

Gringolandia: Lifestyle Migration Under Late Capitalism. *Matthew Hayes.* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2018. 266 pp.

Paul Allatson

University of Technology Sydney

Since the global financial crisis of 2008, some 12,000 people, most from the USA and Canada, have moved to Cuenca, the third largest city in Ecuador. Cuenca, a UNESCO World Heritage site with a well-preserved historical center, is nestled in the Andean south of the country. The middle-class, mostly white migrants often refer to themselves as ex-pats and even gringos. Many speak of their relocations as adventures. Some claim “economic refugee” status given their flight as retirees from the high costs of aged and medical care in their home countries. These “lifestyle migrants” and the narratives they tell about themselves are the focus of *Gringolandia*, a study that examines the entanglement of lifestyle migration in uneven North-South socioeconomic relations and the transnational legacies of colonialism.

The book is divided into two parts. The first three chapters focus on lifestyle migrants from North America as they discuss their own moral codes and imaginaries of place, and their economic motivations for moving to Ecuador. The final three chapters discuss the sociocultural history of southern Ecuador, with particular attention to the processes of gentrification in Cuenca and abutting rural areas linked to the lifestyle migrants and their considerable economic impacts. This neat structure allows Hayes to contextualize his interlocutors’s stories of selfhood as aging and wealthy migrants in relation to local structures of political, socioeconomic and racial hierarchization, of which many of the migrants in the study are not aware. Another neat touch is that Hayes elaborates on his research methodologies in an appendix, which allows for a tight anthropological narrative across the book’s six chapters. Hayes completed six field work visits to Ecuador between 2011 and 2016, for a total of 39 weeks. Complementing participant observation and ethnographic analysis are the 108 semi-structured interviews he conducted with North American and other migrants, and an additional 41 interviews with Cuencanos that provided keen insights into how the lifestyle migration trend was perceived by locals.

Gringolandia explains lifestyle migration to Ecuador as implicated in asymmetrical relations of power under late capitalism. It demonstrates how North American migrants are often not in positions to describe their own negotiation of and impact on unequal transnational relations and local political, economic and racial structures, even when they are able to advance compelling narratives about their personal experiences of retirement and

aging. In this study, key terms such as “expats” and “lifestyle” are thus under necessary scrutiny, as are the self-identifications of “economic refugee” and “medical refugee.”

Underwriting some lifestyle migrant imaginaries is a perception that Ecuador is like the USA in the 1950s: nice, safe, innocent, comfortable, unthreatening and affordable. Lifestyle migrants romanticize Ecuador as more authentic and traditional than North America, and Cuenca as a more European-like city, idealizations that for Hayes illustrate coloniality at work. Such idealizations are nurtured well before retirees arrive in Cuenca. Hayes provides a fascinating discussion of a transnational economy of lifestyle migration in which magazines, TV programs like *House Hunters International* and blog sites such as *International Living* are enormously influential in selling to the global north dreams of a more affordable and idyllic aged retirement in the global south. These venues link retirees’ financial need and capacity to retirement as an adventure tale of personal growth and success.

Hayes nonetheless identifies fault lines in the lifestyle migrant community in Cuenca. Canadians are critical of Americans. Old timers with good Spanish and local knowledge resent newcomers with no or little interest in local culture. Many migrants are happy to call themselves gringos, others are not. Some retirees are uncomfortably aware they are being read locally as white and rich, while other retiree experience an ownership of their whiteness—read in contradistinction to local mestizo and Indigenous categorizations—that would be impossible at home. Interestingly, many single female retirees benefit from the local gendered labour economy, which allows access to Ecuadorian maids. Some retirees are extremely well off, others barely make do. Complicating lifestyle narratives of successful retirement in the Cuencan idyll are anecdotes from some of the lifestyle retirees about Ecuadorian workers not living up to American middle-class expectations.

The local impacts of lifestyle migration tell other stories. Hayes notes that lifestyle migrants are welcomed in Cuenca, and they receive considerable municipal support and local business attentions. The fact that the national currency is the US dollar is also a bonus. Yet, while locals acknowledge that lifestyle migrants bring economic benefits, many locals grapple with inexorable urban growth, overcrowding, increased crime, congested traffic, and pollution. Lifestyle migration is implicated in the transformations of urban space as the city is cleaned up, and street vendors—many of whom are Indigenous—are moved into malls or other parts of the city. Precarious working conditions are worsened by land price rises, which force the working poor to live on city outskirts with fewer amenities. International agencies, such as the Inter-American Development bank, and designations such as the UNESCO heritage status awarded to Cuenca in 1999, assist these processes by making Cuenca and its

surrounds an attractive destination for tourists and migrants. Policies of heritage preservation contribute to the “extranjerización” (foreignization) of Cuenca’s urban landscape at the expense of the working poor. Similar patterns of disruption and disadvantage occur in the rural areas around Cuenca, to which lifestyle migrants are also moving. Hayes argues that in parts of southern Ecuador land redistribution favors North American gated communities and the continued colonialist power of hacienda overlordship. Unable to survive on small holdings, peasant farmers sell their land, which is purchased and rezoned by developers and sold for big profits to foreigners. Land prices rise, blocking locals from buying land, hence new migrations away from rural areas, and indeed the country. The local winners in these developments in both the city centre and the rural surrounds of Cuenca are the traditional landowners, who have seen their land values rise and have been able to capitalize on the profits brought by lifestyle migration.

Gringolandia is a marvellous study, and it also sheds light on the often overlooked local connections between lifestyle migration—and its influence on urban and rural inequalities, many anchored in colonialism—and mass emigration from Ecuador. While the latter is not a primary focus of *Gringolandia*, it is worth stating that in the last few decades more than ten percent of the Ecuadorian population has moved to Spain and the USA, with half a million-plus in those two countries alone, and to other western European states. More complications emerge from migration into Ecuador by workers from neighbouring Colombia and Peru, who as Hayes notes are subject to increasing discrimination. Further attentions to the transnational dimensions of these complex migratory entanglements under late capitalism would be welcome. Given the current inroads of COVID-19 in Ecuador and the USA, another important line of enquiry would be to see whether or not the pandemic has introduced new patterns of inequality to the lifestyle migrations and imaginaries at the heart of this book.