

# Cultural Imaginaries in the Residential Migration to Cotacachi

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## Abstract

How has the small Andean town in Ecuador, Cotacachi come to be “the paradise at the end of the rainbow” as constructed by the companies *International Living* and *Internations* as well as its developers and investors? Based on ethnographic analysis conducted in Cotacachi since 2013, I analyze the dominant imaginaries that helped shape the motivations of U.S. citizens who have relocated to live in Cotacachi against a backdrop of diminishing economic security for working class U.S. retirees. I argue that status mobility is an important part of these imaginings. Keywords: *Residential migration, Ecuador, globalization, transnationalism*

## Resumen

¿Cómo se convierte Cotacachi, ciudad andina de Ecuador en “el paraíso al final del arcoíris” para Compañías como *International Living* e *Internations* y para inmobiliarias e inversionistas? A partir de un estudio etnográfico realizado en Cotacachi desde el año 2013, este artículo analiza los imaginarios que contribuyeron a moldear las motivaciones de los y las ciudadanos estadounidenses que se han trasladado a vivir a Cotacachi en el marco de una escasa seguridad económica para los y las jubilados de clase trabajadora en los Estados Unidos. Argumento que la movilidad de clase forma una parte trascendental en la construcción de estos imaginarios.

Palabras-chave: *Migración residencial, Ecuador, globalización, transnacionalismo*

## Introduction

And so when you come, when you plan to retire you plan to leave all of the chaos behind, you don't plan to move into more chaos.

-Sarah, U.S. Cotacachi resident from Florida

Decisions to start over take place against the backdrop of existential questions about what makes life worth living, decisions in which – as Sarah's

quote demonstrates – geography has a bearing (Gosnell and Abrams 2009). The number of U.S. migrants like Sarah has increased greatly during the past decade in Latin America, Africa and Asia (Van Noorlos 2013). This surge in residential mobility among citizens of industrialized countries is due to factors that include economic and social opportunities, increases in life expectancy, the retirement of the baby boomer demographic, and access to more efficient and cheaper transportation and communication (Janoschka 2011). Rojas, LeBlanc and Sunil (2014) as well as Zeltzer (2008) expect the numbers of residential migrants to continue increasing. This is corroborated by the 2013 Federal Voting Assistance Program (FVAP) report showing the number of U.S. citizens living overseas increased at an average of 5 percent annually between 2000 and 2010. This trend is reflected by Susan Haskins' statement about the advantages of moving to Ecuador in the December 14<sup>th</sup>, 2014 *International Living* Reader email: "there is room in Ecuador for many more of us who are looking for an easier, better life." While there are insufficient data on the exact number of retirees in Cotacachi, the Municipality estimates there are 1,000 to 1,200 households.<sup>1</sup> According to data provided by the Ministry of Foreign Relations and Human Mobility, between 2012 and 2014, the majority of retired pensioner visas were granted to U.S. citizens. In addition, this population more than doubled in two years, from 373 to 603. The biggest influx started during 2009, which coincides with the 2008 economic crisis in the United States. As there are constant migration flows within this population the figures are not static. While migration of North Americans to Mexico has been the predominant focus of lifestyle migration research in Latin America (Benson 2013: 314), little has been written about recent destinations such as Ecuador (Hayes 2014a and 2014b) and even less about Cotacachi (Quishpe and Alvarado 2012).

This paper is part of a larger ethnographic research project that analyzes U.S. and Canadian residential migration to the Andean city of Cotacachi, Ecuador where I have conducted fieldwork since February 2013. In this paper, I address the dominant imaginaries that helped shape the motivations of U.S. citizens who have relocated to live in Cotacachi. International lifestyle marketers help to construct these imaginaries, against a backdrop of diminishing economic security for working class U.S. retirees, the main demographic that has relocated to Cotacachi. I find that desires for status mobility are an important part of these imaginings, and that they are also shaped by lifestyle marketers. These imaginings collide into the social realities of Cotacachi, marked as they are by a complex history of land-tenure and economic and social inequality. Thus, migrant imaginaries are also 'in-process' (cf. Benson and Osbaldiston 2014), since the initial expectations and aspirations must adjust to a different reality.

In order to learn more about how U.S. Cotacachi residents make sense of their migration experiences we can turn to "cultural imaginaries" based on Appadurai's (2002) "geographical imaginaries" and on Benedict Anderson's (1982) imagined communities that de-emphasize a center-periphery analysis of globalized images, ideologies, technologies, ideas and finances, and emphasize how these circulate as (cultural) knowledge. Based on his approach, I am particularly interested in the production of locality in the case of Cotacachi. That is to say, I place the focus of this paper on the U.S. Cotacachi residents' imaginaries and perceptions to analyze initial imagined representations of Cotacachi with some of the challenges U.S. Cotacachi residents face upon their arrival. U.S. Cotacachi residents aspire to social mobility and a more comfortable

lifestyle, yet their arrival has translated into water scarcity, increased land and housing prices, and tensions with indigenous and mestizo groups. U.S. Cotacachi residents' perceptions of the town itself tend to minimize some of those impacts by highlighting their desire to remain "invisible" and to act as "guests". While the current research focused on the perceptions of the U.S. Cotacachi residents in order to illustrate how Cotacachi was crafted as this ideal place for retirement geared particularly to working class U.S. citizens, future research will focus on the perceptions of the indigenous and mestizo population.

