sensitive issues around land. After all, a very small group of people are in the position to make a significant amount of money, all while making decisions that affect the wider community. While the explicit discourse of most people, Ecuadorians and amenity migrants alike, was something like: “Although a few adjustments need to be made we’re happy the gringos are here/we (amenity migrants) are happy to be here”, the inaccessibility of the people most involved with amenity migration as a process suggests that the reality is much more complicated.
Ch. 2: The Virtual Life of Cotacachi

The internet has played a critical role in the creation of Cotacachi as an amenity migrant destination. With a few exceptions, it is here that the amenity migrant’s journey to Cotacachi begins and so examining the town’s virtual presence is a logical starting point for my project. I’ve organized this chapter to mirror in some ways the online process a typical amenity migrant would go through in learning about the town. While there are great number of blogs and minor webpages devoted to either describing life in Cotacachi or promoting retirement in Ecuador in general, there are two virtual giants that effectively act as gatekeepers for the vast majority of online information about retiring to the town. The chapter begins with an analysis of these two companies, both in terms of what they do generally (which is important because it gives us an idea of how people find them - and hence Cotacachi - in the first place) and then how they represent Ecuador and Cotacachi in their work. One is the web presence of a developer/guru name Gary Scott and the other is the company International Living.²

Typically, after reading about Ecuador on one of these two websites Jane and Joe Retiree will begin to explore blogs written by amenity migrants living throughout the country. After reading these, Jane and Joe then set up a tour of the country (sometimes

² Only three of the 31 people I interviewed heard about Cotacachi from a source other than the internet. Of the remaining 28, every person who specified a website (as opposed to just saying “online”) mentioned one of these two companies. Their contribution to the amenity migration phenomenon cannot be overstated.
through one of the aforementioned companies, and sometimes on their own) and visit the places they think would be most interesting to them. During these travels Jane and Joe keep their own blog and document their experiences for friends, family and potential migrants back home. Even if they choose not to move to Cotacachi, or even Ecuador, their blog is now part of the growing internet presence of the town and the country, and will appear in future searches by other potential migrants, reinforcing their fantasies and expectations of the region. These blogs -written by potential migrants and actual migrants alike- form the second part of this chapter.

International Living

As mentioned briefly in the introduction, International Living is a company that promotes retiring abroad. In addition to their website, they have newsletters, email “postcards” and a hard copy of the magazine all devoted to encouraging and assisting people to retire outside the United States. Their heavy web presence ensures that anyone within a certain demographic encounters their advertisements while using the web. One woman described the process of learning about Cotacachi this way: “My husband and I had made a trip to Denmark and of course then Google ads pop up: Oh, you’ve been to Denmark- International Living. So I started reading their newsletters saying Ecuador was the best country to retire to” (personal interview (PI), Barb).³ International Living’s basic approach emphasizes the economic benefits of retiring abroad while also heavily promoting the traditional Western fantasy of paradise. As of this writing, there is

³ From here on, I will use “PI” to designate information gathered from personal interviews.
prominent announcement featured on the company’s homepage that encourages one to

“Retire Overseas! Learn about the world's 9 best places to live or retire. Live well on
$30 a day…Enjoy fine restaurant dining for $7 per person. Employ a maid or gardener
for $6 a day…” (http://internationalliving.com/).

When you click on the link in the ad, you’re taken to a page that opens with the
following:

You look out your window, past your gardener, who is busily pruning the lemon,
cherry, and fig trees…amidst the splendor of gardenias, hibiscus, and hollyhocks.
The sky is clear blue. The sea is a deeper blue, sparkling with sunlight.
A gentle breeze comes drifting in from the ocean, clean and refreshing, as your maid
brings you breakfast in bed.
For a moment, you think you have died and gone to heaven.
But this paradise is real. And affordable. In fact, it costs only half as much to live this
dream lifestyle...as it would to stay in your own home! (Bonner,
http://internationalliving.com/)

Following this invitation to fantasy is a lengthy explanation of the benefits you’ll
receive by subscribing to International Living and how such a subscription could make
one’s dreams come true. While this isn’t specifically about Cotacachi, I believe it is
important to understand the kind of narrative that is being used to promote the town and
places like it around the world. This fantasy is what people are looking for when they
subscribe to International Living, and it is what they believe they are consuming when
they move to Cotacachi or somewhere like it.

What’s disturbing about this advertisement is that the vision of paradise it creates
is essentially repeating the same colonial imagery: The exotic, pristine land, the central
role of domestic servants, and the emphasis of getting everything for a bargain are all
tropes that can be found in colonial encounters, as I discussed in the introduction. Once
again, the landscape is emptied of people with agency, whatever humans are present exist only to serve one’s desires and the physical space is unsullied by humankind.

The ongoing economic legacy of colonialism—or, in other words, the coloniality of power—can be seen in the various country lists that International Living creates for its readership. Nine out of the twelve countries they consider “Best for Cheap Living” are located in Central or South America and only one of the entire list (Thailand) has never been a colony. Similarly, all five of the best places for retirement are in Central and South America. Of the twenty-seven “Best Real Estate Markets” (cheap, low property taxes and minimal concerns over land seizures by the government), the top five picks are in the Caribbean, and Central and South America (McMahon, “The world’s best real estate markets”). When you look at the entire list, ten of the fifteen countries named are in those same regions and only three of the fifteen have never been on the receiving end of a colonial encounter (ibid). While drawing a direct line between past colonial endeavors and present travel practices is beyond the scope of this paper, I feel that the pattern is worth pointing out because it underscores the ways in which such endeavors created the conditions that make amenity migration possible today.

The Ecuador of International Living

Due to its low cost of living, Ecuador in particular has been heavily promoted by International Living and has been named by the company as the world’s “Top Retirement Haven” four years in a row. When explaining the rationale behind their choice, the authors stress the low cost of living, the good value of the real estate and the variety of
places Ecuador has to offer. Such variety also includes the option to “…live comfortably in thriving expat communities…or with friendly, welcoming locals” (“World’s top retirement havens”). In International Living’s free “Report on Ecuador”, the title page says “Ecuador: Live Like Royalty on Your Social Security”, under which we’re shown a photograph of modern looking condos lining a white sand beach. In the introduction, the country is compared to the U.S. in the 1950s and we’re “…guaranteed a quality of life that just plain doesn’t exist anymore in the States” (“Ecuador: Live Like Royalty”). These details are worth dwelling on because they create the image of Ecuador that potential amenity migrants carry with them when they visit the country for the first time. Additionally, given Ecuador’s popularity on the international amenity migration scene, it’s clear that this particular version of the country is extremely compelling. Whether it reflects reality or not, it’s what the amenity migrants are buying when they choose Ecuador as their retirement destination.

Cotacachi itself also figures prominently in International Living’s information on Ecuador, partially because two of its contributors, Dan Prescher and Suzan Haskins, live there part time. While I wasn’t able to access the full text of many of the articles without a paying subscription, a quick search brought up 367 articles, the oldest of which seem to date back to 2008. This is important because it demonstrates the rapidity of Cotacachi’s rise as a destination while also showing the intensity with which the town has been promoted. In one article from 2008, the author states that only twenty “expats” live in the
town full time (Haskins, “The best little mountain town”). As of 2012, that number had risen to 500.4

Words like heaven, paradise and escape frequently appear in the titles of articles on Cotacachi, along with headlines that publicize the town’s low cost of living. The most common formula is: “In this mountain town, you can do X (something expensive) with less than $$$! (absurdly low dollar amount)”. Other tropes include enthusing over Cotacachi’s perceived lack of modernity: It’s a “peaceful town frozen in time” and identifying the town with its natural surroundings (Moser, “Live on $600 per month”). Descriptors like “fertile” and “green” are common, with one article mentioning that “The produce grows freakishly large all year long” (ibid).

Generally speaking, the actual residents of Cotacachi are erased from representations of the town. When they are mentioned, they often serve as a kind of background or supporting actor to the writer’s experience. In lauding the cleanliness of the region, Haskins writes “The towns are clean and orderly, and city governments have invested in infrastructure improvements to keep tourists (and residents) happy” (“A music-filled, color-rich life”). Here, the actual human beings that live and work in the town have been reduced to a parenthesis, a kind of footnote to the main story of the white, Western, tourist. Attempting to be humorous, a piece by Edd Staton discusses the “difficulty” of not being able to communicate in Spanish:

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4 In the latest census, the Canton of Cotacachi found 250 “gringo” households. The assumption is that most of these are two-person households, hence the number 500. While not all of these people live in Cotacachi full time, from what I could tell the great majority spend more time in Cotacachi than elsewhere.
I gave what I thought was an Academy Award winning performance explaining to the lady at the dry cleaners that they had created a stain on my clothing and I wanted it redone for free. I was so exhausted I needed a siesta after that one. (Staton, “But I don’t speak Spanish”) 

In both these stories, the town’s residents are marginalized, and their subjectivity erased.

In their stead, Cotacachi is offered up as an empty place in stasis -literally frozen in time- waiting to fulfill its destiny as a heaven for North American retirees.

When Cotacacheños do merit more attention, the descriptions tend to be a celebration of the exotic, but friendly, local people. After discussing the prevalence of indigenous healing practices and the many indigenous festivals observed in the region, Prescher concludes by saying “In short, you’re in no fear of mistaking Cotacachi for small town America or Europe —there is local culture galore…” (Prescher, “The four Cs of Cotacachi”). In a piece that described at length the couple’s building project, he has this to say about Jorge Quilumbaqui, the Ecuadorian builder of some of the first amenity migrant developments:

[We talked] in our broken, faltering Spanish. But Jorge Quilumbaqui, our builder, obviously understood. He’s a native of Cotacachi and speaks no English. But we’ve never had trouble communicating with him. And he has never failed to smile throughout every meeting we’ve had during the construction of our unit… Jorge’s smile never faltered. He is one of the most mild-mannered, even-tempered men we’ve ever met… He and his crew are unfailingly polite, as most folks in this part of the Ecuador highlands seem to be. And they work quietly, steadily, relentlessly on the condos, townhouses, and villas that make up Primavera II, the project where our condo sits. (Prescher, “Building Ecuadorian condos with a smile”)

For me, this description evokes Christopher Columbus’s accounts of his interactions with the inhabitants of the Caribbean that he meets during his travels, as transcribed in his *Journal of the First Voyage*. He frequently calls them “gentle” (33, 69,
131), discusses their simplicity (35) and unaggressive nature and depicts them as extremely eager to please (33). He then emphasizes how such qualities will make them ideal servants and slaves (31, 35). He also communicates with them through sign language, assuming that he is being understood (35). Similarly, Prescher highlights Quilumbaqui’s “mild” and obliging manner, and his sole value lies in that he and his crew “work…relentlessly” to fulfill the amenity migrants’ fantasies. And while Prescher is attempting to communicate in Spanish, there is (to my mind) a naïve assumption about his ability to do so. It seems to me that the burden is placed on Quilumbaqui (who “obviously understood”) to receive and interpret their poor language skills while also maintaining a smile on his face.

Who is Gary Scott?

Gary Scott was one of the original investors in the migrant-oriented land developments in Cotacachi. Scott is an international investor, self-described “entrepreneur, author and investment publisher” and a kind of guru who offers courses on things like “SuperThinking + Spanish” (where you learn Spanish in three days using something called “frequency modulation”) and “Quantum Thinking for Everlasting Wealth” (garyascott.com). Like International Living, Gary Scott’s Ecuador offers “the good life”, only with a slightly different focus. In his view, such a life is comprised of personal enlightenment and making money, using his personal philosophy to quiet the cognitive dissonance that such an unholy union can create.

According to an article in Clave, an Ecuadorian real estate magazine, Scott began holding his seminars in Ecuador after learning about the country through Ecuadorian
participants in one of his workshops.\textsuperscript{5} He saw potential in the area and began to promote it through his brand’s extensive network. Around the same time, Jorge Quilumbaqui (mentioned in the International Living piece) was developing land in Cotacachi. In 2006, Scott bought seven of the eight apartments in what is now known as Primavera 1 and resold them to his clients. While they are not necessarily the original owners, the building is still occupied by North Americans today (Vallejo, “La construcción de un destino”).

