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Ecuadorian Migration: A Rough Road To Success

Me vine a la YANY, me vine a trabajar, no importa en qué, pero voy a ganar. Con toda esa plata, yo voy a comprar: ropita, casita, y el auto popular. Soy Cholo Boy y me voy a trabajar! Tú sabes...chulla vida!

[I come to New York City, I come to work, it doesn't matter in what, but I'm going to make money. With all this money I am going to buy: clothes, house, and the hottest car. I am a Cholo Boy and I'm going to work! You know...only one life to live!]¹

In the 1980s, Ecuadorian migration experienced a boom seen nowhere else in the Latin American world. The sharp increase in clandestine migration came most notably from the southern Andean provinces of Azuay and Cañar, making up roughly 70 percent of the immigrant Ecuadorian population in the United States (Kyle 29; Pribilsky 8). A complex network of human smugglers mobilized the majority of these people in what constitutes one of the most miserable chapters in the history of Ecuadorian migration. Once they had entered the United States, most of these immigrants established themselves in New York City to become one of the largest undocumented communities in the city (Pribilsky 8). In what has become the traditional interpretation, Ecuadorian leaders have condemned this wave of migration to the United States due to the harshness of the migratory process, the trepidation it produces among families, and the difficulty migrants face to assimilate into the American society. More recent observations, however, have qualified the accuracy of this grim view to try to assess the actual consequence of Ecuadorian migration. Indeed, an in-depth examination of Ecuadorian migration leads to a more encouraging conclusion. Although Ecuadorian migrants from the

¹ The epigraph is from the song "Soy Cholo Boy" recorded in Cuenca in 1992 by the band Utopía. Translations are by David Kyle.

southern regions of Azuay and Cañar have had to endure the harsh financial and physical conditions entailed in human smuggling, many have become successful in New York City. They have not only improved their own socioeconomic situation, but also through the remittances they send to Ecuador, they have improved the living standards of their families back home, as well as contributed significantly to the economic advancement of their country.

The phenomenon of mass migration from the southern regions of Azuay and Cañar to the United States started during the later half of the 20th century as a result of the collapse of the Panama hat trade. This industry dates back to the 19th century, when immigrants from the coastal province of Manabí introduced the technique of weaving straw hats with a special palm straw known as *paja toquilla* into the southern Andean provinces (Kyle 56). Local elites, taking advantage of the infrastructure of the cloth industry that had succumbed to cheaper imports from England, began promoting the craft. Furthermore, they did so as they realized “it [was] an occupation in which all hands [could] be put to work, including men and women, the elderly and children” (Domínguez 36). During the California gold rush of the 1850s, the hat industry experienced a significant boom. Hats began to be exported through Panama to the U.S. for sale to gold miners (Kyle 56). From this decade onwards, the Panama hats gained renown all over the world. Despite this prolonged success, the hat trade collapsed after World War II as the United States began importing cheaper straw hats from Asian countries, which enjoyed lower import tariffs as part of postwar reconstruction policy (Kyle 57). By this point, however, the hat weaving cottage industry in Azuay and Cañar had expanded significantly so that it was employing the majority of the labor force of the two provinces. According to Miguel Domínguez, at the height of the hat trade in the 1940s, “as many as 250,000 children and adults from the provinces of Azuay and Cañar were engaged in some activity directly related to making and marketing Panama hats”(Kyle 57). Not surprisingly, when the hat trade

crumbled, thousands of people lost their jobs and the local economies of Azuay and Cañar became stagnant. As a response to the crisis, the peasant-weavers initiated seasonal migration to the coastal provinces. Conversely, young mestizo and white exporters initiated a timid migration to New York City to make use of their hat trade connections (Kyle 59).