I conducted ethnographic research using participant observation, twenty semi-structured and numerous unstructured interviews known as conversational interviews, and fieldnotes. Since ethnographic studies are conducted in natural settings (Bernard 2002), a significant part of the ethnographic data collection for this research took place during 'cafesitos', bar outings, meals at restaurants and while accompanying U.S. Cotacachi residents during their daily lives strolling through the town's main streets. For instance, I met with them at one of the town's popular restaurants or at the U.S. Cotacachi residents' homes, often spending hours talking and sharing their stories. I used different means of meeting the U.S. Cotacachi residents. One was placing an advertisement about my research project in the Cotacachi Newsletter run by a liaison between the U.S. Cotacachi residents and the U.S. Embassy. I met many of my twenty interviewees through this newsletter and then met others through snowball sampling and word of mouth. After meeting, all the interviewees connected me in turn with their circle of U.S. Cotacachi residents. I keep in touch with my respondents through email, read U.S. Cotacachi residents' (and potential newcomers') Facebook pages and continuously reviewed *International Living Ecuador* newsletter.

My research work has incorporated collaborative research (Schensul and Stern 1985) or participatory action research (Fals-Borda and Rahman 1991), which uses research to bring positive change in institutions or communities (Le Compte and Schensul 1999). Within this framework and thanks to my privileged position as an Ecuadorian with dual citizenship working with the U.S. Cotacachi residents, I developed an on-going project with the town's mayor, Jomar Cevallos and the founder of Amie Theater, that consists of video-forums organized under topic areas relevant to all Cotacachi residents: indigenous, mestizo and non-Ecuadorian retirees at Amie, an avant-garde theater.

All interviewees fall under the socially constructed racial and ethnic category of "white" and are mostly from the U.S. South, Southwest or Midwest. Based on their income, occupation before retirement (mostly blue collar), careers, and other social markers, the majority of this population could be considered working class although such lines are always blurred as income is not tied to a particular type of consumption. Instead, many seek to distinguish themselves through taste (and markers constructed around it) as Bourdieu (1984) elaborates, independently of their income. Lower-paid workers constitute the bulk of U.S. residents in Cotacachi, distinguishing it from Cuenca where, as Hayes (2014a) discusses, there is a larger U.S. middle-class presence. At least two of my interviewees mentioned they moved to Cotacachi from Cuenca to reduce living expenses. The U.S. Cotacachi residents I interviewed and shared time with have been in Cotacachi between eight months and five years and were planning to stay. Their career paths are highly variable, ranging from independent contractors to a U.S. Postal Service employee, a dentist, a legal

secretary, restaurateurs and contract specialists. My inquiry started after reading an article in the American Association of Retired Persons magazine entitled “Cotacachi: a Paradise at the End of the Rainbow”.

I have focused on the U.S. retirees who moved to Cotacachi over the past 5 years, as there is a lack of information about this population’s perspective and perceptions of their immigration experience. I use pseudonyms to protect the privacy of interviewees given the size of this community in a rather small town. Nevertheless, in qualitative research, names are just one information marker that members of the same community could identify (LeCompte and Schensul 1999), particularly in settings such as Cotacachi. I was also able to interview the Mayor of Cotacachi and conducted semi-structured interviews with service providers such as restaurant workers, taxi drivers, market stall owners and leather goods sellers.

The guiding ethnographic questions geared towards the U.S. Cotacachi residents included several topics: their reasons for migrating internationally and for choosing Cotacachi as a destination; their pre-conceived ideas about Ecuador; the ways in which they recreate day-to-day life; language and cultural barriers; how they get access to a permanent resident card; housing; health and entertainment; and their relations with other U.S. Cotacachi residents and the local community. The U.S. Cotacachi residents I met are motivated to learn Spanish and actively pursue their language goals by hiring Spanish teachers, using the Rosetta Stone or Duolingo language programs, taking on-line Spanish courses and making an effort to have interactions with local Spanish-speakers. Through our conversations, I witnessed the resilience of this group of people trying to make the most of their new situation, city, food, language, cultural codes and circle of friends while hoping to remain “invisible” so as not to alter the life of the Cotacacheños. The latter proved impossible, as I will discuss further.