Although Gary Scott is not currently developing land per se, his company offers both shamanic healing and real estate tours of Ecuador, promotes Ecuador and Cotacachi heavily on his multiple websites, and offers seminars throughout the country (as well as the United States and Canada). He also owns the most popular “gringo” hotel in Cotacachi, where many potential amenity migrants stay during their exploratory visit to the town.

Scott’s brand and web presence essentially put a contemporary, New Age, feel-good spin on the Protestant justification of capitalism. Scott promotes something called “quantum wealth”, which is comprised of “balanced health, fulfilling service and positive attitude”. This appears to be a remarkably holistic, non-capitalist, logic until he uses the premise that everyone is connected to assert “…when we help others… we help ourselves. So instead of trying to be grateful… it is easier… faster…. more efficient to make someone else grateful… by providing a product or service” (Scott, “Lifestyle

\textsuperscript{5} In a typically colonial fashion, Scott makes no mention of how he first visited Ecuador (that is, through the invitation of an Ecuadorian friend). Instead, he says he “stumbled upon” the country, thus erasing the Ecuadorian’s critical role in his “discovery” (see Pratt for more details on this pattern).
foundations”, ellipses in original). He then goes on to explain his wealth-building motto, “Turn Passion into Profit” (i.e. make money by doing something you love) and ends with an examination of quantum physics. The conclusion he draws from the science is that:

The driving force of these quantum wealth spirals is consciousness. The attitude and desire to be healthy and wealthy, the belief that we are healthy and wealthy or are going to be is the key that makes everything else work. “Where does this attitude come from?” To answer this we have to look at the Quantum aspects of life. Doing this can help us with our wealth as well because the foundations of wealth have the same attitude root! (ibid)

While this may seem tangential to the topic at hand, a great many of the retirees I spoke to first heard of Cotacachi through Gary Scott’s websites and seminars. Some had even come to Cotacachi for the first time in order to attend one of his classes. Therefore it is important to examine what, exactly, Gary Scott is selling because it influences what people think they’re buying when they take his Ecuador real estate tours, attend his seminars and use his newsletters to make decisions about moving to Ecuador. It’s true his articles focus less on representing particular places (though they include plenty of glamorous pictures of ocean-view pools, mountain vistas, etc) and more on how to achieve a certain way of life. However, his marketing is only effective because it employs tropes and stereotypes about Ecuador and the United States that his followers find compelling.

For example, natural health and alternative healing practices form an integral part of Scott’s brand. Many of his email newsletters include titles like “Ecuador Shamanic Nutritional Idea”, “New Andean Super Food Recipe” and “Ecuador Tomatoes, Health and Consciousness” (Scott, email newsletter). As mentioned earlier, his company offers
“shamanic minga tours” and he frequently discusses his practice of meditation and reliance on “yatchaks, shamans, Indian Vaidyas and sages from all cultures” (Scott, “Lifestyle Foundations”). He calls Ecuador “a mystic mysterious place” and a Garden of Eden (Scott, “Mystery Ridge”). Similar to the “natural wonders” trope, such a focus exoticizes Ecuador and lends it a kind of pre-modern, mystical aura. The 21st century’s answer to Columbus’s Eden, Ecuador becomes a place to escape and purify oneself of the toxic North American lifestyle.

Indeed, an important corollary to the exotic enlightenment of Ecuador is the social decay of the United States. He talks about things like “desk rage”, the alarming loss of pension funds, the government’s invasion of privacy, warns of “the threat of an EMP terrorist attack” and then offers up Ecuador -and his seminars- as a solution (Scott, “Cage Stress Rage”, “Up theirs”, “Ecuador Helps”). Although these portrayals are not about Ecuador, they act as its foil, without which the country could not be the Edenic escape of Gary Scott’s creation.

Finally, Gary Scott is all about making money. Unlike International Living, whose focus is primarily on saving money, Gary Scott emphasizes wealth creation. His “Turn Passion Into Profit” motto is essentially an invitation to have it all -a fulfilling, enjoyable life and financial success. Among his email newsletters, he features things such as “Teak Investment in Ecuador”, “Ecuador Ag Potential” and “Create Everlasting Wealth From Ecuador”. In these missives, he informs readers of different investment opportunities or business possibilities in Ecuador and ends the emails with invitations to join one of his Ecuador real estate tours, take one of his classes, etc.
Here, then, we see the economic exploitation side of colonialism. Although he is a vocal supporter of “sustainable” practices (a teak farm instead of logging the rainforest) and gives lip service to respect for indigenous peoples, he still treats Ecuador as a kind of vast landscape of untapped opportunity of which savvy readers should take advantage.

One article titled “A Multi-Dimensional Investment Opportunity in Ecuador” reads:

Ecuador has some of the cheapest yet best agricultural land in all of South America...However, most Ecuadorian farmers have not yet learned how to produce and manage a farm. They are lacking higher education and management skills as well as equipment. Some Ecuador farmers still plow with oxen. Many Ecuadorian farmers do not know how to sell and do not treat the farm as a real business. There is a great opportunity that lies in this combination of cheap, arable land, the geographical place of Ecuador on the equator and lack of good agronomical skills. This is a tour for those who want to learn about Ecuador farms, and have $50,000 or more to invest in their home and income opportunity. (Scott, email newsletter, emphasis in the original)

This description is remarkably similar to what Pratt, in Imperial Eyes, calls the “neo colonial trajectory” of the “capitalist vanguard” that descended on post-Independence Latin America (146-147). Looking for investment opportunities and ways to expand their influence “…European, especially British, capital poured into South America in the form of loans to build railways and roads, modernize ports and mines, and develop new industries…” (147) and from these ventures come observations such as: “The greater proportion of the lands lie fallow; they would, however, produce considerable crops, if the inhabitants were less indifferent. No encouragement can rouse them from their indolent habits and usual routine” (Gaspar Mollien, quoted in Pratt, 151).

In both cases, the ineptitude or disinterest of the locals provides justification for exploitation by foreign capital. As Pratt notes “…it is America’s purported
backwardness that legitimates the capitalist vanguard’s interventions in the first place. Ideologically, the vanguard’s task is to reinvent America as backward and neglected, to encode its non-capitalist landscapes and societies as manifestly in need of the rationalized exploitation the Europeans bring” (152). Gary Scott justifies this attitude by combining it with romanticized celebrations of “indigenous wisdom” (i.e. the shamanic tours) and then disguising it as a way for people to follow their bliss. In his world view, moving to Ecuador and buying a teak farm is not perpetuating capitalist exploitation of the Third World, it is liberating oneself from the oppressive capitalist code of the First World.

Amenity Migrant Blogs

In some ways, migrant blogs about Ecuador or Cotacachi offer an important corrective to the sugar-coated fantasy sold by both International Living and Gary Scott. Virtually all the blogs take issue with the “Live like a king on $700 a month” shtick and many provide their own budgets and expenses so others can get a better understanding of the true cost of living in Ecuador. Many also stress that living happily in Ecuador requires flexibility and acceptance of another culture. As one blogger put it: “Go with the flow- or go home” (Staton, “Go with the flow”). Additionally (and unlike the previously discussed companies) they are clear that living in Ecuador is not for everyone, and they discuss the costs -financial and otherwise- of their choices openly. Their frankness notwithstanding, the way most of these blogs discuss Ecuador and what it is like to live there still demonstrates an “alienated landscape perspective”, with significant blind spots about how their presence might affect their host communities.
Generally speaking, these narratives - that is, the way the migrants represent themselves and their relationship to the foreign country they now call home - can be divided into two categories. In the first category, the migrants present their choice to relocate to a foreign country as a kind of grand adventure or thrilling journey. Blogs with titles such as “A True Tall Tale”, “Living it up in Ecuador” and “Ecuador Adventures” come under this category (http://southofzero.wordpress.com/). In these stories, living in Ecuador (not just a foreign country but a third world one) is exciting, novel and challenging. The authors tend to (intentionally) dramatize their experiences, focusing on the unexpected and highlighting the creative or humorous ways they’ve had to adapt to their new country.

In the second category are people who characterize their new life in terms of values. They reject the materialistic rat race of the United States and embrace a kind of holistic life ideal, prioritizing physical, emotional and spiritual wellbeing over wealth accumulation. This group is represented by blogs like “Finding our Paradise in Ecuador”, “Pachamama Spectrum of Treasures”, and “The YES Effect” (ibid). In these stories, the authors tend to celebrate small things - a mountain view for example - and having the time to appreciate them. There is an emphasis on simplicity, happiness and following one’s bliss. Yoga, meditation, and natural health practices appear frequently in such pieces, along with the occasional reference to the spiritual power of the region.

What is remarkable about both of these themes is that they are based on a perception of happiness as an end in itself and also as a personal right. They are myopic and fundamentally narcissistic in nature. People come to Ecuador in order to make
themselves happy (be it through “adventures” or “enlightenment”) and do not consider
the larger implications of their choices -the impact they will have on local real estate, the
environmental ramifications of rapid, suburban development and the distortion of the
local economy (from a diverse one to being primarily service-based).

Furthermore, and perhaps most importantly, such narratives erase the Ecuadorians
from the landscape. In these blogs, the authors are the stars of their own miniature
dramas -they are all about how Nancy ate guinea pig for the first time or Bob had a hard
time finding the cheese factory. On the one hand, this is to be expected -after all, these
stories are generally for the benefit of friends and families back home, and also help the
migrants process the overwhelming experience of living in a foreign country (I have
noticed that, generally speaking, the number of entries dwindles the longer someone has
lived there). However, in the telling of these stories, the Ecuadorians -the real, flesh and
blood, human beings to whose country the migrants have moved- disappear. They
become incidental, ancillary, mere props to support the stories the authors tell about
themselves.

Of the dozen or so blogs I looked at, only one or two mention specific
Ecuadorians as friends. Of the rest, Ecuadorians are either romanticized or marginalized,
serving as “examples” a la the indisponibilité of Marcel. In the former, they become
exoticized objects of the migrants’ gaze: photographs of random children and/or festivals
are common, and musings such as “The beautiful indigenous people of Cotacachi, called
Otavaleños,⁶ are part of the magic here… There's a genuine sweetness to the people” are typical (KatieJack, “Beautiful Cotacachi People”). In the latter, Ecuadorians are reduced to faceless, nameless, and frequently unreliable, providers of goods and services. Like the colonial practices of yore, this habit presents Ecuador as an empty place that migrants can inhabit, and alter at will, without having to concern themselves about the desires, aspirations or needs of those already living there

Figure 5. From Patricia’s blog. The caption for this photo reads “Following is a picture of an Indigenous lady. This is to show how short they are.”(http://lifealeisure.travellerspoint.com/9/)

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⁶ This is incorrect. People from Cotacachi are called Cotacacheños, while those from the neighboring town of Otavalo are Otavaleños.
In what I consider to be a particularly problematic manifestation of this cultural blindness, the migrant bloggers downplay the importance of developing conversational Spanish. While everyone says learning Spanish is important, the vast majority are content with knowing nothing beyond what is necessary to communicate one’s basic needs and desires in commercial transactions. The following, written by someone who has lived in Ecuador for two years, illustrates the typical migrant attitude towards this issue:
If, like me, you’re not a fan of, “For English press 1, for Spanish press 2,” it would be the height of hypocrisy to not gain some proficiency in the language of your new Latin American home. Plus, speaking the native tongue shows proper respect for the local culture...So how’s my Spanish now? I’m proud to report I can successfully communicate with most dogs and toddlers. (Staton, “But I don’t speak Spanish”)

Not speaking functional Spanish severely limits migrants’ abilities to interact with their Ecuadorian neighbors in any meaningful way. And yet most bloggers are basically dismissive of this fact, demonstrating the narrow scope of their interest in actually living in the place of Ecuador. The author’s use of self-deprecating humor to discuss his (in)ability to communicate with Ecuadorians makes such communication seem like an insignificant and ultimately unworthy goal and telegraphs this message to potential migrants who are considering moving to the country.

Who Profits?

Gary Scott and International Living profit from turning Cotacachi (and other places) into a consumer good in a number of ways. First, they sell information. While a great number of articles, which are essentially no more than lengthy advertisements, are free, you can only access the “real” information through a paid membership to their organization. I don’t have such a subscription, but I believe that at least some of what becomes available is specific contacts in the places you’d like to visit.

