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RESEARCH ARTICLE

REVISED From worker to owner: Moral economy and competing value regimes in Cuban return migration

[version 2; peer review: 2 not approved]

Previously titled: "From worker to owner: Emerging articulations of 'trabajo' and 'negocio' in return migration to Cuba"

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Abstract

Since reforms to Cuban migration policy and the expansion of licensed private enterprise in the 2010s, an increasing number of migrants based in Europe have resettled in Cuba. This article examines return as an evaluative moment: how returnees' economic projects are judged in everyday interaction, and how vernacular distinctions between *trabajo* (waged work) and *negocio* (business), and between 'European-style' and 'Cuban' ways of doing business, become moral coordinates for assessing worth, obligation, and legitimacy. The analysis draws on long-term ethnographic fieldwork (2005–2023) and intensive participant observation with 22 returnees (17 men, 5 women, mostly in their 40s–60s) in Havana and Viñales, complemented by multi-sited research with Cuban migrants in Spain (2012–2018). Based on fieldnotes and inductive, cross-case thematic analysis, the article shows that returnees narrate and attempt to enact a passage from worker to *dueño* (owner), but that such claims remain fragile under scarcity, shifting regulations, mistrust, and pervasive scrutiny about 'success' and 'failure'. Returnees respond through performative labor, assembling proofs, mobilizing transnational resources, and enrolling others into projected futures, while also negotiating the practical and moral ambivalence of *invento* and *trapicheo.* The article mobilizes 'moral economy' as an analytic of how entitlements, obligations, and legitimacy are contested within shifting economic arrangements, rather than as a residual space outside them. The study relies on a purposive sample and speaks most directly to trajectories shaped by the post-2012 reform conjuncture prior to the post-2020 intensification of crisis.

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Any reports and responses or comments on the article can be found at the end of the article.

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Return Migration, Economic Practice, Work, Business, Value, Morality, Change, Cuba, Spain

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REVISED **Amendments from Version 1**

The manuscript has been fully reorganized into a conventional research-article format (Introduction–Methods–Results–Discussion–Conclusion), with a clear separation between evidence and interpretation. The Introduction now states the research gap, aims/questions, core contributions, and provides a concise positioning within relevant scholarship. The Methods section has been expanded to provide an explicit account of research design, sites, sampling and recruitment (N = 22; 17 men, 5 women), data generation and documentation (fieldnotes), analytic procedure (inductive cross-case thematic analysis with abductive engagement), ethics/consent, and limitations. The Results are presented in structured thematic clusters, while the Discussion synthesizes the findings in relation to return migration, moral economy, and Cuban transformations of work and business, making the argument and contribution explicit. The Conclusion has been rewritten to provide a concise synthesis, implications, and future research directions, with a brief epilogue situating the analysis in the present conjuncture. I have also standardized the abstract (continuous text), aligned sample descriptions across sections, and tightened the academic register throughout.

Any further responses from the reviewers can be found at the end of the article

Introduction

Return is not simply a movement 'back home'. It is also an evaluative moment: a public test of what migration was worth and of who a person has become.

In Cuba at the time of my field research on return migration (2018-2022), this test acquired renewed force[1]. By the mid-2010s, after reforms to migration law and the expansion of licensed self-employment and private enterprise, return had become thinkable as an economic project in Cuba—often framed in everyday talk as a move from *trabajo* (waged work, often low-status) to *negocio* (business) and, ideally, to life as a *dueño* (owner). At the same time, ongoing scarcity, shifting regulations, and a polarized currency landscape made such projects uncertain and highly scrutinized.

Scholarship on return migration has long shown that homecomings are shaped by expectations, obligations, and the politics of recognition, and that 'success' is a relational achievement rather than an individual attribute (cf. Olwig, 2012; Scalettaris et al., 2019; Gardner, 2015). Work on the social demand to be a 'successful migrant' highlights how return is judged through visible proofs (housing, consumption, business) and through moralized readings of effort, deservingness, and responsibility. This article builds on these insights while asking what happens when 'success' must be enacted under conditions where the material grounds for it are unstable.

Analytically, the article complements a body of work that brings return migration into conversation with moral economy approaches and with debates on how economic life is moralized in crisis contexts (cf. Simoni, 2016a; Simoni, 2025), examining the moral and performative labour through which returnees make their projects—and themselves—credible. It also speaks to scholarship on money, care and value in post-Soviet/reform Cuba (Andaya, 2014; Holbraad, 2017; Wilson, 2009; Wig, 2021), on entrepreneurial ventures and inequality (Gold, 2016; Bastian, 2025), and on informal economies and exchange networks (Armengol, 2013; Köhn and Siré, 2023), but keeps the focus on evaluation in everyday interaction.