## Terminology

Foreign retirees coming from so-called industrialized countries such as the United States are often referred to as the “expat community”, a term that many U.S. Cotacachi residents use to refer to themselves. But some of them also use it as a derogatory term to highlight the differences between those who chose to live in isolated, gated communities (the “ugly Americans”) and those who live in town and are seen (and see themselves) as more integrated. Within the literature, lifestyle migration has been described as involving mobile individuals usually from industrialized countries seeking a more fulfilling way of life, especially in contrast to the one they left (Benson y O’Reilly, 2009). Other terms include residential migration, amenity migration, privileged migration, economic migration, second-home development and residential tourism (Van Noorlos 2013), terms that focus on individual choice rather than structural inequality (Hayes 2014a: 3; O’Reilly 2012). According to Janoschka (2011) and Janoschka and Haas (2013), all these terms refer to mobility as being situated in a conceptual continuum between migration and tourism and its conflicting dimensions. Having said this, I concur with Benson and Osbaldiston (2014: 5) on the need to “unsettle the relationship between lifestyle migration and theories that focus on individual agency, freedom and choice”.

Since academic terms depart from those used by U.S. residents in Cotacachi, I refrain from labeling them in any of these ways. The U.S. citizens that I met and interviewed do not necessarily fall within the categories of migration used in the academic literature. Therefore, such terminology could obscure future analysis that might reveal new and distinct ways of describing migration trajectories and experiences. I discuss how these concepts overflow the experiential practices they intend to define, and developed the idea of *desbordes* (Viteri 2014: xxiii).<sup>3</sup> U.S. Cotacachi “residents” both embody and resist any migration category whether it’s “residential”, “amenity”, “lifestyle” or “economic”. As Kearney (1995: 559) reminds us, transnational spaces, identities and communities pose difficult problems for ethnographic representation. Based on this framework, I refer to the U.S. migrant population as U.S. Cotacachi residents knowing that the term ‘resident’ is also insufficient. ‘Resident’ carries the idea of stability and permanency that is usually measured in terms of time and place whereas for most migrants (not only U.S. Cotacachi residents) migration itself carries a temporary definition where time and place are re-inscribed (Laguette 2003) and idealized notions of a past are set against the current global fragmentation (Massey 1994).

### **Situating Cotacachi as a Destination**

Canton Cotacachi is located in Imbabura Province, in the northern Ecuadorian Andes (see Figure 1). It has approximately 40,000 inhabitants that live in three different areas: the Andean rural area, the urban area and the subtropical area. The canton to the north is the Cotacachi-Cayapas Ecological Reserve. The majority of the indigenous communities are in the Andean rural area while the mestizo population lives in the urban and subtropical area. Only 31 percent of the mestizo population lives in the urban area. However, this situation is changing due to the presence of foreign retirees who are building homes in the Andean rural area and buying houses in gated communities – usually on indigenous-owned land – causing discontentment and further complicating the ongoing problems of water use, garbage disposal and land ownership. Cotacachi is the biggest canton in Imbabura Province with 1,809 square kilometers. 53.5 percent of the population self-identifies as mestizo, 40.5 percent as indigenous and 2.5 percent as white (INEC, 2010).

The economy of this area of the Andes is based on traditional crops and handicrafts (Ortiz, 2004: 58, 59). Cotacachi’s urban area has tourism, leather manufacturing, commerce, and is surrounded by haciendas that produce flowers, vegetables and fruits for export (Ortiz, 2004: 59). The subtropical area produces coffee, sugar, wood and livestock. During the 1980s, the artisans who had had a long tradition of leather manufacturing (saddles, leather bags and leather cigarette cases) began manufacturing leather clothes, particularly jackets. The recent migration of foreign residents has spurred an increase in prices of land, resources, goods and services. Foreign retiree immigration has triggered the building of gated communities that affluent Ecuadorians seek as potential investment properties and weekend destinations from nearby cities such as Quito. As discussed by McCarthy (2007:130-133), the rural areas, mostly located in the non-industrialized world, are now global commodities. This phenomenon is called “urbanization of the rural”. Architects, planners, landscapers, builders

and marketers such as the global developer Remax have established themselves in these new markets. In addition, many forms of rural retreats will probably increase social segregation (McCarthy 2007: 135).