Additionally, both companies sell experiences. As previously noted, Gary Scott sells a number of classes and seminars on a range of topics and most classes cost $700 per person (though for couples, the cost only rises to $900). Similarly, International Living hosts conferences in locations that they are promoting, and charge between $895
and $1295 to attend. International Living and Gary Scott also offer “elite” services where, for a larger sum, all conference costs are waived for the year in addition to receiving various newsletters, information packets, etc., free of charge (you can also bring a nonpaying guest to the events). International Living didn’t display the price for their “VIP services” but Gary Scott charges $1,800. Interestingly, both companies stress the community that such privileged membership creates. In explaining the benefits, Gary Scott tells us “When you join our International Club 2013 you become part of a special family” (Scott, “How to Prosper”), while International Living states “[If] you just love the atmosphere and community you find at any IL conference or event their VIP membership is for you” (Flynn, “International Living World Club”).

The relationship between International Living or Gary Scott and the actual development and sale of migrant-oriented housing is complex and somewhat opaque. Both websites offer generic “real estate in Ecuador” articles and both also provide information about actual properties for sale. Scott, who offers a variety of real estate tours all over Ecuador, claims “Because we are publishers who owe our loyalty to our readers and not real estate agents, you can be assured that the tours are based on your wishes, not on any broker’s desire to sell a specific property. Ecuador Living does not participate in any proceeds, commissions etc. from real estate sales” (Scott, “Ecuador Imbabura Real Estate Tours”). However, in his emails he tells stories of property in Cotacachi that he and his wife were considering investing in and his name is associated
with the original amenity migrant developments in the town. Although rarely mentioned by name in the free email newsletters, Scott frequently refers to his “Ateam Ecuador” which is “a group of contacts… Ecuadorian and expats who live in Ecuador and continually sniff out and share what’s going on in Ecuador with Ecuador Living Club members” (Scott, “Ecuador Living Handbook”). Apparently, these are the people who provide Scott with “insider” information and who also help coordinate real estate tours in the country. One of Cotacachi’s active realtors (who refused to be interviewed) forms part of this “Ateam” though the arrangement he has with Gary Scott is unknown to me.

On their real estate page, International Living states that a company called “Pathfinder is International Living’s preferred real estate advertiser. Pathfinder scouts the globe to bring you the hottest real estate opportunities” (“International Real Estate”). When you look at the disclosure, you find out that “Pathfinder represents a select group of real estate developers and brokers” and that the director of Pathfinder, Ronan McMahon “currently contributes real estate articles to International Living postcards, and the International Living magazine” (“Disclosure”). In an interesting twist, on Pathfinder’s website they share that until 2007, they were part of International Living.

Aside from these two companies, the original land developers, their builders, and realtors are the people who profit most from the migrant-induced building boom of Cotacachi. Although everyone I spoke with was vague about who actually bought the land, created the developments and sold them, the Clave article states that “…An

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7Gary Scott no longer spends time in Cotacachi. According to local migrant rumor he left because he had been “denounced” by a local builder, who accused Scott of slandering him. Apparently, slander is taken very seriously in Ecuador and if Scott were to enter the country again, he runs the risk of being taken to court (PI, Glenn).
Ecuadorian friend and colleague of the Scotts, an owner of a travel agency, took a chance and invested in San Miguel, the first gated community in Cotacachi primarily geared towards foreigners” (Vallejo, *my translation*). Additionally, Jorge Quilumbaqui is credited with creating Primavera 1 and Primavera 2. As mentioned earlier, Scott bought and resold much of Primavera 1, but for Primavera 2, Quilumbaqui sold the apartments directly to North Americans himself (according to the Clave article, they were all sold within eighteen months). There are a great number of other developments but, with the exception of the current project Tierra Firme (being developed by Clayton Black), the investors’ names are all unknown to me. What is most important to understand is that these people, whose financial stake in the process is far from transparent, have a vested interest in creating a virtual Cotacachi that people will buy and who stand to profit significantly from that sale.

**Conclusion**

Without heavy, internet-based promotion, Cotacachi would never have become the migrant destination it is today. And while it’s possible that its popularity would have increased over time through word-of-mouth, the answers my informants gave show that the internet, and in particular International Living and Gary Scott, is responsible for the veritable explosion of interest the town has received in the past five years.

When I asked people how their lived experiences matched up to what they had been led to expect through their research on the internet, their body language tended to shift. In particular, people seemed to feel there was a discrepancy between the advertised price of living in Cotacachi and the actual costs on the ground. In an unstructured group
interview, one woman volunteered “It does seem like a fair number of people were led to believe you could come down here and live for practically nothing” while others assented (PI, Sharon). The first couple I interviewed during my research had moved to Cotacachi a week before my own arrival. Chatting at a coffee shop near the end of my stay, they told me they were considering looking for property elsewhere in Ecuador because they had been unable to find something in their price range.

The virtual Cotacachi exists primarily to make money by selling people their own fantasies and promising a place that will fulfill those fantasies. By moving to the real Cotacachi, people are literally buying into the virtual place that Gary Scott and International Living have sold them. The consequence is that Cotacachi is now hosting a significant foreign population who are there with unrealistic expectations and no real understanding of what living in a foreign country means. It’s important to note here that both groups deal with the fallout of this situation -the Cotacacheños who get shouted at for not speaking English but also the migrants themselves- many of whom have sold everything -who quickly discover that the real Cotacachi is more complicated, messy, and expensive than they were led to believe. As one particularly direct woman told me: “They want you to think it’s the land of milk and honey, but it’s not” (field notes).
Ch. 3: Amenity Migrant Perspectives

The vast majority of the residential tourists in Cotacachi are retirees, and as such they are experiencing a double displacement. Listening to their stories, in both formal and informal contexts, I was struck by the notion of the speakers’ “former lives”. Retiring anywhere implies a certain redefinition of self, a reconfiguring of one’s relationships with others and an ending of a significant period of a person’s life. Moving to another country also offers the opportunity for a certain kind of “reinvention” of oneself and in Cotacachi, the two converge to create a close-knit community. Everyone in Cotacachi did something in the United States, and so they bring certain knowledge and skills that can be of use to the community. One retiree offers bridge classes, another lends his skills as a kitchen designer to friends who are building new homes, another sells her photography. This allows people to embody “the busy ethic”, which functions as “…a defense against obsolescence…[and] serves the purpose of legitimating retirement” (Phillips, Ajrouch, Hillcoat-Nalletamby, 64).

Being in a new place also affords people opportunities to branch out, trying new things or starting side projects that they might not do otherwise. Over dinner, I asked two couples what they liked about living in Cotacachi and Susan answered for everyone saying: “You can reinvent yourself, learning things new…It’s that excitement that I wasn’t expecting after retirement…It’s a wonderful thing…to look forward to meeting
new people and doing new things” (PI). Because the residential tourist community in Cotacachi is new (and always shifting) it is a receptive place for these enterprises. There are no decades-long routines or habits to contend with when trying to gain a clientele. Perhaps more importantly, the migrants have a significant amount of leisure time, allowing them the flexibility to participate in a variety of activities. In other words, everyone is displaced, looking for things to do, and people to do them with and this shared experience creates an environment in which virtually all contributions are welcome and friends are easy to make.

Closely related to this theme is the creation of friendships and social capital within the migrant community. As Barb, an interviewee from the east coast who had been in Cotacachi for a little over two years put it: “I immediately made friends here…Everyone comes on an equal playing field, nobody has any friends here…We’re in a small enough space, we’re thrown together and meet each other easily, there are activities, and all of a sudden you have a group of friends” (PI). This sentiment was echoed by a great number of my informants, making it clear that one of the main benefits the migrants derive from living Cotacachi is in their friendships with each other, with the support and companionship that such connections entail.

Betty, one of Barb’s closest friends, lost her husband within a year of moving to Cotacachi. When discussing his passing with me, she emphasized the crucial role her new circle of friends played in her ability to cope with the loss: “After Charles died, they

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8 In his 1995 article “Bowling Alone: America’s Declining Social Capital”, Robert Putnam defines social capital as “…features of social organization such as networks, norms, and social trust that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit” (111)
[some close friends] came to my house and packed everything for me…I mean, what would I have done without this help? It was just phenomenal” (PI). Another couple, who had been in Cotacachi for less than six months, put it this way: “I have made a faster friendship, because you’re all in the same boat…You’re not going somewhere where everyone already has a group of friends, so they’re more apt to let you in” (PI, Connie).

The issue of health is another theme that arose during my conversations with the migrant community. Virtually everyone I spoke with who had used the health care system in Ecuador had only good things to say about it. After working in a minga, Bruce got a double hernia and had to have an operation. When asked how he felt about the medical care, he responded “It was better than America …The nurses were more attentive than I’ve ever had in America. The doctor was a truly caring doctor…And then we got the bill, and it was staying over-night, anesthesiologist, doctor, pre operation tests, and an operation and it was about $1300. So I have nothing but good things to say about Ecuador so far as medical goes” (PI). Another woman, Jan, shared that she paid two dollars for a month’s worth of prescription medication. Stories such as these are typical and demonstrate perhaps one of the most significant advantages of retiring abroad for North Americans. With high medical costs, and a complicated Medicare system, older people who have limited resources face great challenges in getting their health needs met adequately in the United States. By contrast, the service in Ecuador seems to be more straightforward and transparent, the providers more solicitous and the cost significantly more affordable.
Additionally, a great number reported having lost weight since their move, and many attribute this to a healthier diet or the increased opportunities for movement a small town provides. Reflecting on the health benefits of her life in Cotacachi, Bev shared that she had “lost twenty pounds…over three years. I didn’t mean to, it just happens because you’re eating healthy and you’re walking everywhere” (PI). Similarly, Barb felt that she was “much healthier here. I live a healthier lifestyle…I walk everywhere -no car” and she contrasted this experience to her life in the United States, where she would end up driving to places even if they were within walking distance (PI). As we can see from the interviews, the lay out of the town and the fact that many of the migrants don’t own a car have much to do with the perceived “healthier lifestyle” that Cotacachi offers.

I mention these themes for two reasons. Firstly, because I believe they help us understand how retiring abroad contributes not just to the financial health of these individuals but also to their emotional, social and physical wellbeing. We live in a society that tends to marginalize the elderly and disregard both their needs and their potential (Cuddy, Norton, Fiske, 270-272). Retiring to Cotacachi lets these migrants redefine themselves as something other than “retired person”. It also places them in the middle of a network that both allows for a sense of community and yet is fluid enough to welcome new contributions. Furthermore, the simple fact of retiring abroad requires interdependence and increases the intensity of connection with fellow retirees, creating the pre-conditions for friendships that, being retired, the migrants have the opportunity to develop.
The second reason is that I think it is important to recognize that many of these benefits are not unique to Cotacachi or Ecuador. A walkable community with an urban center located in a region with functioning public transportation can exist anywhere. With such walkability and a vibrant town center come improved social relations, as people share the downtown spaces, see each other frequently on the streets and interact - something that is hard to do when everyone travels by car. Its novelty (and benefits) for the migrants is primarily due to the demise of such places in the United States.

What I want to emphasize here is that much of what the migrants claim to “love” about Cotacachi does not reflect specific place-based attachments but instead consist of, fundamentally, a list of amenities. The social and emotional benefits the migrants discuss primarily revolve around their relationships with other migrants -not Ecuadorians- and the amenities they enjoy can also be found other places. The only difference between those other places and Cotacachi is the cost of living, making it clear that above all the decision to retire internationally is an economic one. And, as discussed in the introduction, the economic situation that makes this phenomenon possible is rooted firmly in the coloniality of power and a history of imperialism and colonialism. While the financial dimension of the decision to move is no secret, nor is it inherently wrong, it’s important to be frank about the privilege with which the migrants enter Cotacachi’s society, to understand where that privilege comes from and the effect such a power imbalance has on the host community.

In the first part of this chapter, I examined how the amenity migrants perceived themselves and their relationships to each other. In the following section, I will look at
the themes that arose when the migrants’ discussed their experiences of Ecuador and Ecuadorians.