The decades that followed were marked by severe economic crises. The 1980s, also known as Latin America's "Lost Decade", were characterized by the mounting value of the national debt and a sharp decline in revenues (Pribilsky 8). Because of the national nature of the economic downfall, "migration to other regions of Ecuador was now financially risky and unattractive" (Kyle 64). For this reason, peasants no longer sought internal seasonal migration but rather envisioned international migration as a solution to their desperate situation. The 1990s did not bring any improvement to the Ecuadorian economy. On the contrary, they brought a significant economic downfall fueled by a national banking scandal, rising infrastructure expenditures as a result of the 1997-98 El Niño, and a sharp drop in petroleum revenues (Pribilsky 8). By the close of the millennium, Ecuador was heading to the worst economic crisis of its history. In 1999, Ecuador's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) shrank by 7.3 percent and inflation rose to 60 percent (Acosta 13). As Pribilsky accurately puts it, Ecuadorians quickly adopted a sure strategy to combat devaluation: "Never go to sleep with a *sucre*² in your pocket, lest it be worth nothing in the morning" (Pribilsky 183). Prices for basic food staples, gasoline, cooking oil, and cooking gas skyrocketed (Pribilsky 283). The cost of drinking water rose by 120 percent (Gerlach 158). The endless path of devaluation finally ended in a complete dollarization of the economy by March 2000.

Once the frenzy was over, the country found itself significantly more impoverished. The percentage of people living under the poverty line increased from 34% to 71% and below the

² The *sucre* was Ecuador's national currency before the dollarization of the economy on March 2000.

line of extreme poverty from 12% to 31% (Acosta 15). According to Acosta, this occurred mainly because of the rise of unemployment rates as well as the sharp decline in revenues and the lack of investment in health, education, housing, and community development. These deprived conditions, as well as an ineffective government response, triggered a mass exodus to the United States, and from the year 2000 to the present, increasingly to Spain and Italy. People were trying to leave the country in a desperate search for a better situation—one that Ecuador could not offer them. As Leonardo Arízaga points out, an individual does not usually migrate if he or she enjoys a decent economic situation, or at least, has the possibility to prosper in his or her own country (28). Indeed, migrants from Azuay and Cañar saw no possibility for prospering in their local economy and instead visualized this possibility in New York City or in Europe.

Although most sociologists would agree that non-refugee migrants are often not the poorest of the poor within their society (Kyle 224), it is certain that migrants who parted from the provinces of Azuay and Cañar lived under disadvantaged socioeconomic conditions. According to a statistical study carried out by FLACSO³, out of a sample of 320,000 migrants, 220,000 belonged to a socioeconomic standing denominated as “vulnerable” or lower. Of this “vulnerable” group of migrants, 100,000 were labeled as poor, and 20,000 as indigent (FLACSO 42). This means that approximately 70 percent of migrants have no possibility to improve their social and economic standing as a result of their lack of resources. In this same investigation, FLACSO concluded that 45 percent of the U.S.-bound migrant men had received only primary or no education at all before leaving Ecuador (FLACSO 36). For women, this value was slightly lower at an approximate of 37 percent (FLASCO 36). The particular cases

³ FLACSO (Facultad Latinoamericana de Ciencias Sociales) is an inter-government autonomous organization dedicated to the research, teaching and spreading of social sciences in Latin America and the Caribbean. In English, FLACSO is known as the Latin American Social Sciences Institute.

found in Azuay and Cañar signal even poorer migrant origins. David Kyle has done extensive research in these areas. In a study he conducted in 1993 in two migrant-sending towns of the province of Azuay, he concluded that basic living conditions were lacking in a host of areas; illiteracy rates ran as high as 16 percent among the population; post primary education did not exceed the 4 percent of the population in certain villages; the average schooling ranged from 3 to 6 years; approximately 15 percent of households had dirt floors; the average age of dwellings ranged between 18 to 21 years; and an average of 3.4 percent of people had health problems that prevented them from going to work (Kyle 13).