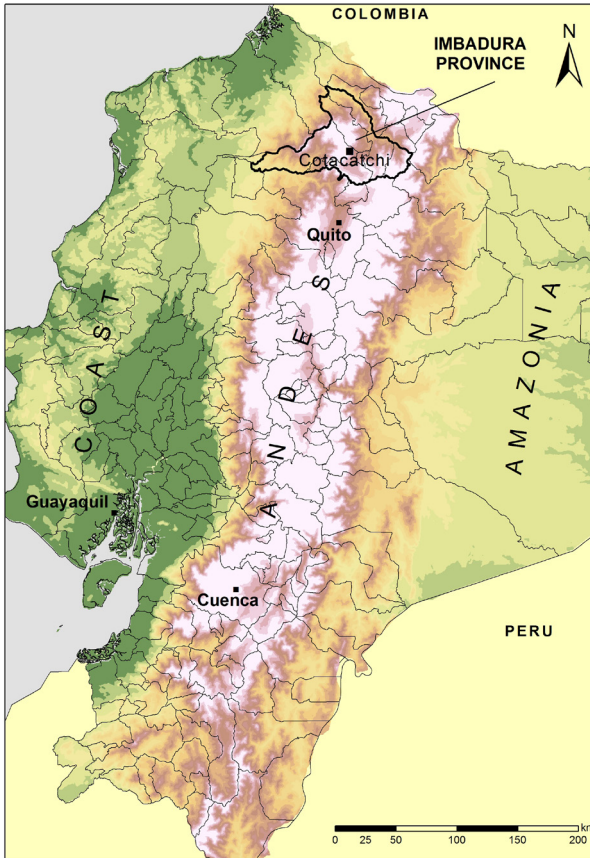


Figure 1. Imbadura Province, Ecuador

One of the principal characteristics of Cotacachi is its history of democratic governance by the Indigenous communities that are not under the jurisdiction of the town of Cotacachi but have created a multi-ethnic and multi-cultural participatory model that has been recognized worldwide (Breton 2005; Breton and García 2003). This differentiates it from any other location described in the amenity migration literature. Cotacachi's innovative governance structure is internationally recognized as a model of successful participatory. In 2002, Cotacachi won UNESCO's International Cities for Peace Prize and in 2006, the International Participatory Democracy Prize.

In Ecuador, land tenure patterns are based on colonial land legislation in which the 'encomienda' system was imposed on indigenous communities. In the encomienda system peasants known as *huasipungueros* worked the land

of the haciendas without any salary. They were given very small plots for their own subsistence. Agrarian reform didn't come until 1964 and it ended in the 1970s. As Breton (2008) discusses extensively, despite these reforms, highly concentrated land ownership and wealth are still a pervasive realities.

According to Quishpe and Velásquez (2012), between 2004 and 2009, the price for one hectare of land in Cotacachi's countryside increased from \$4,800 to \$75,000.<sup>4</sup> The authors analyzed the ancestral relationship between territory and community land as part of the core identity of the Cotacachi peasants and the Kichwa indigenous communities. The Kichwa philosophy equates the land to Mother Earth (known as *pacha mama*) and promotes belonging and self-reliance as well as a strong indigenous and peasant identity. To sustain this connection, land is passed down through generations. If sold, it traditionally goes to those who would benefit most from the purchase: a family member, community member or neighbour. Only under special circumstances is land sold to an outsider, as this sale requires approval by the General Assembly. The General Assembly tries to manage potential conflicts, as having outsider neighbors could lead to loss of control over how the land is used. Since 2006, these community practices, together with the possibility of recovering ancestral land from plantation owners, have been jeopardized by the establishment of gated communities in the middle of rural zones that were used for agriculture and which have access to water. The main areas being developed in the Cotacachi area are El Batán, La Calera and San Miguel (Figure 2). Yanapampa is the first gated community of white adobe houses one sees when entering Cotacachi. According to the Cotacachi Real Estate website: "Yanapampa is a unique community consisting of 15 homes. This community is gated with a Security Guard – 7 days a week – 24 hours a day." A 2,652 square foot house on a 12,425 square foot lot built in 2012 cost US\$ 208,000, which is unaffordable for most Ecuadorians in Cotacachi. Buying and selling land for investment is mostly a function of speculation, and serves to increase inequality and insecurity (Pike and Pollard: 2010).

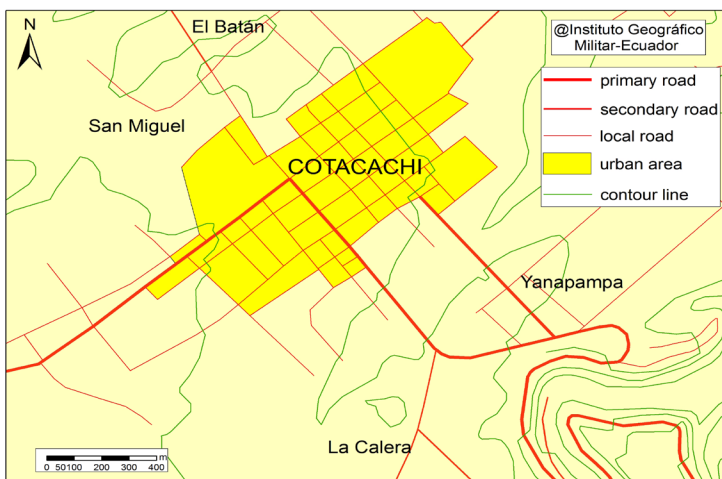


Figure 2. Cotacachi's principal development areas

People planning to move to Cotacachi have no difficulty finding a variety of options online and available through the website *cotacachiliving.com*. Gary Scott, one of the original investors in the migrant-oriented land developments in Cotacachi, helped shift land use towards development geared towards foreign buyers. The company *International Living* has marketed Cotacachi to foreign real estate buyers, constructing unjust imaginaries of the place that emphasize it as a luxurious yet affordable place to live after retirement. Nine out of the twelve countries they consider “Best for Cheap Living” are located in Central or South America. Cotacachi figures prominently in *International Living’s* information on Ecuador perhaps because two of its contributors, Dan Prescher and Suzan Haskins who live there part-time aiding Scott in his realtor business (Kline 2013:37). Based on initial findings, since Cuenca is more expensive than Cotacachi, those U.S. retirees with less income tend to go to Cotacachi, making it an affordable retirement destination as planned by initial developers.

