

Book Review

– *Unraveling Time: Thirty Years of Ethnography in Cuenca, Ecuador*, by Ann Miles, Texas University Press, 2022

This ethnography about Cuenca is quite unique in its kind. It is a retrospective about everyday life in a medium-size city based on a longitudinal study of rural-to-urban migrants spanning thirty years. Miles calls the outcome an ‘ethnography of accrual’. She uses this notion to capture a constantly shifting understanding of how urban life has unfolded and changed over the course of decades. This is not a linear process or a then-now comparison. It is a constant adaptation of what is known about urban reality. As Miles states, one only realizes how culture is enacted in everyday life when “going back to the same place and seeing what you thought was true dissipate, disappear, or be flatly denied” (p. 7). Although more anthropologists from the same generation have depicted how their initial research locations have changed – usually after a revisit decades later (e.g. Moser, 2009; Perlman, 2010) – Miles’ approach comprises a process of finetuning knowledge, not of pinpointing differences. I had the privilege to read this book while revisiting Cuenca to conduct ethnographic research. This turned the reading experience into a metaphorical joy of recognition (except for some North-American peculiarities, see below).

Unraveling Time effectively dwells on a mix between micro-ethnographic observations and a macro perspective of how this intermediate Latin American city grew, developed, and globalized over time, while some cultural idiosyncrasies stubbornly persisted. Methodologically, Miles discusses issues of positionality and the interpretative approach as she was confronted more than once with the fading explanatory power of theory. The book consists of six thematic chapters and five personalized ‘datelines’ illustrating the ethnographic encounter during a specific period. The four themes that structure chapters 2 to 5 are cultural heritage, gender, transnational migration from Cuenca, and lifestyle migration to Cuenca. While some of these themes are contingent to the specific, historically-developed characteristics of Cuenca, the described impact of three decades of cultural, gender and socio-political changes on a rural-to-urban migrant population also covers general trajectories of change in Latin American medium-size cities, which makes the book relevant to a broad readership.

The second chapter is the most theoretically embedded one. It discusses the social construction of cultural heritage and the gentrification and touristification of Cuenca as a World Heritage site. Miles describes how the urban elite rewrote Cuenca's cultural heritage into the nostalgic global registers of UNESCO. Using examples such as the change of dress among *chola* [*mestiza*] women, who once self-identified as female peasants and whose self-representation was iconized as the *Chola Cuencana*, Miles explains that *cholas* became reluctant to wear their costume: "while the public rhetoric might extol the nostalgic virtues of the *chola cuencana* as a symbol of cultural blending and a proud rural past, it is also obvious that the *pollera* [colorful skirt] is a symbol of a kind of non-modernity" (p. 44). The chapter details how Rafael Correa's socially oriented administration (2007-2017) did not offer *mestizos* solace. Whereas his policies reinforced the political empowerment of indigenous groups, *mestizos* encountered an increasing disdain. Under Correa, the tuition fee at public universities was abolished, which resulted in an increase of costumed self-identified indigenous youngsters studying at the University of Cuenca. Yet, no woman in the University of Cuenca ever wears a *pollera*, Miles claims, because the *chola*'s hybrid identity is deemed incompatible with the idea of modern life. Hence, according to Miles, different from other Andean cities, the cultural registers of *cholas* in Cuenca have not been included in the nostalgic turnover.

The third chapter unravels the changing position of rural migrant women in urban society through the stories of interlocutors Carolina and Jessica. Miles uses the often-heard notion of *sufrimiento* to explain the ability of older-generation women to endure all sorts of vulnerability and injustice. She points out that a younger generation of women, born in the 1990s and 2000s, do not use *sufrimiento* that much. They seem to have gained an enhanced sense of control over their lives, which Miles interprets as a "quiet revolution" (p. 83). The fourth chapter describes the life of male transnational migrants in the United States and their ways of dealing with the expectations of the American Dream. Much of this chapter is based on Miles' earlier book *From Cuenca to Queens* (2004). Using the experiences of interlocutors Vicente and William, Miles makes the reader 'feel' the daily limitations of being undocumented. While some are relatively satisfied with what they have achieved for their families, others are disappointed yet locked in a situation in which returning to Cuenca is not an option. The out-migration networks paved the way for a subsequent in-migration wave of retirees.

Chapter five discusses this relatively massive lifestyle migration from the United States and Canada to Cuenca, which occurred after the financial crisis of 2008. The skewed mobility possibilities that expats in Cuenca have and labour migrants in the United States do not, are exemplified in the stories of her interlocutors. The 'gringo invasion' has been extensively documented by Canadian researcher Matthew Hayes, whose work Miles cites extensively to discuss the workings of 'white privilege', based on the angry reactions Hayes received from retirees after presenting his findings. At this point, Miles articulates her own

positionality as an anthropologist vis-à-vis the responses from expats and locals: “Those [lifestyle migrants] I find sympathetic are excruciatingly concerned about cultural differences, work hard to form relationships with Ecuadorians, and worry about their intrinsic privilege. [...] In many ways, they are not so very different from anthropologists” (p. 137). Her introspective gaze reveals that the ‘average’ lifestyle migrant or retiree who came to Cuenca to look for adventure or to find a relatively cheap and comfortable place to live, annoyed her because deep down she feared losing the exclusive authority to make sense of other people’s cultural space “when everyone’s granny is doing it too” (p. 138). Furthering her confrontation with North American expats in the final chapter, Miles problematizes the current value of ‘expertise’ and ‘representation’ in the anthropological discipline.

Two critical reflections can be made. Firstly, the emphasis on the North American-Cuencan encounter undergirds an analysis of cultural and racial stereotypes that is less obvious to non-American scholars. For example, the discussion about ‘race’ and politics in chapter five is clearly embedded in the American political schism between Democrats and Republicans and less evident for people from regions where ‘socialist’ is not a commonly used curse. Secondly, the structural division of the text in thematic chapters and personal datelines is not very effective since both are structured around the interlocutors’ personal life stories, their emails, and Miles’ personal reflections. The analytical and the personal perspective fuse completely in the conclusive chapter. Overall, however, this monograph is a valuable contribution to urban anthropology. It is smoothly written and suitable for use in undergraduate courses in urban anthropology, ethnographic methods, or urban studies. A broad audience interested in Cuenca and Ecuador might also appreciate it.

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References

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