These numbers evidently demonstrate the meager conditions in which many of the migrants from the two provinces lived before leaving for New York City. Although migration theories that emphasize the importance of “push and pull” factors have been extensively criticized as too narrow in focus and missing an acknowledgement of the importance of social networks in transnationalism (Hollifield 146), it is important to recognize the evident “material magnetism powering migration” (Pribilsky 10). On the one hand, few opportunities of employment and individual progress due to a stagnant economy hit by several crises “push” would-be migrants out of the country, and on the other hand, due to a high demand for low-paying service jobs in U.S., envisioned possibilities for economic and personal growth in major cities “pull” would-be migrants northward. It is these supply-push and demand-pull forces that have brought migrants from the southern region of Azuay and Cañar to New York City since the 1970s and increasingly during the past few decades. And most importantly, a large percentage of these migrants have, in fact, been able to realize their envisioned possibilities for growth in New York City—something that would not have been possible in Ecuador.

Certainly, Ecuadorians have been successful in New York City as they have been able to improve their personal socioeconomic situation. To start with, recent investigations have

concluded that Ecuadorians are gaining greater wages than the majority of Hispanic immigrants in the United States. According to the Current Population Survey of March 1998 and 2000, Ecuadorians were winning an average of \$11, 848 yearly, over the \$9,432 average for all the Hispanic population (Jokisch 3). The average wage of an Ecuadorian is significantly greater than that of the average Hispanic, which is indicative of greater economic success. In New York City, additionally, Ecuadorians have the opportunity to find jobs more easily and receive considerably greater remunerations than what they would have received in Ecuador (Garcés 110). Secondly, Ecuadorians win significantly higher wages in New York City than in the provinces of Azuay or Cañar. As David Kyle assures, “with an average monthly income in Ecuador of around \$60 in the early 1990s, a migrant could reasonably expect to earn at least ten times that amount as an undocumented laborer working in the back of a [New York] restaurant or factory” (Kyle 4). This vast wage difference proves that Ecuadorians are earning significantly greater revenues, which in turn provides tremendous incentive for the large numbers of Ecuadorians who migrate to the United States.

Fourth, the government is actually helping the Ecuadorian community to thrive as it allows undocumented Ecuadorians to benefit from social programs without charge. Notwithstanding the legality of their migratory status, Ecuadorians can benefit from social programs such as free health care, free social insurance, public education, free medical care for pregnant women and nutrition for the newborn babies, and, if needed, even government financial support (Garcés 111). Back in Ecuador, many migrants would have never had access to all of these services. Besides, it is important to consider that the New York City Department of City Planning reported in 1999 that Ecuadorians had become the largest undocumented group of Latinos in the city (Pribilsky 8). A reason for this is that the U.S. government’s law enforcement against undocumented Ecuadorians is relatively weak. As Ivonne Garcés clarifies,

police agents would only proceed to deport undocumented Ecuadorians who are involved in criminal actions (Garcés 110). Therefore, the number of Ecuadorians who have benefitted from government programs at no cost is very large. Due to this federal aid, Ecuadorians in New York City are clearly enjoying better living conditions than what they were before leaving Ecuador.

In addition to improving their personal economic conditions, migrants have also aided their families in Ecuador and have contributed to the growth of the Ecuadorian economy through the sending of remittances. As for the first, remittances have considerably improved the socioeconomic standing of many families of the provinces of Azuay and Cañar. By comparing households that have no migrant relatives abroad to households with migrant kin, one can appreciate the economic impact remittances have in local communities. Households that have no relatives remitting from the United States can expect to have a monthly income between \$90 and \$170 by working on agricultural activities and construction (Pribilsky 73). In contrast, households with a relative in New York City can expect to receive monthly remittances between \$200 and \$250 in addition to their own income (Pribilsky 74). In a survey conducted in 2004 by Marisol Nieto, the majority of immigrants she interviewed answered that they remitted amounts between \$100 and \$500 (Nieto 207). Although this survey fails to accurately report the exact amount of money the majority of immigrants send, it helps us understand that some immigrants send even larger sums than what Pribilsky discovered in his research. No matter the exact amount, families with migrant relatives are nonetheless earning greater incomes, and as a result, they are able to improve their living conditions significantly. According to a report filed in 2003 by Bendixen & Associates, families use the greater part of remittances (61%) to cover expenses for basic needs such as food, housing, water, electricity, transport, clothes, and medicine (Acosta, López, and Villamar 38).