One of the phrases I heard repeatedly when the migrants talked about life in Cotacachi was “I just love the people”. Indeed, when I asked “What do you like most about living here?” a number responded with that exact phrase. The “people” they were referring to were the Ecuadorians, mestizo and indigenous alike, who live and work in Cotacachi. Betty, reflecting on what it’s like to live outside the U.S. told me “I just love the culture. I love the indigenous culture. I think the people are just so amazing. I don’t know that many, but my little cleaning lady is a kick and a half…She has always got a smile on her face” (PI). When explaining why she and her husband chose Cotacachi, Susan mentioned the climate and then the local population, saying “They were just so friendly, and wonderful. Very, very appealing and endearing” (PI). Patricia and Roger, a couple who were thinking moving about Cotacachi shared that the people of Cotacachi were one of the things they found appealing about the town: “The Ecuadorians and the indigenous people -I just love their personalities. They’re so friendly and so welcoming. You never feel like you’re imposing on them” (PI).

There are two important things to consider when reading, or listening to, such descriptions. Firstly, the great majority of the migrants speak little to no Spanish and thus these perceptions are necessarily superficial. Secondly, when asked who they spent the most time with, the majority responded with the names of either their spouses or fellow migrants they had befriended. The same was true when asked who their neighbors were. What this means then is the vast majority of the migrants’ experiences with
Ecuadorians fall into one of two categories—they are either passing, daily exchanges with strangers or acquaintances on the street, or, more frequently, they are commercial transactions where the migrants pay the Ecuadorians for a variety of goods and services. Stephen Banks, in his article on amenity migrants in Lake Chapala, Mexico, called these “instrumentalized interactions”, noting that “despite intimations of closeness and personal knowledge, the relationship is framed as an instrumental exchange” (372) in which a North American pays for the goods or services offered by a Mexican and “All descriptions offered of friendliness and helpfulness either are simple acts of normal courtesy…or are framed within the employer-employee relationship…” (374).

While I don’t doubt the sincerity of these migrants’ sentiments, their perceptions betray their superficial relationship with Cotacachi as a real place. There is no specificity to their characterizations and instead we are presented with a kind of generic “Ecuadorian” that has little to do with the actual personalities, qualities and aspirations of the people they are describing. If we refer to Marcel’s position on love—which must be based on individual relationships of disponibilité—the claims of knowledge and “love” become quite suspect. As discussed in the introduction, the discourses the migrants employ about Ecuadorians reflect a position of indisponibilité—especially since they are unable to communicate with each other. Although these migrants now consider this place home, their construction of their Ecuadorian neighbors as others demonstrates that this home, while physically located in Cotacachi, is socially and culturally isolated from it.

Many participants would compare present-day Cotacachi to the United States’ of their childhood. Given the age of many of the migrants, they’re referring to roughly the
1950’s and 1960’s in the United States. When discussing what she would look forward to if she were to move to Cotacachi, Patricia shared that “All the things that we might complain about here are things that we didn’t have in the simpler time of our life…It was a simple way of life. To me, everything we are missing here are the things we didn’t have as children in the ‘50s anyway, so that’s what I’m excited about” (PI). During card night with a number of the migrant women, another woman stated: “That’s what I said when I first came here, that the country [Ecuador] is sixty or seventy years behind…and they’ll catch up some day” (PI, Donna) and the others agreed, though offering the caveat that, while it would be good for Ecuador to “catch up” to the United States around issues such as litter, “there are some things I hope they never catch up with” (PI, Vickie).

These comments reflect a typical North American approach to Latin America, in which those countries are denied their modernity and instead placed along a linear, Western defined timeline in which they are always already behind the “developed” nations of the West and condemned to play catch up for the rest of eternity. According to the “chrono-politic” of capitalism, “Latin America…is always in an earlier temporal phase, backwards or ‘emerging’ in relation to the already constituted, in a process that never ends…we are second in the history of capitalism and ‘we arrive late at the banquet of civilization’” (Ludmer, 26-27, my translation).

This perspective that Cotacachi is somehow located outside of modernity is also demonstrated in many of the participants’ comments about the produce in the town. Many people mentioned to me that the produce, which can be bought at an open air market, is fresher and healthier. A number seemed to think it is all organic, or at least
fresher: “We get a lot of things locally, because it’s right out of the ground. There’s no…Well, there’s just nothing in it. You get what you get right out of the ground” Bev told me when discussing the health benefits of living in Cotacachi (PI). These remarks display assumptions about their host culture, conflating “less developed” (by Western standards) with a way of life that is more pristine and untainted by modern technology. In fact, many of the farmers in the area use pesticides and the produce is not always necessarily fresh. Paradoxically, some informants also expressed concern about buying meat from the market and chose to purchase such products at the SuperMaxi half an hour away in Ibarra, where they felt the sanitary standards were higher.

The final manifestation of this attitude can be found in the comments many of the migrants made about the “happiness” of the Ecuadorians and their admiration for the locals’ contentment with a “simpler” way of life: “A much more positive feel amongst the people than there is in the United States. They have so much less and so much more to complain about and they just…they’re a happy people” is how Bruce described them (PI). When I asked why he thought they were happier, he answered “They’re happy with what they have”. On her travel blog, Patricia shared her impressions of the local people: “In the states, we would consider them extremely poor, especially [sic] the Indigenous; however, they are all fed well, dressed well and very happy. As Jeff Neal [a realtor] said: They don’t know they’re poor” (“First week in Cotacachi”). I believe comments such as these reflect a certain nostalgia and a desire to return to a “simpler way of life”. It would appear that the migrants are unable to make the connection between the “simplicity” (and poverty) around them and the privilege that they themselves enjoy. A crucial tenet of the
coloniality of power is the inextricable link between the impoverishment of “developing” nations and the prosperity enjoyed by the West and this is precisely what we see at work in these perspectives.

One moment that can be interpreted as kind of destabilization of the migrants’ “alienated landscape attitude” is their response to my question “what would you tell other people who are thinking about moving here?” The vast majority answered “you have to adapt to their culture”. One older man told me “they should get themselves into Spanish language lessons because if you’re going to come down here and live here, you should adapt to the local culture” (PI, Alan). Another woman shared something similar, saying “you got to remember every day: this is not my country. This is their country, and we’re guests” (PI, Wanda). Many said simply “This is not the United States”.

While I will explore later the gap between this kind of conscientious interview reply and the reality I observed around me, I believe this part of the migrants’ discourse is still worth noting because it demonstrates at least an intellectual awareness of their position in the town. They are conscientious of the fact that they have relocated not to an empty landscape, but to an actual place with its own norms, cultures, and behavioral expectations. This is the material reality of the virtual fantasy sold on the internet, and spending energy wishing it were otherwise is a recipe for perpetual dissatisfaction. While many people expressed that the biggest challenge of living in Cotacachi was adapting to the culture, they also recognized that one’s happiness there depends in large part on one’s ability to do so.
When asked how the migrant community has affected Cotacachi, the most common answer was to point to the town’s economy. As one might imagine, the surge in Cotacachi’s popularity has created a housing boom and construction projects are ubiquitous. The migrants also patronize businesses, hire domestic help, eat at restaurants and use transportation, all of which translates into a significant income stream for the town. Interestingly, when discussing their economic contribution to Cotacachi - whether in response to this particular question or in the context of another- the migrants tended to frame their answers in one of two ways. Some, like Barb, reflected the “buy local” mentality that is currently popular in the United States, expressing a desire to do her part to support the town she now lives in “I’m trying to keep grocery shopping right here in Cotacachi as much as possible to support local businesses” she answered when I asked her where she bought her food (PI). In some ways, this demonstrates a certain kind of identification with and investment in the town, showing a desire to participate constructively in her community. Others framed their answers to emphasize the magnitude of the positive impact the migrant community has had on the town’s economy. One characterized it as “tremendous” and felt that their economic contribution went “unappreciated” by the municipality (PI, Rick). Another stated “We’ve brought a lot - we’ve brought money, we’ve brought jobs…This town wouldn’t be changing if it weren’t for the expat community” (PI, Joan).

While the migrants’ economic contribution to the town is undeniable, its significance is debatable. It’s impossible to know how much of the town’s growth is due to the influx of amenity migrants and how much is related to other factors. Bearing in
mind the lack of quantitative data, I believe my own observations and the information gleaned from the interviews still allow for a few insights. Most importantly, the self-perception of amenity migrants as economic engine of Cotacachi can quickly lead to feelings of entitlement. This is evident in an email sent by one migrant to Laura, the woman who handled cross cultural communication as part of her job with the municipality. It was written after a string of thefts in migrant homes:

Can you please ask the Mayor to call a town meeting where the Police Chief is required to be present to answer questions from all concerned citizens - gingo [sic] and local people alike? Then we need the mayor to take the issue of very poor policing in Cotacachi to the national Chief of Police in Quito. At the same time we need this matter brought directly to the attention of President Correa. Your country relies heavily on people moving and visiting Ecuador.

Failure to act quickly and effectively in this matter can have very bad consequences for Cotacachi. Many people are now talking of leaving. Many more are now talking of not buying homes.

By extension, if we decide to leave in large numbers your financial prosperity plans will evaporate. Businesses will suffer, major construction projects will stop and prosperity will vanish. Gringos are not stupid nor will we stay where this foolishness is allowed to continue.

The Intercultural Co-existence Initiative will die. Cotacachi could lose millions of dollars.

Is this what the town leaders want? (personal correspondence, July 2011)

Victoria, an Ecuadorian graduate student also conducting research in Cotacachi, shared a conversation with an amenity migrant in which the issue of rising real estate prices came up. As a way to manage this, the municipality had been trying to ensure that foreigners don’t pay exorbitant prices for their land. The migrant’s response was “I don’t
care what the market price is. I want the land so I’ll pay as much as I can in order to get it” (Personal conversation, July 2011). Although somewhat less egregious, these remarks demonstrate an assumption that his money gave him the right to act as he pleased, regardless of the consequences for the wider community.

It is also worth noting that many of the businesses the migrants frequent are owned by other migrants. This is particularly true for the restaurants, with four out of the six most popular places having migrant owners. Other migrant-run services include the real estate agents that virtually everyone uses when purchasing property, two of the most frequented hotels, a popular Laundromat and a van for hire that many people use when organizing day trips to the surrounding areas. While these owners may then go and spend their earnings in Ecuadorian-owned businesses, it is important to recognize that a significant portion of the migrant-fueled economy primarily benefits other migrants and as such the overall economic impact of the migrants may be less extensive than they might expect.

Conclusion

The benefits the migrants enjoy from relocating to Cotacachi are real. Between the sense of the community created, the generally healthier lifestyle and the lower cost of living, quality of life for many of these migrants is higher than what they would experience in the United States. Because I do not believe there is anything inherently unethical about amenity migration, I believe these positive aspects should be pointed out. Furthermore, the town and its inhabitants also benefit in very concrete ways from the migrant presence. There is increased economic activity, a higher international profile and

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an influx of new and different ideas. However, the migrants also create costs for Cotacachi, many of which they seem to be unaware of or unconcerned with. This last issue demonstrates not just the alienated landscape perspective identified by McWatters but also an attitude of indisponibilité. There seems to be very little sense of investment in the town as a living, dynamic place. Instead it becomes a kind of screen onto which the migrants project their own fantasies - be it a “simple” village filled with happy natives or, as one migrant put it, “the last Shangri-La” (PI, Joseph). In the next chapter we will see how the Ecuadorians - who in migrant narratives tend to function as part of the scenery - perceive the migrants and their impact on their town.
Ch.4: Ecuadorian perspectives

Benefits

Not surprisingly, the primary benefit the Ecuadorians identify is the migrants’ contribution to the town’s economy. The part time domestic help the migrants employ—usually in the form of a woman who cleans once or twice a week—tend to be indigenous women from the surrounding communities, and this can be an important source of income for their families. Occasionally, the migrants end up also employing the woman’s husband as a handyman. The construction jobs associated with the housing boom offer another source of revenue for the indigenous and mestizo communities alike. Landscaping, and yard and building maintenance are additional employment options for Ecuadorians. A handful of taxi drivers have significant migrant clientele and many of the migrant owned restaurants and hotels employ Ecuadorian staff.