*International Living* has developed what Korpela (2010) calls, “globally produced images of ideal alternative lifestyles.” In many of their newsletters one could easily substitute Cotacachi for most lifestyle destinations just changing some minor references to beach or mountain. Many of the U.S. Cotacachi residents interviewed mentioned doing research before coming to Cotacachi. *International Living’s* Cotacachi Chapter sells a complete guide entitled “Everything You Need to Know” that includes an Insider’s Guide, a cost of Living Report, four expat interview transcripts, a ‘Taste of Cotacachi’ Ebook, 50 Things You Should Know Before Moving to Cotacachi and an unlimited access to ‘A Video Tour of Cotacachi’ for \$27.99. Most of the U.S. migrants interviewed – who had never been to Cotacachi before or had visited it very briefly – felt they could face the vast cultural differences.

Having said this, the majority of my interviewees came across Cotacachi through *International Living*. *International Living* is a monthly subscription publication detailing, “the best places in the world to live, retire, travel, and invest.” It has offices and writers located all over the world and offers real estate services, conferences and events, and local contacts in some of the world’s most popular destinations. *International Living* has country chapters and shapes the image of places in order to make them highly marketable to the magazine’s audience. One risk is that the developers and realtors, as well as the U.S. Cotacachi residents will continue to artificially develop the place for consumption, creating an imagined landscape (a paradise at the end of the rainbow) that translates into new forms of colonialism (Lash and Urry 1994). These imaginings have material implications for the local communities.

Together with Hayes (2014a), I acknowledge the importance of economic changes for elderly North Americans in triggering this type of migration flow, which is relatively new to Ecuador. These economic changes include lower than expected retirement income and rising living and medical costs. Cotacachi as a lifestyle and retirement destination is characterized by a lower cost of living, which enables access to what U.S. Cotacachi residents consider a better lifestyle. It can be considered a form of upward mobility (even temporarily) for the U.S. retirees coming to Ecuador. Among those elements, the following are crucial: *International Living Magazine*,<sup>5</sup> Investor Gary Scott, and Ecuador’s friendly policies toward foreign retirees. Many Ecuadorians might read the latter as a contradiction given that President Correa deploys anti-imperialist (U.S.A.) rhetoric.





Figure 3. A gated community in Cotacachi, author photo

In order to access Ecuadorian Permanent Residency, one of the main requirements is to prove permanent income of more than \$800 per month (validated with a certificate from the U.S. Social Security Institute) or a US\$25,000 investment. Most interviewees said that this type of paperwork took less than 6-7 weeks to file and usually required an attorney because of language barriers. According to the law, Ecuadorian permanent residents are also able to access the Ecuadorian Social Security System and free health care. In 2012, President Correa's Government launched a video clip called "El Sueño Ecuatoriano" (The Ecuadorian Dream) showing U.S. retirees in Cuenca talking about their newly discovered paradise and praising every aspect of their new life.<sup>6</sup> The Government sought to promote the Ecuadorian dream by portraying a revolutionary country in political, social, educational and economic terms using a twist of the stereotypical American dream.

### Imagining Paradise: Migration '*Trayectorias*'

And that was one reason we chose Ecuador was because of the political climate, the physical climate, the beautiful people (*Bonnie, Wichita*).

This section analyzes some of the initial imagined representations of Cotacachi, specifically status mobility through relocation. This inquiry focuses on the power of transporting personal expectations about life "after 50 something" into a transnational identity. As Gupta and Ferguson (1997) write, the "in-between" space as an analytical category could help us to conceptualize

borders and borderlands. As Van Noorloos (2013) illustrates in her analysis of residential tourism in Guanacaste, Costa Rica, there is no separation between the local and the global: the global is not a space located outside the local, rather, it is produced by the local. As we shall see, the U.S. residents' interviews reveal social agency that allows them to leave low-status and burdensome jobs and look outside their country for an alternative life, which U.S. Cotacachi residents consider better than their former life in the United States.

Molly is a 66 year-old, single woman originally from Iowa who self-identifies as an "economic refugee." In response to the question of why she came to Cotacachi, Molly explains:

I was, you know, getting jobs in the U.S. that were low-paying, menial, ridiculous jobs and, you know, I've had a lot of professional experience and it's like, you know, I don't like the way the system is, it isn't right, and I [decided] to look outside the box.