Without remittance income, many families would be unable to cover many of these basic needs and would live in severely deprived conditions.

In their report, Bendixen & Associates also concluded that after having covered their basic necessities, families are able to invest a significant proportion of remittances (22%) in different areas (Acosta, López, and Villamar 38). This includes the purchase of land or property (4%), money directed to savings (8%), capital invested in small businesses (8%), and investment in education (2%). As anthropologist Ann Miles writes, Enrique Serrano reported that as early as 1990, 30,000 immigrants from the Azuayo-Cañari region were responsible for \$120 million in investments (Miles 202). By investing in productive areas, people that were formerly caught in a poor economic circle are able to emerge and rise in society as they expect higher future incomes. Families receiving remittances have also invested in a series of construction enterprises. According to Pribilsky, migrant-sending villages experienced “a wave of new home construction unprecedented in previous eras” (Pribilsky 107). From my personal experience, I can say that while driving through rural areas in the southern provinces of Azuay and Cañar, I was struck by the number of brand new houses, sometimes even three-stories high, that contrast against the poor agricultural surroundings. For many migrants, one of the reasons to invest in housing is that the home they build in Ecuador is usually a strong marker of social status. By building new homes, therefore, migrants are improving the social standing of their families in the local community. This does not mean, however, that construction investment is limited to housing. In addition to the construction of new homes, migrants have also become important investors in the renovation of local churches that foster community life (Pribilsky 75). Remittances have also impacted the improvement of local roads, the provision of services such as the delivery of gas, growth of *tiendas* (small stores), and the building of health clinics in rural areas (Pribilsky 74-75).

Also, Bendixen & Associates reported that families use another 17 percent of remittances to purchase luxury items such as a washing machine or a television (Acosta, López, and Villamar 38). Although this seemingly unproductive consumption decreases the amount of capital invested, it aids other families indirectly. The economists Acosta, López, and Villamar maintain this argument by saying that this stimulus in consumption is essential as it creates incentives that force a demand for consumer products and services, which, in turn, fuel production (38). In other words, money from remittances increases the demand for many products and, in due course, helps the people who are involved in the production of those goods. By living in a country deeply affected by the repeated economic failure of the government, people understand the importance of these external revenues for consumption of these local goods. As Miles writes, “when the government and the municipality of Cuenca [Azuay’s capital] are literally bankrupt, the buying power of migrants cannot be dismissed” (Miles 29). Migrants’ consumerism is significantly helping local communities. Additionally, remittances are helping to fight poverty. The economists Acosta, López, and Villamar have calculated that remittances have allowed for 5 percent of Ecuador’s population to come out of poverty (31). Overall, remittances have a positive influence on families, on the local community, and on the Ecuadorian economy as a whole. As Pribilsky noted while doing fieldwork in the local community of Jatundeleg in Azuay, villagers have described the transformation brought about by remittances “as a sure sign of the poor region’s ‘development’ (desarrollo) and ‘progress’ (progreso)” (Pribilsky 74). In his conclusion, he writes that young migrants have become “absolutely crucial to the social reproduction of rural village life in Ecuador” (273). Thus, migrants have been successful in New York City because they have promoted the growth of their local communities and of their families in Ecuador.