Ecuadorian entrepreneurs have also found ways to tap into the amenity migrant market, usually leveraging their English skills to gain a comparative advantage. For example Cecilia, who learned her English working at a high end hotel in the area, runs a restaurant with a primarily migrant clientele and also acts as the property manager for a number of migrant owned rentals (these condos and apartments tend to be rented to potential-migrants who are in Cotacachi for long-term stays while they look for property, etc). Clara, who lived and studied in the United States for many years, runs a
supermarket that caters to the migrants, stocking hard to find food stuffs for them. Many of the migrants subscribe to the internet service provided by Antonio and his wife Cristina. Other bilinguals offer Spanish classes and translation and interpretation services.

Generally speaking, both the entrepreneurs and the workers in the service sector have mostly had positive experiences working with the amenity migrants, describing them as respectful, cordial and kind: “They’re very kind, they’re not rude….they’re down-to-earth and entrepreneurial… they value any work the Ecuadorians do” (PI, Cristina, my translation). Many also noted the general friendliness of the amenity migrants, mentioning specifically that the majority greet people -even strangers- in the streets.

Additionally, a number of Ecuadorians expressed their appreciation of the cultural diversity the amenity migrants bring to the town. Some, like Cecilia and Clara, welcome the opportunity to practice or maintain their English (PI). Others, like Victor and Rubi, appreciate aspects of North American culture -noting particularly the emphasis on respect for laws, punctuality and organization, while Danny remarked upon the intellectual diversity some of the migrants bring “there are interesting people…people who were university professors or artists and…they come to do interesting things here” (PI). A few Ecuadorians also mentioned the charitable work some of the amenity migrants do -mostly in the form of providing funds for schools or scholarships for students- as another positive aspect of the migrant presence in the town.

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9 All translations of interviews conducted in Spanish are mine
Finally, many of the Ecuadorians who have the most contact with the migrants express genuine affection for them. “We have a good relationship, we’re like a family” is how Cecilia described her relationship with the occupants of the properties she manages, and Cristina repeatedly said things like “We love them a lot” when discussing the migrants (PI). And so, although my position and the conditions of the interviews ensured incomplete responses from at least some of the informants, I believe we can still say that in some cases, genuine affective bonds have been developed between Ecuadorians and amenity migrants. These comments illustrate the complex implications of amenity migration. Relationships of cross-cultural learning and engagement do occur and individuals derive great value from such connections.

Challenges

The most important negative impact that the amenity migrant community has had on the town is the sharp rise in the price of real estate. To illustrate this, one woman discussed her own property, which, in 2005 cost $5,000 (USD). Now the land is worth $25,000, which means land prices have risen by 400% over the last seven years (PI). Price increases have also occurred in the rentals, making it almost impossible for many families and young people to find housing in the town. During an informal conversation with one young woman, she shared that a rental in Cotacachi costs a minimum of $150 per month. For someone making $300 per month, this represents half their monthly income (field notes). A brief look online shows a lot that is slightly less than half an acre selling for $35,000 (USD) and a two bedroom, two bath home is $140,000
In a country where 32.8% of the population lives below the poverty line and the per capita GDP is $4,205, it is not hard to see how the arrival of the amenity migrants is pricing Ecuadorians out of the housing market in Cotacachi. In many ways, this is the international version of gentrification. The fact that those who occupy a place of global privilege are able to repeat this pattern in countries other than their own is evidence of the coloniality of power discussed in the introduction.

A second, more abstract frustration also stems from the inequalities created by the coloniality of power. Some of the Ecuadorians resent the ease with which North Americans can purchase homes and move to Ecuador when the reverse is not true. It feels unfair that the amenity migrants, due simply to their place of birth, have such mobility and the prerogative to drastically change a town which is not their own. For these informants, their resentment was not so much directed towards the amenity migrants themselves as towards the exclusionary immigration policies of the United States; policies which are underscored by the contrast with the ease with which the North Americans relocate to Cotacachi. This sense of unfairness is exacerbated by the fact that, being senior citizens, the majority of the amenity migrants benefit from Ecuadorian subsidies designed to assist the elderly. This includes things like paying lower taxes or subsidized utility bills. One Ecuadorian put it bluntly, saying “They arrive, complain about the infrastructure but they don’t pay taxes to support it and they never have, and they still benefit from it”. He then concluded “In the U.S.A., Latinos pay taxes but have no rights. Here, the gringos pay no taxes but have rights” (PI, A).
Interestingly, although the migrants’ contribution to the town’s economy is indisputable, its significance is questioned by a number of Ecuadorians. Many attribute the town’s overall prosperity to the previous mayor, Auki Tituáña. The extent of the migrants’ economic impact is also debatable, since many Ecuadorians feel that much of the migrant spending is concentrated on just a few businesses, most of which are run by fellow migrants. Many Ecuadorians, some of whom own businesses that benefit greatly from the amenity migrants, felt that the overall economic impact on the town was limited for this reason. When asked how the significant North American presence has benefited Cotacachi, one said: “It’s not really very much, because those same foreigners set up their own businesses and then we no longer have businesses”, a sentiment which was echoed by a variety of the interviewees (PI, B). For others, the economic benefits are tempered by a concern for the economic competition that some of the amenity migrants create. One woman felt that even if she were to open a business, it wouldn’t benefit from migrant dollars because “the gringos will still come here”, referring to a migrant-owned restaurant (PI, C). Another made the distinction between those that come to consume and spend money and those that come looking for profit “[Some] do all their shopping here and they hire local people -that’s a contribution to the economy. The other group…comes to do business…They make their money here but almost none of it stays [in the city]. That’s what people don’t like” (PI, D). This is particularly telling because it demonstrates both an inflated sense of importance on the part of the amenity migrants and complicates the “economic windfall” narrative espoused by many of them.
The final concern is the sense of entitlement that I mentioned earlier and this is best illustrated by examining a town meeting held by the local government in 2011. There had been a string of robberies in migrant homes and gated communities and the community requested a meeting with the mayor and other local officials to discuss the problem. The email quoted in the previous chapter was written while the municipality was organizing this gathering. When discussing the migrants’ impact on Cotacachi, this meeting was mentioned during two separate interviews. One Ecuadorian recalled how the meeting was “to ask for special protection for the North Americans -only for that population” (PI, A) and another described how, in addition to the security measures, the migrants also asked for a special ambulance that would be for their exclusive use and an emergency phone number, like 911, with someone who would answer in English (PI,E). During an informal conversation with Laura, she recalled how during the meeting, a migrant addressed the mayor, demanding “What are you going to do to keep us safe?” (Personal conversation, 2011). By contrast, not one amenity migrant mentioned the meeting spontaneously and when I asked about it directly, those who attended felt it had gone well.

At issue here are two different facets of entitlement that demonstrate the profound psycho-social separation of the amenity migrants within the larger community. First, robberies and violent crime occur daily in Cotacachi and its surrounds. According to James, a North American expat (not amenity migrant), Cotacachi is in the path of drug routes from Colombia and as such experiences a fair amount of criminal activity (personal conversation). Because this violence doesn’t generally involve the amenity

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migrants, they feel safe in the area and don’t report security as being a particular concern — until they become targets for theft and home invasion. It is only in that moment that they organize a meeting with the mayor, and ask to meet with the chief of national police in Quito. As one Ecuadorian put it: “If someone from the U.S. gets robbed, it’s more important than if it happens to someone from here” (PI, A). Secondly, their request for extra police protection for their neighborhoods and English language services demonstrate their expectation of special treatment and their disinterest in the welfare of the rest of the town. Their argument was not “security is an issue in Cotacachi and we’d like to find ways to improve safety here”, but “We (the amenity migrants) want measures to be taken that will make us (the amenity migrants) safer”.

This alienated landscape perspective contrasts sharply with the municipality’s approach to its constituents, which can be seen in the mayor’s reply at the meeting. According to the people who were there, he responded to the requests for extra police protection by saying “We’re all Cotacacheños. If extra security measures are going to be taken, it will be for everybody” (personal conversation). A similar sentiment was echoed during my discussion with a member of the canton’s assembly when he said “we can’t legislate for different sectors…They have to be general policies, for everyone” (PI, Francisco). The municipality’s rhetoric of sameness, in which all members of the town receive the same guarantees, throws into sharp relief the assumptions of privilege that the amenity migrants have carried with them to their new home.

Non-Ecuadorian, non-amenity migrant perspectives
In this section, I’d like to discuss conversations I had with two people who are neither amenity migrants nor Ecuadorians. Both James and May are foreigners who moved to Cotacachi for personal reasons, starting families with Ecuadorians and working in the town and the surrounding region. Although James currently lives two hours away from Cotacachi, his children live in town with his ex-wife and he is also involved with a number of socio-economic development projects in the area. May’s partner is an indigenous man and together they run an organic farm in an indigenous community, a short walk up the mountains from Cotacachi. Being outsiders who have nonetheless developed deep affective bonds with Ecuadorians and whose primary work centers on contributing to the sustainable development of the area, these two people have unique perspectives on the recent influx of amenity migrants to the town. While they certainly do not speak for all the Ecuadorian citizens of Cotacachi and its surroundings, I believe their embeddedness in Cotacachi gives them a “thick” understanding of the town’s dynamics, which they shared openly with me.

Probably the most significant critique both James and May offered of the amenity migrants is concern over the as-yet-unknown environmental effects associated with the real estate development. Until now, Cotacachi has had no zoning code, effectively making it a real-estate free for all. It is also important to understand that Cotacachi is an important ecological region of Ecuador. Directly bordering the canton to the north is the Cotacachi-Cayapas Ecological Reserve which was created in 1968. This reserve …covers 204,420 ha and extends downward from alpine ecosystems in the western Andean cordillera to the western humid tropical lowland forests not far from the Pacific coast…The reserve contains vast extensions of contiguous forested areas, while in the
adjacent buffer zones the primary forest and associated species are rapidly disappearing. Inside the reserve are hundreds of critical watersheds supporting dozens of endangered species… (Rhoades, Development with Identity, 3-5)

Cotacachi is essentially a buffer zone for this reserve. Within Cotacachi, it is uncertain how the town will handle ever increasing demands on its infrastructure. And, as the land outside the town is used to create the gated communities many amenity migrants prefer, it is unclear how the loss of tree cover and increased demand for water will affect the indigenous communities that currently reside on the mountain slopes outside of Cotacachi (PI, James). Recently, developers bought a piece of property on the slopes outside of Cotacachi and then clear cut the land. As a result, the people who lived in the area lost their source of water, since the stream dried up when the trees were cut down (ibid). May noted that a large adobe mansion bordering her farm uses approximately 50% of the water in her community. She also fears that the gated communities’ multiple septic tanks are leaking into underground water sources in the area (field notes). To illustrate this issue, James related to me the story behind the creation of El Urku, a gated community that sits in the middle of an indigenous community:

They built these huge condos there...they built them without any constraints. They got some investors and just threw these things up...Once they were nearing finishing the construction, they went to the municipality to get permission to hook the condos up to the municipal water system...And the municipality said “That’s a community outside of the city, the water system doesn’t go out there”....So then, they’re in this...indigenous, poor, agricultural community and they’re like “We need to hook up to the water system here in El Urku”...And they hooked their water up to the little capitation tank that the community has, which is not even enough water for the community as it stood. And so now the community has a water problem. (PI)
In a somewhat poignant twist of irony, a few days after I had this conversation with James, I participated in a conversation in Selva, one of the migrant-own restaurants. A couple was discussing how clean their water was, with the wife noting she drinks “straight from the tap” and has never had any problems. Later on in the conversation I learned this couple lives in none other than El Urku (field notes).