Molly explains three types of benefits of migrating to Cotacachi:

There's the practical benefits and then there's the lifestyle benefits and then the spiritual benefits, I would say. So, the practical benefits are having the dollar and other expats as a network. The lifestyle part is, you know, as many Americans are totally fed up with politics and government, materialism, it's like...in a way it's maybe escaping that but it's also a choice to live with a healthier mindset and hopefully, you know, as economies grow and things develop when you see all the Coca-Cola and plastic, you know it's a concern because you know where that can go. The spiritual aspect of it too that are the indigenous cultures and the similarities to their belief systems around the world.

Similar to other academic analyses of lifestyle migration (O'Reilly and Benson 2009, Benson 2013), Molly's narrative illustrates a political stance against consumption that might be reflected in the Cotacachi indigenous worldview (*cosmovisión*) that is seen as more spiritual and, as such, less materialistic. This relates to Korpela's (2010:55) discussion of lifestyle migration as a phenomenon where middle class citizens of affluent industrialized countries move abroad in order to find a more meaningful and relaxing life.

Diana and James are originally from Silver City, New Mexico and Long Island, New York, respectively. James is the only U.S. Cotacachi resident I have interviewed who has a Ph.D. (in Business Administration). Before making Cotacachi their residence, they owned a restaurant in Prescott, Arizona that was successful but very demanding. They soon realized that they couldn't afford an early retirement in the U.S. but rather projected it would be another 10 years of work in the exhausting restaurant business. This prompted Diana and James to start looking for retirement places in developing countries, initially in Costa Rica.

In terms of social security and insurance, Diana and James were not covered in the U.S. and were not able to afford private health insurance. In addition, they "never believed in the system" but rather advocated for preventive health care and free universal health care. James will be 66 in a year and then he will be able to receive U.S. Social Security whether he is living in the United

States or abroad. Despite not having any social security or health care insurance in Ecuador, James and Diana are not worried as they are able to afford private visits to the hospital or clinics (which range between US\$30 and \$45) at prices that sharply contrast with the U.S., where fees would be much higher for less consultation time with doctors.

I was also interested in learning more about what prompted them to choose Cotacachi. In James's words:

The biggest thing on our list was cost of living so that we could actually retire. We made the decision, we sold everything, everything except for two bins like this big and packed six suitcases and said, 'We're going, we're just gonna make it work'. We considered Mexico but we started getting really concerned especially us living so near the border. We started getting very concerned about the dangers. And I know that the media plays a lot into that but you don't know how much is fact or fiction.

James and Diana were able to afford a custom-made, 1,5000 square foot house for which they paid US\$70 per square foot. This was one-third the price of a similar house in the U.S. In terms of services, having a cleaning lady in the U.S. is a luxury whereas many U.S. Cotacachi residents have a domestic worker clean their homes once or twice a week. Many mentioned the Ecuadorian government's friendly policies for retirees such as access to a relatively hassle-free Ecuadorian residence, which grants immediate access to the Ecuadorian Social Security System.

Personal safety appears to be among the main reasons for choosing Cotacachi. There have been some break-ins during which thieves stole electronics and left everything else intact. The U.S. Cotacachi residents reported these incidents to the U.S. Embassy after the local police didn't act on the reports of the crimes. Some blame it on the service people as everything appeared in its place and there was no forced entry. Many are aware that, considering the economic inequalities in the community, their very presence has triggered these robberies. Others attribute the break-ins to "those expats"<sup>7</sup> that insist on living isolated from the local community in gated condominiums on the outskirts of the city. Another benefit frequently cited by the U.S. Cotacachi residents is "the people" (Cotacacheñes). I only heard praise of the kindness and the gentle, patient nature of the people and, notably, the U.S. Cotacachi residents' perception is that they belong to Cotacachi. The words 'polite' and "nice" kept coming up as a way to describe both indigenous and mestizo although most had a hard time recognizing who belonged to which group. In James and Diana's words:

Well the people, you know that's another good point, the people here make us feel welcomed. I can't remember, I don't think we've had a bad experience with the people. They welcome us, they, for me you know because my Spanish is so bad, they're patient with me. I think they appreciate it that we're trying to speak Spanish and learn. You know just, if you're feeling blue on any given day, just to walk into town and greet these people that you see all the time, it makes you feel good because they make you feel like you belong.

The meanings around ‘polite’ need to be read within the historically unequal national, ethnic and racial trajectories of each group. In *International Living* newsletters and advertisements, personal accounts of “welcoming natives” are mentioned as another positive trait of a place, together with good weather and a low cost of living. This not only recreates colonialist imaginaries but also places a great burden on places and people whose lack of niceness will be condemned. That is to say, places are evaluated on the basis of what they have to offer to a particular, imagined and desired lifestyle based on an individualistic worldview. Colonialist imaginaries are directly related with perceptions around race and ethnicity. These imaginaries are correlated. Diana and James’ perception of the local racial and ethnic difference might challenge local static and engrained notions of race and ethnicity as they don’t differentiate (as Ecuadorians do) indigenous people from mestizos.