Another helpful way to assess the impact of remittances on the Ecuadorian economy is by comparing it to other external sources of revenue. According Ecuador's Central Bank, 201 million dollars flowed into the Ecuadorian economy in 1993, in the form of remittances (Acosta, López, Villamar 18). According to the same source, migrants were remitting over \$1.6 billion back to Ecuador by 2004 (18). By comparison, Ecuador's main export products (aside from oil)—banana, coffee, cacao, shrimp, tuna, and other fish—produced revenues under \$1 billion in the same year. Given these figures, remittances had become the Ecuadorian economy's second source of revenue by 2004. Oil exports held the number one position with a yearly revenue over \$4 billion. By considering two other factors in addition to the gross value of revenues, Acosta, López, and Villamar deduce that remittances are the first source of external revenues over oil exports. The first of these factors is the fact that a considerable amount of revenues from oil exports are dedicated to the payment of the national debt. For this reason, the net amount that is being invested in the country is lower than that of remittances (25-28). Secondly, while oil exports are susceptible to the fluctuations of the international oil market, remittances have proven to increase steadily over the years. At this time, in fact, Ecuador's budget is suffering because the price of oil dropped sharply and unexpectedly a few months ago. Accordingly, the stability of remittances is appreciated as a positive economic feature that has counterbalanced to a certain extent the reduction of revenues from oil exports. Also, Miles argues that the Ecuadorian economy is highly vulnerable to commodity sales and dependent on external markets, which means that "economic opportunities are closely tied to consumer tastes generated elsewhere" (Miles 21). Remittances become one of the few sources of external sources of revenue which seem to be unaffected by external factors. By sending remittances from New York City and other places in

the U.S. and Europe, migrants have clearly improved the economic situation of Ecuador as a whole.

In order to arrive to New York City, however, Ecuadorian migrants face a number of harsh physical and financial conditions in the migration process. David Kyle argues that migrants, particularly from the regions of Azuay and Cañar, turn to clandestine human smugglers in the search for an alternative avenue to fulfill their pursuit, as they lack the sufficient resources to enter the United States by legal means. Besides, it is important to consider that human smuggling has become much more complicated today than what it was a few decades ago. Human smuggling is no longer simply helping migrants cross a single border for a few hundred dollars (Kyle and Liang 3). Human smuggling has now become a multi-billion dollar business around the world that forces people to make difficult financial decisions and endure harsh physical conditions. For Ecuadorian migrants, in fact, the costs and risks involved are elevated. Ecuadorian migrants, who mainly come from the regions of Azuay and Cañar, are obliged to go through intricate, underground networks facilitated by “migration merchants” (Kyle) if they want to get into the U.S. Once they enter this underground world, they go through inexhaustible quandaries and face extreme conditions, without ever having the certainty that they are going to arrive to their final destination. Notwithstanding the high risks, Ecuadorians take this road as they see it as the only way out of their destitute socioeconomic conditions. Migration to New York City becomes their only hope of ever emerging from this poor status.

In the first place, the process of migration places considerable financial stress on the migrant individual and his family, though it does not disrupt the ultimate profit migrants gain. The process begins when the *tramitador*, or “facilitator”, provides the would-be migrant with all of the required documentation. This includes the documents to leave Ecuador, visas for the

intermediary countries, all travel arrangements, and a falsified U.S. visa or passport. The cost of these services ranges between \$6,000 and \$10,000 (Garcés 102). Considering that none of the migrants possess such large sums of money, *tramitadores* arrange for *chulqueros*, or loan sharks, to lend them the necessary sums. Profiting from the disadvantageous conditions of the migrant, *chulqueros* set usurious interest rates of 10-12 percent, to be compounded monthly, and hold all of the migrant's possessions, land, and animals as collateral (Kyle 66). In this way, *chulqueros* exert their leverage over the migrant. It is not uncommon to see *chulqueros* menacing migrants to seize their collateral, if they do not repay their debts quickly. However, due to the higher wages they are winning in New York City, most migrants are able to pay their debts in only 2 to 3 years (Nieto 210). From the business perspective, migration is definitely worth it: migrants are repaying the loans that make it possible for them to get to the U.S. in a few years; from that point onward, the entire revenue they earn is for their own use.