In a related issue, both James and May criticized the amenity migrants for their lack of participation in important aspects of Ecuadorian life and a kind of willful ignorance about the country in which they now live. On his blog designed to challenge the migrant-created myths about Cotacachi, James explains the concept of the minga, a communal work system important in Ecuadorian culture:

Mingas are days or periods of time set aside for members of the community to work together on a project, either one that benefits the community as a whole or as part of an exchange of work between different community members. Much of the maintenance of infrastructure and public works occurs through mingas, and thus every member of the community has an obligation to participate”. (James, “Impacts and responsibilities of foreigners”)

Generally speaking, each household sends a member to participate in a minga, and if the household is unable to do so they pay a sum of money instead. In her community, May has noted a reluctance on the part of the amenity migrants of El Urku to take part, and many refuse to participate or pay. According to May, these migrants have expressed the sentiment that they pay taxes to the city of Cotacachi and therefore have already “done their part” so to speak (field notes). However, the indigenous communities manage much of their own resources and as such taxes paid to the municipality are not necessarily used to fund the community’s projects. In his blog, James recounts how,
during the construction of El Urku “several roads were damaged by trucks laden with heavy equipment and materials” and yet the new neighbors were disinterested in participating in the mingas that were required to repair the damage.

In a similar vein, many of the migrants who employ Ecuadorians, be it in construction or domestic help, do not pay their employees minimum wage. James and I discussed this during our interview, as he recounted some of the debates he has had with North American real estate developers in the area, all of whom employ Ecuadorian labor during their construction projects: “I would ask them: ‘How much is the minimum wage in Ecuador?’ and without exception, nobody could ever answer that question. Nobody knew. Why don’t you know what the minimum wage is in the country you live in? Because you don’t care”. James continued “Why don’t people know these things? Because you go to these websites and it’s like “Come live in Cotacachi” and there’s subpages about “What you need to know to live in Cotacachi” with the people, and the culture and all this, but there’s nothing on there that says: here’s what you need to pay someone” (PI). He contrasts this with his own website about living in Cotacachi, which has links to the labor laws of Ecuador. As James noted, whether the underpayment is due to cupidity or ignorance is beside the point, because both situations demonstrate a general lack of engagement and indifference on the part of the migrants towards the laws of their new “home” and its citizens.

The issue of the minimum wage gives lie to the migrants’ self-perception as economic windfall for Cotacachi and, like the Ecuadorians mentioned above, both James and May take issue with this characterization. Like some of the Ecuadorians, James puts
Cotacachi’s prosperity in historical perspective, explaining how the town’s extremely popular former mayor Auki Tituaña did much to make the town what it is today: “Going back fifteen years ago, Cotacachi was a pretty ugly little town…Then Tituaña took over in 2000 and did a pretty good job…He wasn’t super corrupt…he got a bunch of international aid money, he invested in all kinds of infrastructure”. And so, James argues, although many amenity migrants see themselves as being responsible for the town’s success, it is the other way around: Cotacachi’s relative prosperity, *pre-foreign interest*, is what made it an attractive amenity migrant destination (PI).

Many of the amenity migrants I spoke with mentioned purchasing organic produce from May and yet she was skeptical about the migrants’ economic contribution to both her own operation and the town in general. In her own experience, the migrants were unwilling to purchase enough produce on a regular basis to truly improve her bottom line. She also felt that between the numerous dry goods the migrants bring back from the States and their frequent trips to the SuperMaxi in Ibarra, much of their economic support “stays in their own circle”. Additionally, when discussing the kinds of work created by the migrants, she called it “*trabajo sin dignidad*” (work without dignity), noting that much of it was temporary and low-skilled (field notes).

Indeed, in many ways this is perhaps the crux of the critique May and James level at the migrant community. Both of them have centered their lives in Cotacachi around building relationships of solidarity with Ecuadorians and working with them to improve, in long-lasting and meaningful ways, the socio-economic conditions in which their neighbors and friends live. There is a marked contrast between their daily efforts, built
over time, and the rather superficial, not entirely benign, contributions the amenity migrants are making. Both James and May feel that making one’s home here should entail a more profound level of identification with the local population and an aligning of one’s lifestyle and goals with the aspirations of their host community. Speaking from the perspective of a Cotacacheño James stated “If foreigners want to come live here, that’s fine. But it needs to be according to our rules and supporting the kind of development that we want…If you want to come and be part of the community, you’re welcome” (PI).

Local government’s perspective

Here, it is useful to discuss the municipality’s response to the stream of migrants moving into Cotacachi. As noted above, Cotacachi has no zoning codes, so the municipality was not initially equipped to manage the ways in which the town was developed. James describes the process this way: “When these conjuntos privados started going up, the municipality was caught totally unprepared…outside of the eight blocks of the urban center, five years ago I could have bought a hectare of land and put a skyscraper on it. There’s nothing that said I couldn’t do that” (PI). Currently, the city government is carrying out a study of the proposed housing developments and has put a freeze on further construction until the study is completed. During my visit, I was able to speak with an elected representative serving on the canton’s assembly and he shared the municipality’s perspective:

We find ourselves in an urgent situation to make people respect the ordinance from the canton’s development plan... in which certain areas of the canton are designated for urban development, others for industry and others exclusively for agriculture....We have
seen that some developments haven’t respected this, because they’re located in agricultural zones where the soil is excellent for the production of food...We’re working urgently on this issue of regulation...While we do have this ordinance from the development plan, we still have other ordinances to put together, like zoning....And of course we have to educate all the different communities and the foreigners so they are very clear about the rules here. (PI, Francisco)

It is also important to note that the indigenous communities surrounding Cotacachi operate as independent entities, which means that they have their own regulations regarding land use and the regulations vary between communities. This is why El Urku is the only community with gated communities inside it. While it is was not clear from my interviews if the policies in other communities were a result of the El Urku developments or if they preceded them, a number of informants mentioned the ways in which the indigenous communities address this kind of development. Specifically, some of the communities prohibit the sale of land to outsiders or require that a person offer their land to others within the community, at a reasonable price, before entering the wider market. According to one mestiza, “They [the indigenous communities] don’t allow foreigners to buy land there…I don’t know why, maybe they’re afraid they’ll take their land” (PI, Cecilia), and an indigenous woman speculated that, although the issue hasn’t come up in her community, in the communities where the prohibitions exist, “We don’t have enough money to make our communities progress, but they come with money and they can advance themselves. Maybe that’s why they [the indigenous communities] are afraid” (PI, Belén). Although I was unable to obtain more detailed information about the policies during my research, their existence points to the manifold consequences of
amenity migration for a community in which money is scarce and land is the most valuable resource.

Conclusions

One of the questions I asked Ecuadorian interview participants was “what would you tell North Americans who are thinking about moving here? What advice would you give them?” and the answers reflect the complex dynamics of amenity migration in a globalized world. Cristina responded “They should just come!...The climate is beautiful, they’re not going to find something like this anywhere else. It’s tranquil and Ecuadorians are very kind” (PI) and this was a fairly typical answer. In general, people answered with some variation of this response, expressing pride in their town and a desire to be welcoming to others.

Some also included an emphasis on the economic contributions the migrants can make, saying things like: “That they should give us work” (PI, E) or “They should come with motivation to give work to those of us who need it” (PI, F). This is interesting because such comments are open to multiple interpretations. On the one hand, they reflect the global relations of privilege and wealth and demonstrate how the Ecuadorians primarily perceive the amenity migrants as a source of income. This interpretation also shows how amenity migration, while providing some economic stimulus, reinforces the perception of the Global North as the source of wealth and prosperity, while the Global South is condemned to passively waiting to receive whatever share of affluence the North decides to bestow on it.
On the other hand, it is also possible to interpret these comments as a kind of veiled criticism of the behavior and choices of the present amenity migrant community. That is to say, depending on where one perceives the weight of the comment to lie, one can read these comments as saying “They should contribute economically [because they’re not doing it now]”. Considering the context of these answers and the constraints of the interviews, it’s not hard to imagine my respondents using such a response to express, in a subtle and diplomatic fashion, a level of discontent with the present situation.

The migrants’ sense of entitlement and privilege and their ignorance of Cotacachi also came up frequently in Ecuadorian’s responses to this question. One Ecuadorian answered my question by saying “They should respect us” (PI, G). Another said “They should know where they’re coming” (PI, H) and a third echoed this with: “First, they need to get to know the place” (PI, I). Another, after prefacing his statement with an apology to me, answered: “Some come with the idea that “we’re gringos, we have power over everything and you have to do what we say” (PI, D). Indeed, I began to ask this question after an interview in which the participant discussed at length the amenity migrants’ expectation that the municipality offer them services in English. She criticized this attitude, pointing out that if she were to immigrate to another country, she wouldn’t expect the population to suddenly accommodate her in Spanish. At the end of the conversation, she asked me explicitly to try and explain this to the amenity migrants and encourage them to learn Spanish (PI, E).
To conclude, I believe it is instructive to examine how the Ecuadorians construct themselves and their relationship to the amenity migrant community. As mentioned earlier, many have a great deal of pride in Cotacachi and speak proudly of its climate, cleanliness, safety and natural beauty. They also characterize themselves as kind, unselfish and courteous and feel proud of the hospitality their culture generally offers to foreigners. In this, their perceptions are quite similar to those of the migrants. However, like the municipal discourse over services, the Ecuadorians also tend to use a narrative that minimizes the differences between themselves and the foreigners; challenging, in a way, the migrants’ exceptionalism mentality. One woman responded to my question by saying “Our doors are open for them to come live here…We’re all here to work together. After all, we’re all human beings and the only thing that changes is the color of the skin. In the rest, we’re the same” (PI, Cristina). While a few amenity migrants said something along the lines of “Ecuadorians are like people everywhere -some good, some bad, etc”, none of them said “Ecuadorians are just like us”.

The Ecuadorians’ expressions of identification extended to the ways they discussed the future of the town. Many articulated the hope that their new neighbors would work with them and together they would create a thriving, vibrant, town. While clearly this vision is predicated in part on the migrants’ greater financial resources, these comments were not solely referring to money. Saying things like “if they come, they should help with the city…There are many ways to help, not necessarily economically but there are many projects that we could do so that Cotacachi becomes more than it is today” (PI, Luisa) and “More should come, and if there were a way -even though there is
already a gringo community- maybe they can help in *something* for the advancement of our canton, of our city” (PI, Rubi) (emphasis in the original) in answer to the question “What would you tell North Americans who are thinking about moving here?” demonstrates a desire on the part of these participants for an amenity migrant community that is engaged with Cotacachi and actively invested in making it a better place.

By contrast, save for a few remarks made about trying to buy local, and a migrant-wide effort to save stray dogs, narratives of solidarity were generally absent from the migrants’ discussions of Cotacachi. While there was much they appreciated about the town, they did not necessarily identify with it and certainly their description of their daily lives indicates that their primary investments are within the migrant community -not Cotacachi as a whole.

The general attitude of Cotacacheños towards amenity migrants is welcoming but also unapologetic. Foreigners are welcome, as long as they’re willing and able to adapt to the town’s culture and abide by its rules. This includes things such as learning the language, participating in the minga and not expecting special treatment. The tension arises when this egalitarianism collides with the frequently unconscious privilege those from the Global North carry with them wherever they go. Although many express a desire to “adapt to the culture”, the comments from the Ecuadorians and the rate of turnover among the migrant community suggest that such adaptation is halting and frequently unsuccessful. While the Ecuadorians have many positive things to say about the foreigners in their town, the hypothetical advice they offered demonstrates the true commitment that is required if one is to engage with others and live ethically in the
power-geometries that shape our world today. As one woman put it “They should come…but with a little less pride” (PI, J).
Ch.5: The good, the bad and the ugly

In the previous chapters, I’ve examined how the Cotacachi amenity migrants represent themselves and their new home, how their Ecuadorian neighbors perceive them and how Cotacachi itself is represented through online marketing. In this chapter, I’d like to share my own observations, with the hope that they will supplement the information already discussed. My choice to do this is partly due to the highly artificial nature of recorded interviews, in which people are less likely to speak candidly and more likely to present their “best” self. Additionally, the interviewees were a self-selecting group who, for various reasons, felt comfortable with and interested in sharing their story with me. In recounting my experiences in more casual and public settings, I am able to present a slightly wider range of attitudes and perspectives, since I interacted with a great many more amenity migrants than I interviewed.