### **We Are Here as Guests: The Travails of Structural Inequalities**

When I talk to academic U.S. friends that live in Ecuador or colleagues from the Cotacachi City Council about some of the challenges faced by U.S. Cotacachi residents, such as uncontrolled noise from all-night parties next door, they suggest that U.S. Cotacachi residents facing this situation get together as a community so that they can take action. The problem is that the diversity of their group prohibits national identity from acting as social glue. For communication purposes, the U.S. Cotacachi residents and potential migrants have a very active Facebook page and a Cotacachi newsletter, which create a virtual community. In addition, there is a website called *Cotacachi Living* that provides information on everything from housing to cultural differences. In fact, it could act as a disadvantage as the following narratives illustrate. One drawback that was mentioned is that none of the interviewees anticipated finding such a large number of U.S. Cotacachi residents. For instance, most of the respondents mentioned that they also decided to live in Cotacachi because it’s not (yet) filled with gringos as other places like Panama or Costa Rica. This will be the opposite from the lifestyle migrants analyzed by Spalding (2013:76) in Panama who actively seek an “affordable location with an existing community of foreigners.”

From the interviewees’ perspective, the large number of U.S. Cotacachi residents is a drawback as it brings an unexpected visibility to this newly arrived population that could create unwanted friction with the locals. It also increases prices so that land, houses and rent are no longer accessible to the local community. Clark, 71, a former dentist and firefighter who came to Cotacachi more than a year ago from Idaho together with his partner Jane, 65, (former secretary) illustrates this vividly:

We worry about what the expats do to the community in terms of driving up the cost for the locals and then we worry about what they do to our reputation as an expat. It’s no different than when you live in any other country. You know if you live in America and you have a crappy neighbor living next to you.

There's a strong concern among all interviewees about not creating a "bad name" for themselves and they're very critical of those who create a negative image for U.S. residents in Cotacachi. Contrary to what Methvin (2009) discusses in the case of Lake Chapala in Mexico where retirees seek to integrate into the expat community as quickly as possible, many U.S. Cotacachi residents had strained relations with the established expatriate community and usually tried to distance themselves from other U.S. residents, particularly those deemed "ugly gringos" (Hayes 2014b). As James further explains:

So we're not anti-social with the expats, we're friendly but we're very particular. And we don't, we wanna make sure that if we're associated with an expat and the locals see us, that it's an expat that the locals can respect also. Yeah, because we feel, you know, the whole thing is that we're in your country, we're here as a guest, we're not here to change what you guys are used to doing, we don't want to. If you come to us and say, what do you think, you wanna give us advice on the trash issue or something like that I'd be happy to give my advice I'm not gonna change it, this is the way they do things. This is their country.

Similar to Benson (2010:79) who carried out research with British lifestyle migrants living in the Lot – a rural, inland department in southwest France – most of the U.S. Cotacachi residents I have been working with on a regular basis seek interactions with the local community. Those U.S. Cotacachi residents that choose to live outside the town in gated communities (there are some gated apartment condominiums inside the town as well), are looked down upon by those who chose not to live in gated communities and blamed for the potential negative perceptions of the locals. Based on ethnographic research, these lines are rather blurred as I have met some U.S. Cotacachi residents in gated communities that are actively engaged in with the Cotacachi community and its people.

James and Diana have many reasons to worry in terms of the impact of their presence in the lives of Cotacachenses, particularly the indigenous. Marvelled by the overpriced figure offered by the intermediary, many indigenous landowners have sold their land, but end up spending everything on objects such as an expensive car. One of the immediate and predicted conflicts has been the scarcity of water as there was no form of planning services such as garbage disposal or granting permits for all the recently built condominiums. According to the 2001 Census, less than half of the population had sewage service and only 50 percent had running water inside their homes and are part of the Municipal water and sewage system. Cotacachi uses only one water source that comes from the Cotacachi Volcano. Weak zoning regulations in Cotacachi mean that land use and tax rates don't reflect the significant economic and social gaps that exist among residents. Discontent with the use of land for the construction of gated communities in rural areas that are usually adjacent to the indigenous communities' homes and fields has been a great concern for past and current Cotacachi authorities as well as indigenous leaders. Contrary to what an article on responsible retirement in Cotacachi reported in 2012, real estate developers have continued expanding because there's not yet an ordinance that stops them.

This phenomenon of building residential development on the outskirts of towns is now a globalized phenomenon that is seen in other countries such as in Los Cabos, Mexico (Lizarraga 2010) or in Spain.