Some migrants choose not to take loans from *chulqueros* at all, and they turn to other funding sources. In effect, according to the Catholic Diocese of Azogues, 14.3 percent of migrants use their own capital, 21.3 percent use capital raised by family members, 6.2 percent receive it from friends, and 5.9 percent contract a bank loan. This, in turn, helps to unite the community and the family in the pursuit of a common goal. Notwithstanding these other various means of gathering the necessary money, however, the use of money from *chulco* is still the predominant way of funding. The Diocese's study confirms this fact as well, as it reveals that roughly 50 percent of the migrants are taking loans from *chulqueros* (Catholic Diocese of Azogues). In his own study, David Kyle, Associate Professor of Sociology at UC Davis, similarly concludes that up to 66 percent of migrants turn to this illegal recourse to finance their undocumented migration (Kyle 100). This is comprehensible if one takes into account that money lending is a centuries-old institution in the Azuayan community (Garcés

102). Moreover, many migrants have no other recourse once they decide to take this road.

Although uneven, this road will take the great majority of migrants to their ultimate destination. Jason Pribilsky, Professor of Anthropology at Whitman College, offers an exemplary account of the many problems migrants face when securing their journey to the north. Pribilsky describes how thugs, working for the *chulqueros*, hounded Caesar Pañora and his family, after the Guatemalan police thwarted his plans to get into the U.S. His miserable story goes as follows. A smuggler by the name of The Rabbit had secured his passage to Guatemala. However, soon after he arrived, the Guatemalan police raided the “safe house” where he was staying. Although he was able to bribe his way out of the detention center, he had to return to his hometown of Jatundeleg because of his critical financial situation. When he got back, “thugs who worked for the *chulqueros* seized Caesar’s father’s truck and threatened to take their home unless at least some of the \$8,500 Caesar had borrowed was repaid” (Pribilsky 163). In addition, “the family started receiving disturbing calls threatening to kidnap and kill Caesar’s sister if the money was not delivered” (Pribilsky 163). Caesar found himself at a dead end and had no choice but to contract another debt in order to be able to finally smuggle himself into the U.S. and pay his original debt (the new gross debt now summed \$15,000). For this reason, migrants that have been successful in their pursuit of getting into the U.S. are quick “to send a sign” to a *chulquero* in order to demonstrate that they intend to pay what they have borrowed and avoid Caesar’s family’s disturbing situation. These signs, however, often add up “to little more than servicing the compounding monthly interest on a crippling *chulco*” (Pribilsky 210). As Jokisch clearly puts it, “the clandestine economy of the *chulqueros* and *coyotes* has allowed for a few to exploit thousands of migrant families” (Jokisch 7). Clearly, the migration process places a financial difficulty on many Ecuadorian people.

Another of the many dilemmas Ecuadorian migrants face in their trip north is the fear of being deceived by smugglers and caught by enforcement agents. “Ecuadorian newspapers run stories almost daily exposing the cons and scams (*estafas*) of people who pass themselves off as smugglers in order to bilk the unsuspecting and vulnerable” (Pribilsky 162). This brings about a high degree of uncertainty among the migrants that undertake these risky enterprises, and heightens the trepidation of family members and friends. One of these press articles, entitled “A Dream Turned Nightmare,” reports that during the first six months of 1994 alone, 250 Ecuadorians were deported en route to the United States after having paid large amounts of money to *tramitadores* who had promised a smooth passage north (Kyle 67). These occurrences are not uncommon at all. According to FLACSO, in the year 2006 alone, 16 vessels were intercepted with a total of 1,093 passengers, whose majority were Ecuadorians, attempting to smuggle from South America to Central America (FLACSO 22). Many times the intercepted vessels’ reports are distressing. In fact, Ecuador’s Coast Guard reports detailed situations of “hardship, danger, and sometimes death” (Pribilsky 164). This is the sacrifice migrants have to make if they wish to enter the U.S. through these illegal paths.