Also, I chose the title of this chapter very deliberately. As noted earlier, many amenity migrants keep blogs and, when sharing their experiences of the town, use the term “the good, the bad, and the ugly” to break down their observations of life in Ecuador. Some also used this phrase when talking with me (as in “Sure, I’ll tell you all about Cotacachi -the good, the bad, and the ugly”). Here, then, I will shift the ethnographic lens from Ecuador to the amenity migrants who live there and share my own observations in a similar spirit.
The Ugly

Probably the most important thing to discuss is the casual, negative comments that many amenity migrants make when talking about Ecuador and Ecuadorians. During my first visit, I overheard two migrants complaining bitterly about a banking problem and how a person couldn’t “get anything done in this country”. This was one of the moments that made me interested in studying amenity migration since it made me wonder, if people were so unhappy and frustrated in the country, why they would stay. It also made me curious about whether or not such attitudes were prevalent and if it permeated all interactions amenity migrants had with Ecuadorians.

Upon returning and conducting my interviews, I was a little bit surprised to find so many people articulating (if not actually living) a more humble attitude towards their host country, acknowledging that they are in fact guests in Ecuador and so it behooves them to adapt to their new country’s culture and not the other way around. However, as I sat in the cafes and restaurants and listened to casual conversations, a different attitude frequently surfaced. Complaining about various aspects of the country—from shoddy workmanship to poor customer service—seems to be a common pastime for many amenity migrants and indeed in some ways serves to bond people who otherwise might have little in common. After all, everyone has a story about a time when an Ecuadorian was unreliable, untrustworthy, or ill-equipped to complete the task at hand. For example, in one conversation about Ecuadorian workmanship, one amenity migrant joked “I think the Ecuadorian motto is: good enough” and another responded: “They don’t know what a straight line is here” (field notes). More extreme comments include a woman who told
me that “They [Ecuadorians] operate on a lower vibration”, while another, when discussing the poor service at a restaurant, exclaimed “I'm so sick of these fucking indigenous women, they all have a mouth on them, they always have to say something, they always have to talk back” (field notes).

To be fair, not all amenity migrants engage in this kind of insulting dialogue. Indeed, I witnessed conversations in which one amenity migrant would attempt to start this kind of discussion and others would neutralize them, by either stating something positive about the country or by simply not joining in. In one conversation, in which a woman was complaining about the byzantine process of trying to renew her cedula, another woman responded simply by saying “That’s the way it is here. I don’t even worry about it anymore”. She repeated similar phrases as the first woman continued to try and elicit more empathetic responses (field notes).

Nonetheless, I believe these observations offer an important caveat to the “I love the people” theme discussed in Chapter Three. While some amenity migrants genuinely appreciate the culture, and a small minority possess the language skills to truly participate in it, a great number display a kind of disdain (sometimes mild, sometimes less so) for the society in which they now live. The fact that negative comments about Ecuador are a common topic of conversation demonstrates the powerful role that “Othering” can have in the creation of a group identity. The shared difficulties of coping with life in a foreign country gives amenity migrants from disparate backgrounds something to commiserate about. Unfortunately, in the process, it also feeds a particular, negative, discourse about Ecuador and Ecuadorians.
In a related vein, the migrants’ self-reporting about Spanish differed somewhat from what I observed in my fieldwork. Although many said they wanted to learn Spanish, only a few were actively enrolled in Spanish classes. Additionally, most of the migrants spent the majority of their time in places where little Spanish was required, such as restaurants and cafes with English menus and/or English speaking staff. From what I observed, the majority was able to communicate numbers and food items, but little else and yet, when discussing their Spanish level, many said they could “get by” and seemed content about it. In one very telling exchange, some amenity migrants were discussing their Spanish abilities and one couple said “Ours isn’t very good, but we’re not trying very hard” to which another woman responded “I’m not trying at all!” and everyone laughed (field notes).

Again, I want to emphasize that there are important exceptions to this generalization -some migrants speak competently or even fluently and others take classes and deliberately place themselves in situations where they will need to practice. However, the conversation I just related indicates the laissez-faire attitude many migrants have towards acquiring the language of the country they have chosen to live in. People see it as an option, a project which the particularly ambitious among them take on, not an integral part of living, respectfully, in a foreign country or perhaps the most crucial skill needed if one is to actually know “the people” that so many claim to love.

The Bad

Another aspect of the amenity migrant community that did not surface during the interviews was the relative prevalence of conspiracy theorists among them. While I have
no interest in examining the precise beliefs various migrants hold, the conspiracy
theorists as an important subgroup of the amenity migrants are worth analyzing because it
speaks to a specific kind of motivation for leaving the U.S. and choosing to live in
Ecuador. Certainly one minor factor for many migrants -though not all, or even
necessarily the majority- is the political situation in the U.S. As one amenity migrant put
it succinctly: “You’ll find two kinds here -people who left because they didn’t like Bush
and people who left because they didn’t like Obama” (field notes). People would
frequently tell me that they “didn’t like the direction the U.S. was going in”.

However, beyond that frustration and disappointment with the current situation in
the U.S, many migrants also hold a view that as the United States loses its power and
status in the world, it will resort to more extreme measures to control private citizens’
capital. People discussed with concern the limits on the amount of cash the United States
allows people to leave with. One amenity migrant recommended the website
SovereignMan.com to me, which has sections on things like “How to Get a Second
Passport” and “Offshore Bank Account”. Some of the text in the latter section reads

Having an offshore bank account is a fundamental part of international diversification.
It’s especially important in times like these when currency controls and government
regulations are getting stricter, supposedly, “to battle money laundering and international
terrorism”. Offshore banking enables a way of having part of your wealth outside of your
country, so that you never risk having one government freeze or confiscate all your
assets. (www.sovereignman.com)

People who feel similarly see moving to Ecuador as a way to maintain control over their
assets and protect themselves from such government interference.
Likewise, but with a slightly different emphasis, some amenity migrants focus on the government’s control over its citizens in general. This includes things like the cameras on stoplights (which are “everywhere”) and chemtrails - the trails left by airplanes, which some believe to be “a toxic substance the government deliberately sprays on an unsuspecting populace” (Watson, usatoday.com). In one casual conversation about the general situation in the U.S. today, some migrants warned me about the “camps” that are apparently appearing all over the country. With the barbed wiring facing in, some people fear that these camps will be used to contain and control portions of the population in the near future. When I described the high quality of life I experience in my own town, I was told to “just watch out for any fences getting built in my area”. If such high, barbed wired fences began to appear, I would do well to leave as soon as possible (field notes).

Holding some “alternative” views myself, my purpose in mentioning this amenity migrant sub-culture isn’t to mock them or dismiss them as paranoid but to examine how such views relate to their decision to live abroad and their experience doing so. Specifically, the emphasis on freedom from government control in both sub-groups is interesting to me. On the SovereignMan website, the author frequently uses the phrase “Build your freedom” and declares in bold letters at the top of every page “If you value your freedom, you’ll want to subscribe to this e-letter”(Sovereignman.com). Apparently, for some people, moving to Ecuador is a way to exercise this freedom and live outside of the U.S. government’s grasp. The irony here is that their ability to do so is based entirely on the privilege that that self-same government has created through decades of
dominating and controlling other countries. They do not seem to wonder why they have a “right” to be “free” while members of other countries do not.

The irony deepens when one realizes that a number of migrants harbor anti-immigrant sentiment in regards to immigration in the United States. Some of the migrants I spoke with openly supported “Sheriff Joe’s” efforts in Arizona and some blogs seemed to have negative views about the significant presence of immigrants in the United States. Discussing the need to change their return tickets, Patricia’s husband muses “I guess they [the Ecuadorian government] take unkindly to people who overstay their visa by fining then $200 each on departure as well as barring you from the country for the next year! Too bad the US government doesn't follow their lead!” (Roger, “Making new friends”, emphasis in the original). Drawing on Helen Pellerin’s work, Massey reflects on this paradoxical mobility brought about by global neoliberal capitalism:

…neoliberalism in practice is not simply about mobility: it too requires some spatial fixes… Capital, the rich, the skilled…can move easily about the world, as investment, or trade, as sought-after labor, or as tourists; and at the same time whether it be in the immigration controlled countries of the West, or the gated communities of the rich in any major metropolis anywhere…they can protect their fortress homes. Meanwhile, the poor and the unskilled from the so-called margins of this world are both instructed to open up their borders and welcome the West’s invasion in whatever form it comes, and told to stay where they are. (86-87)

Furthermore, the assumption that one is “freer” in Ecuador reflects an absolute naiveté about the country to which they have chosen to move. Many Ecuadorians are concerned about President Correa’s moves over the past few years to consolidate power and see it as deleterious for their country’s democracy (personal conversation). James,
who lives in a region of the country with great mineral wealth and also significant biodiversity, shared that people have recently noticed an increased military presence in the area. After a number of unsuccessful attempts by multinational mining corporations to start operations there, the local populace suspects the government will begin its own operation soon and the military is being sent to safeguard the project (personal conversation). Clearly, there is a strong enough government in Ecuador at this time to interfere with individuals’ lives and make unilateral decisions on a range of issues. On the other hand, given the relative wealth with which these migrants enter Ecuador, and the fact that they have the option to leave any time they’d like, they are certainly freer than their Ecuadorian counterparts and their position of privileged mobility insulates them from much of these concern.

Finally, the somewhat chaotic and weaker state apparatus in Ecuador (as compared to the U.S.) cuts both ways for these migrants. Remember, it was the lack of zoning codes that made many of the gated communities in Cotacachi possible. For those who fear “big government’s” ability to gather and maintain information about private citizens, the lower tech and less extensive government regulation of daily life comes as a relief. And the fact that these migrants have money to spare make bribery an acceptable option when necessary -an option which is generally less available in the United States (especially for the amounts of money these migrants have at their disposal). In one story I heard, a couple boasted about how they had gotten their new flat screen TV for a much cheaper price by crossing the border and purchasing it in Colombia. On the way back,
they bribed the border guard and thus avoided paying duties on it in Ecuador (field notes).

On the other hand, another migrant told me the story of getting fined for a non-existent traffic violation while driving in Quito. He felt that the police officer, spotting a foreigner, decided to take advantage of him—giving him the option of writing him up for a violation he did not commit or paying the officer a smaller fee to “ignore” the incident. He chose the latter (PI, George). It’s also worth remembering the outcry that was raised after the string of robberies in 2011. At that time, the migrants wanted more state presence, not less, and were upset about the municipality’s inability to comply. Additionally, the number one frustration the migrants report is the process of getting their residency permit. It usually takes months, during which they sometimes end up in legal limbo (having overstayed their tourist visa but not having their official residency papers either) or find that the requirements have changed midstream, obligating them to start all over again.

The point here is that a significant minority of the amenity migrants come to Ecuador in part because they are trying to escape what they feel to be unacceptable control and regulation by the U.S. government. And yet the system they perceive to be invasive is precisely what makes their flight possible. And when they do arrive in Ecuador, a country which they believe will allow them greater freedom and autonomy, they are frustrated by the lack of the very thing they were trying to escape: structures and controls that make life more predictable and transparent.
The Good

Having offered some significant critiques about the amenity migrants’ relationship to Cotacachi, I would like to close this chapter by commenting on some of the positive aspects that I observed during my trip. As mentioned earlier, there are a handful of migrants who have made efforts to learn Spanish and are actively involved with the Ecuadorian community.

For example, I attended an Ecuadorian church service with Bev, a particularly warm woman who has acquired what she calls “street Spanish” (that is, functional but not necessarily grammatically correct) and watched as numerous members of the church greeted her warmly. She knew them by name (and they her) and she introduced me to them, explaining who each person was (field notes). In recent email correspondence, she mentioned that she, with others, has contacted ASPCA International and is organizing a neutering campaign for the numerous street dogs of the town. She has also gotten in touch with the municipality to create a tutoring program where some of the amenity migrants help Ecuadorian school children with their English. Wanda, an amenity migrant who speaks fluent Spanish, has made a number of Ecuadorian friends and has been tutoring local children in her home for some time (PI).