Another important reason for U.S. Cotacachi residents moving to Cotacachi is that they lost their (private) health insurance coverage and couldn't afford to pay for private insurance. These flows entail a duality in terms of the impact they produce and how the local and the global are merged with one another. The paradoxes and juxtapositions brought by migration flows act under a micro- and macro-context (Lewellen 2002:190) as the Cotacachi case very well illustrates.

For instance, the Telegraph (UK online newspaper) published an article on the results of a poll conducted by *InterNations* on the best place to retire overseas. Ecuador topped the list of countries followed by Luxembourg and Mexico in, "the cheap cost of living, good weather and top-class yet affordable health care." Nevertheless, Cotacachi lacks the, "top class health care" such as specialized exams and certain infrastructure that requires travelling between one and three hours to better-equipped hospitals or clinics. The ambulance does not work 24 hours per day and most clinics have limited hours. However, U.S. residents can afford so-called alternative health treatments that are prohibitively expensive in the U.S. such as stem cell injection therapy, which is unaffordable for most Cotacachi residents. A Cuban doctor travels from Quito twice a month to give the injections to more than fifteen U.S. Cotacachi residents for US\$25 per session. The therapy takes place at the house of a U.S. resident. The relationship between migration and health care in residential migration is yet another layer of structural inequalities and how these are accentuated locally.

## Conclusions

I have illustrated some of the "cultural imaginaries" by U.S. Cotacachi residents that help make sense of their migration experience. Although the common factor for U.S. Cotacachi residents to migrate from the U.S. is economic, there are many other ideas and ways of imagining places and well-being that are motivating factors. One of the salient factors that this type of migration makes visible is the unfulfilled dream of health care, social security and a savings plan to secure a stable and comfortable life after age 66 or an early retirement in the quest of a better quality of life. Whether perceived or real, these unfulfilled governmental promises are infused with expectations and marketing of a life that mimics a paradise at the end of the rainbow, triggers U.S. Cotacachi residents' mobilities. Many sought to "move up by moving out"; leaving the United States was seen as a means of upward mobility which allowed many of the U.S. Cotacachi residents to enjoy what they deemed as luxuries that would not have been possible back home: dining out, a custom-made house, a domestic worker, a gardener, and the possibility of saving money to travel internationally.

Within the local context of Cotacachi, U.S. retirees are generally well received as their original class status matters less than their whiteness, which places them higher on the Ecuadorian social ladder. In the process, U.S. Cotacachi residents have been forced to re-evaluate their allegiances with their State and their own – usually stereotypical – social hierarchies in terms of class,

nationhood and ethnicity. One finds Republicans supporting the current socialist government in Ecuador, as well as patriotic Americans who never planned to leave the U.S. They are now critical of U.S. policies and tend to romanticize Cotacachi, wanting to leave it ‘untouched’, yet without fully understanding its history of *haciendas* and the injustices of economic and social inequality as well as racial and ethnic discrimination. It becomes clear that the privilege of lifestyle migrants can, at least in part, be considered systemic: for example access to a permanent residency which is unattainable for other recent migrants to Ecuador, such as Haitians, as illustrated by Ceja (2014).

As this research project continues, I am attentive to the merging of structural inequalities in both countries and how those come into play in the re-configuration of inequality in place and space as made visible through the increase of the cost of living in Cotacachi triggered by this migration flow.

Based on the initial Cotacachi research findings, a place is not just a geographic representation but a socially-constructed discourse that carries meanings and that are mediated through power. Those meanings are part of the imaginaries crafted by businesses such as Remax and *International Living* who profit from societal expectations of life after fifty, such that “you don’t have to be rich and famous to enjoy an international lifestyle. *International Living* will help you understand that all you need is the special imagination to appreciate all the opportunities the world has to offer” (International Living Magazine on-line advertisement).

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup> There hasn’t been an official census of foreign residents. The current mayor believes a census is needed but it would be challenging as the U.S. community “like to keep their lives as private as possible”.

<sup>2</sup> Authored by Susan Hankins and published on March 14, 2013: available at <http://blog.aarp.org/2013/03/14/cotacachi-ecuador-paradise-at-the-end-of-the-rainbow/>

<sup>3</sup> Desbordes as a concept implies not only undoing but also overflowing all prediscursive categories.

<sup>4</sup> Ecuador has no institution that regulates real state prices as those are regulated by the local market hence there's no institution that tracks average sale prices in Ecuador.

<sup>5</sup> For a discussion on IL's philosophy and rhetoric on Cotacachi, please refer to Hayes (2014a)

<sup>6</sup> The video can be accessed at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uM6m2YZEHgs> Please refer as well to El Comercio Newspaper article: <http://www.elcomercio.com/opinion/sueno-ecuatoriano.html>

<sup>7</sup> Term used by the U.S. Cotacachi residents to talk about the break-ins.

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.cotacachiliving.com/>

<sup>9</sup> Interview with Cotacachi Mayor Jomar Cevallos, October 31, 2014

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