Indeed, for those migrants who are able to make the crossing, the conditions in which they do so are appalling. The most common route smugglers choose to transport migrants is to take them by sea to either Mexico or another Central American country (Guatemala mostly) and then lead them by surreptitious routes to the U.S.-Mexican border. Finally, *coyotes* guide migrants across the Rio Grande or the Arizona desert. One Ecuadorian man, who Pribilsky interviewed in Queens, described the conditions of the maritime voyage as the “worst experience of his life” (Pribilsky 165). As Pribilsky states, *pasadores* would force between 150 to 200 people into fishing boats designed for 12 or 20 people at the most. Not surprisingly, villagers in Ecuador would tell how stowaways froze to death in the refrigerated rooms of the

boat or drowned when boats overturned (Pribilsky 164). Another of the great fears migrants have during these voyages is that they do not know how to swim, as they grew up in the Andean highlands where no bodies of water exist nearby. Further deepening their misery, they are given very little to eat and to drink during the entire cruise. "Each day we had only a banana and a hard-boiled egg to eat," the migrant man assured Pribilsky (Pribilsky 166).

From my own experience as an Ecuadorian, I can say that I have read many dreadful articles about Ecuadorians suffering from terrible conditions in their trips north and from the ruthless exploitation of the smugglers, who profit from the misery and naïveté of the migrants. Nevertheless, none of these obstacles, not even the infamous U.S.-Mexican border, seem to deter Ecuadorians from migrating to the United States. In fact, many migrants think that this last major barrier is not hard to cross at all. When interviewing a twenty-six-year-old returnee in Ecuador, Pribilsky got this answer concerning the border: "Man! You couldn't imagine the scene. It was like the door was left wide open and anyone was welcome" (Pribilsky 166). Regardless of this opinion, Border Patrol agents have indeed apprehended a large number of Ecuadorians. According to Pribilsky, however, because it is common practice to "throw back" alien Mexicans caught in the frontier, it is easy for Ecuadorians to pass off as Mexicans and simply be sent back over the border (Pribilsky 166). Thanks to this practice, migrants will attempt to cross the border multiple times until they succeed.

In conclusion, despite the manifold obstacles that thwart their success, Ecuadorian migrants have not lost their hope and a significant majority of those who attempt to migrate make it to New York City and succeed. By sending remittances to Ecuador, moreover, they also improve the conditions of their families and contribute to the advancement of the Ecuadorian economy. The testimony of the Ecuadorian-American Alfredo Fuentes exemplifies Ecuadorian migrants' ability to assimilate into American society and, most importantly, to succeed in New

York City. Fuentes was born in Guayaquil in a time “when life was difficult all over Ecuador” (Fuentes 31). With the financial support of relatives living New York City, he migrated along with his parents and siblings in 1960, “determined to make a better life than the one [they] knew” (Fuentes 23). By migrating, Fuentes “set [his] dreams in motion” (26). Now a retired captain of the Fire Department of New York City, Alfredo Fuentes has been a recipient of 11 meritorious awards as well as a 9/11 meritorious medal for actions during the 9/11 terrorist attacks when he operated as the Acting Battalion Chief for the Marine Division of the NYC Fire Department. He was buried when the North Tower collapsed, was later rescued, and finally survived after being in a coma for weeks (WcSpeakers). His exemplary life is a clear testimony of la *chulla vida*, the hardships and sacrifices one has to make in life. However, it is also the testimony of the success of Ecuadorian migrants in New York City. In his book *American by Choice*, Fuentes himself recognizes that coming to America changed his life in a way he could have never dreamt. He wrote that he “literally [crossed] the threshold from one world into another” and that “those born in this country [the United States] may never know what it means to cry and give thanks to be able to come to America” (Fuentes 25). Although “America is far from ideal,” Fuentes chose this place to be his family and his home (210). He became an “American by choice” because he saw that the United States offered him opportunities Ecuador could never offer to people of his poor socioeconomic standing. Migration for him, as for many more Ecuadorians that have come to New York City, was unquestionably worth it.

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