Another couple, Liz and Philip, have started a construction business in which one of their main areas of focus is building affordable houses for Ecuadorians. Liz, who
speaks competent conversational Spanish, recalled the company dinner she and her husband hosted as one of her favorite memories of her time in Cotacachi so far: “We had fourteen people around the table and they’re all people that worked for him or with him and we were the only foreigners. And, you know, the conversation’s going in Spanish and I’m half-following…That was nice. That was really nice”. She is also aware of the minimum wage laws in Ecuador and is conscientious about complying with them for her domestic help. Interestingly, she was one of the very few who acknowledged the incomplete nature of her understanding of Ecuadorian society. When I asked her what some of the greatest challenges of living in Cotacachi were, she responded: “Not understanding the culture and also some of the things about the culture….It’s very common to cheat. To say one thing and do another…I don’t understand it yet. I know it exists, I know it does not meet my value system -it’s lack of integrity… at least [that’s] what it looks like to me, but I don’t understand where it comes from yet, so, you know, I don’t have a final opinion on it yet” (PI).

A few migrants also had stories about relationships with Ecuadorians that transcend that “instrumental” exchanges discussed in a previous chapter. Vickie described celebrating Inti Raymi with her Ecuadorian friends.

That night I was hanging out, just kind of waiting for something to happen...There came my friend Alma with her pod, and scooped me up. It was all about Pachamama, we danced in circles in someone’s courtyard...they served chicha...and served a platter of food which you take with your hands...We went to about six or seven houses and danced in the courtyards under the moonlight. And the musicians...would be in the center, everybody taking turns....Several of the houses had really big courtyards and other groups would come in and be dancing as well and all this was -it was amazing...It was such a gift, I was so included. (PI)
During my time there, she was very enthusiastic about attending a workshop with her Ecuadorian friends about a method for building using recycled plastic bottles. Glenn, a bachelor, has a close relationship with an Ecuadorian family in another town, calling them his “adopted family”. He celebrates holidays, birthdays and other special occasions with them and showed me photos of the family while we spoke (PI).

Not surprisingly, the primary commonality between all these people is their ability to communicate in Spanish. While some had the language skills prior to their move, others, like Bev and Vickie, have learned through effort and a willingness to socialize with Ecuadorians, their limited language skills notwithstanding. Additionally, Liz, Philip, Wanda, Vickie and Bev have all chosen to spend at least some of their time in activities outside the migrant social circles - things like church and tutoring programs provide contact with Ecuadorians inside a structure that makes interactions less awkward. Such activities allow for a multiplicity of connections, since one frequently meets many members of a community, and they also create a space outside of the instrumental nature of customer-vendor relations. Finally, it is interesting to note that while some of the people mentioned here live in gated communities, none of them live in the truly isolated communities that are located far from town. They are physically located much closer to the center of town and spend much of their time walking the streets and being physically present in shared spaces.
I believe these examples are valuable, not just for presenting a balanced picture of the amenity migrant community but also for indicating ways of interacting that do not merely replicate the coloniality of power. One of my central questions is how to understand the relationship between the process of amenity migration, which is based on historical structures of inequality and global privilege, and the people who participate in it - many of whom have good intentions and express a desire to be good guests in the country they’ve chosen to call home. In these anecdotes, I believe we see some possibility of ways in which, the historical structures notwithstanding, the amenity migrants can contribute positively to the place in which they now live.
Ch. 6: Conclusion

…One of the truly productive characteristics of material spatiality - its potential for the happenstance juxtaposition of previously unrelated trajectories, that business of walking around a corner and bumping into alterity, of having… to get on with neighbors who have got ‘here’ …by different routes from you; your being here together is, in that sense, quite uncoordinated. This is an aspect of the productiveness of spatiality which may enable ‘something new’ to happen… what is important is that contact is involved and some form of social negotiation. (Massey, 94-95)

I’ve agreed to meet Joseph at his house, which is in a gated community outside of town. It’s hot, and the wind is blowing dust into my eyes, teeth and hair. I walk and walk, leaving the center of town, past a long high wall behind which is nothing. “Se vende” (“For sale”) is spray painted on the outside. On my left are some brightly colored, modern looking condos near completion. Ahead of me the last vestiges of the town disappear into the countryside and I begin to worry that I’m lost. There is only one other pedestrian in sight, a woman with her son, and I ask her for directions. Apparently, yes, there are gringos living down this way. I just have to keep going. Eventually I end up at a gravel road, and according to Joseph’s instructions, I should walk down it until I reach his particular compound. However, the road looks deserted and I wonder about the wisdom of walking it alone. It’s hard for me to imagine anyone at all living down there, and especially not the glamorous, rumored-to-be-Leonardo-DiCaprio’s-uncle Joseph. I call him, he assures me I’m in the right place, and I forge ahead. Finally, after passing a man grazing his cow in a field, tall walls begin to appear. One after another, each with
their own name and varying combinations of aesthetic and security measures. I’m simultaneously relieved that I seem to have found the right place and mildly disturbed by how isolated I feel. I approach the enormous wooden gate, ring the bell, and, after answering his suspicious questions, the guard lets me in. Joseph’s house is near the entrance, behind another high, locked, wrought-iron gate with two barking dogs in the yard. As we sit in his courtyard and settle into the interview, I’m struck by the fact that I’m alone with a strange man and surrounded by high walls, unfriendly dogs, and locked gates. Clearly, these measures are mostly meant to keep people out, but at that moment I am most aware of the fact that they can also keep one in. Unselfconscious and a prodigious talker, Joseph is an interviewer’s dream, but I am still glad when we are finished and he calls off the dogs to see me out.
Figure 7. On my way to Joseph’s house, nearing the edge of town (image mine).

Figure 8. The rather desolate gravel road (image mine).

Figure 9. Some of the other gated communities in the area (image mine).
Figure 10. Another gated community (image mine).

Figures 11 & 12. I’ve arrived (images mine).
I realize it’s possible to read the above reflections as the paranoid musings of a novice fieldworker who has seen one too many episodes of CSI. However, I’ve included it here because it presents an interesting contrast to Massey’s argument for space quoted above and in doing demonstrates some of the challenges of amenity migration. By completely removing themselves from any kind of neighborhood, let alone the town center, those choosing to live in this area cut themselves off from the “happenstance juxtaposition of previously unrelated trajectories”. These amenity migrants have done everything possible to ensure that their neighbors got there in very much the same way that they themselves arrived and there is little opportunity for meaningful, spontaneous, social negotiation with “alterity”. While some walk to town, many own cars or take taxis, thus further reducing any exposure to the “chaos, openness and uncertainty” that Massey believes can lead to “creative crucibles for the democratic sphere” (153).

I agree with Massey that space has a number of “productive characteristics” and in many ways that is what drew me to study the amenity migrants in the first place. However, that productivity is almost universally circumvented by the migrants themselves, which means we must consider how they are using the space and then articulate alternative possibilities.

Some borders are being dismantled, some renegotiated, and yet others -new ones- are being erected. The real socio-political question concerns less, perhaps, the degree of openness/closure…than the terms on which that openness/closure is established. Against what are boundaries erected? What are the relations within which the attempt to deny (and admit) entry is carried out? What are the power-geometries here; and do they demand a political response? (Massey, 179)
The very nature of amenity migration means that certain boundaries have been dismantled and this is not necessarily a bad thing. This is what the government official was getting at when he said: “We receive them with open arms because we believe in globalization, we believe that the world today has to open itself up for relationships that are more open, genuine and humane between all human beings” (PI, Francisco). Other Ecuadorians seem to feel similarly, and welcome the opportunity to show foreigners that Ecuador is not “a place out there in the jungle” and that in fact Ecuador “is developing, it is growing…There are cities, there is modernity, there is technology” (PI, Antonio). A similar sentiment was echoed by the amenity migrants themselves, since many mentioned to me how ignorant many of their Stateside friends and family were about Ecuador, warning them that it was dangerous, impoverished and underdeveloped in the extreme. Many delighted in challenging these negative stereotypes and particularly enjoyed watching their loved ones change their minds upon visiting (PI).

However, as we have seen throughout this work, new barriers are being created even as the fundamental barrier of living in a foreign country is rapidly diminishing. To Massey’s question “Against what are boundaries erected?” we can say, the amenity migrants erect boundaries against Ecuadorians, particularly poor ones, as they try to protect themselves and the privilege they came to Ecuador to enjoy. They isolate themselves linguistically and spatially, build ever higher walls around their compounds and confine their socializing to migrant spaces and migrant-dominated activities, preferring romantic ignorance over active engagement with the greater community.
When Massey asks “What are the relations within which the attempt to deny (and admit) entry is carried out? What are the power-geometries here” I have tried to answer by exploring the coloniality of power and how colonial attitudes permeate amenity migration as it is currently practiced. If the potentially positive ramifications of amenity migration are to be realized, we must first be extremely explicit about the history of oppression and contemporary asymmetrical power relations that inform the phenomenon. This includes recognizing that the privilege that allows people from one country to “live like royalty” in another is not due to a birthright or their own hard work but rather a history of exploitation that is accompanied by attitudes of entitlement and superiority, however unconscious. It also includes naming the coloniality of power when we see it, and not treating it as a normal or inevitable system of relations but instead the product of asymmetrical power relations which can and should be challenged.

And finally, we must consider what potential political responses are appropriate or useful in this particular situation. I like Massey because she does not turn this question into an issue of how “open” or “closed” a given space should be, recognizing that there is always flow and movement in spatiality. The question is: what terms of openness and closure can produce a democratic, and more or less just, space for all involved? This is particularly useful here because I don’t believe that we can condemn amenity migration outright or simply wish that it didn’t happen. After all, it is hard to argue that elderly people in the United States, living on pensions of $1500 per month and in a system of privatized health care, should live out their days in poverty with no access to quality health care as they age. Who would wish that on their own parents or choose that for
themselves, when they have the option to live comfortably, with all their needs met, in another country?

Instead, we can think about the conditions that might potentially challenge the typical alienated landscape perspective and encourage more active engagement on the part of the migrants. In many ways, my ideas for such conditions are no more than suggestions for further research, but I believe they would include changing the zoning laws to prohibit the creation of gated communities, creating mixed-income apartment buildings, and perhaps setting up a kind of language exchange, in which a migrant and an Ecuadorian are paired together to teach and practice each other’s languages. Although no policy can directly address the migrants’ personal attitudes towards their host community, I believe a firm commitment to learning the language and a conscientious effort to spend time in Ecuadorian social circles (be it through churches, civic organizations or volunteer activities) will increase opportunities for what Massey calls “social negotiation” and the productive potential of space.

To conclude, I would like to reflect once again on my own position. I was raised in, and continue to be, a member of the Baha’i Faith, a religion which exhorts its members to have a vision that is “world-embracing”. From childhood, I was taught that “The earth is but one country and mankind its citizens” (Baha’u’llah, 249) and that I should see all members of humanity as my brothers and sisters. As I traveled and did the hard work necessary to acquire a second language, I learned just how difficult it is put such ideals into practice and to truly love others as we love our own family. One of the conclusions I drew was that short and medium term trips are not sufficient to overcome
the multitude of barriers that we face when trying to engage ethically with those different from ourselves. Only by living in a place for an extended period of time could such a process even begin.

These beliefs and experiences are some of the reasons I found the amenity migrants of Cotacachi so fascinating. After all, here was a chance for people from vastly different cultures to develop, over a long time, and through “that business of walking around a corner and bumping into alterity”, new and meaningful connections with each other, to approach the other with an attitude of disponibilité and reap the benefits of such relationships. Because Cotacachi is a small and walkable town, the potential for “‘something new’ to happen” seemed even greater. From this perspective, the results of my research were disappointing if unsurprising, since it seemed that few migrants truly take advantage of these possibilities. Living in a foreign country is hard and it is very easy to merely erect new barriers, inside which one is protected from the challenges, exhaustions, and humiliations of being a foreigner. Being willfully ignorant of one’s privilege and leaving one’s own cultural assumptions unexamined is even easier. However, my research also showed that, more than anything, it is a series of individual choices that erects or dismantles these walls. That is to say, being an amenity migrant does not destine one to live in a world of indisponibilité and one can in fact choose otherwise. Some choices are large, like choosing where to live or learning, by any means necessary, the local language. Others are small -attending events outside the migrant community or spending time in public places and non-migrant cafes. But made with regularity over a long period of time, such decisions can allow one to form, in Marcel’s
words, “constellations” with other beings, and such constellations can fulfill the creative and productive potential of sharing space with those different from ourselves.
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