The article addresses a gap in existing research on Cuban return and transnational entrepreneurship: we know relatively little about how returnees' economic initiatives are evaluated in everyday interaction, how vernacular distinctions (*trabajo*/*negocio*; 'European'/'Cuban' ways of doing business) become moral coordinates, and how claims to competence and belonging are sustained - or punctured - through mundane encounters. By tracing these dynamics across multiple cases, the article clarifies how 'successful return' is made, disputed, and sometimes undone.

The analysis is guided by three questions: 1) How do returnees mobilize the contrast between *trabajo* and *negocio* to narrate and enact a shift from worker to owner? 2) How do they navigate local suspicions about 'success' and 'failure', and what kinds of 'proof' and performative work become necessary? 3) How are 'European' and 'Cuban' ways of doing business invoked, negotiated, and reworked in practice? The article makes four contributions: it (1) specifies *trabajo/negocio* as an emic analytic through which returnees articulate value, personhood, and belonging; (2) conceptualizes credibility as performative labour under scrutiny; (3) traces the practical negotiation of 'European' and 'Cuban' repertoires of doing business; and (4) shows how reforms and crisis reshape aspirations and evaluations in everyday life.

[1]This article is part of a collective research project that addressed, in its broadest scope, how ideals of the good life are articulated, (re) assessed, and related to specific places and contexts as a result of the experience of crisis and migration. The project *Returning to a Better Place: The (Re)assessment of the 'Good Life' in Times of Crisis* is a project sponsored by the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme (grant agreement No 759649).

The next section details the research design and analytic procedure. The Results section presents four findings, supported by comparative vignettes. The Discussion situates these findings within debates on return migration, moral economy, and entrepreneurship in constrained contexts. The Conclusion summarizes contributions and points to directions for further research.

Methods

Research design and field sites

Fieldwork followed a long-term, multi-sited ethnographic design. Research began in 2005 and continued through repeated stays until 2023, with primary field sites in Havana and Viñales (Pinar del Río). Fieldwork combined participant observation in domestic, workplace, and everyday social settings with informal conversations. A complementary multi-sited component focused on Cuban migrants in Spain (primarily Barcelona and surrounding areas) between 2012 and 2018, which provides comparative material on the crisis context in which many return projects were re-imagined.

Participants and sampling

The core corpus for this article comprises 22 Cuban returnees from Europe (17 men, 5 women), mostly in their 40s–60s. Most had lived in Europe for several years (often a decade or more) before returning and spending substantial time back in Cuba; some alternated between Cuba and Europe in patterns of partial or circular return. Destinations included Spain, Italy, France, Germany, Austria, Denmark, Belgium, and Slovenia. Return took place largely between 2013 and 2016, often - though not always - through the formal repatriation process[2]. Participants were recruited through purposive and snowball sampling, beginning from long-term acquaintances and expanding via family, neighbourhood, and workplace networks. Inclusion criteria were: (a) extended residence in Europe; (b) a decision to resettle in Cuba; and (c) active involvement in livelihood-making after return (employment, self-employment, or business initiatives).

Data collection and documentation

Data were generated through prolonged participant observation and repeated, unrecorded, informal conversations. Interactions took place in homes, neighbourhood settings, workplaces and small businesses, and during routine activities (shopping, errands, hospitality, social visits). Because conversations were not recorded, documentation relied on detailed fieldnotes written during or immediately after encounters. The resulting corpus exceeds 1'000 pages of daily fieldnotes, supplemented by photographs of public spaces and material culture, policy and media documents, and analytic memos written throughout fieldwork. The five cases discussed most extensively in the Results were selected because they capture variation in trajectories, resources, and sectoral positions, while allowing close analysis of how *trabajo*/*negocio* distinctions and evaluations of 'success' crystallize in interaction.

Analysis

Analysis followed an iterative, inductive thematic procedure, combined with abductive engagement with the literatures discussed below. Fieldnotes were first indexed during fieldwork and revisited in successive rounds of coding. Codes were developed around recurring emic categories (*trabajo*, *negocio*, *dueño*, *invento*/*trapicheo*), evaluative language (success/failure, sacrifice, deservingness), and interactional scenes of scrutiny (neighbours, kin, customers, officials). Themes were refined through cross-case comparison, attention to discrepant cases, and triangulation across sites and temporal phases. The analysis prioritizes transparency over strict replicability: it aims to provide an audit trail of decisions and to support transferability through thick description and explicit linking of claims to evidence.

Ethics

Ethical procedures followed institutional requirements across different project phases. Early exploratory fieldwork (from 2005) was conducted under the ethics procedures of the author's host institutions at the time; subsequent phases were covered by later institutional and externally funded projects that formalized consent and data-management procedures. For the encounters reported here, consent was obtained orally in context and revisited in long-term relationships; pseudonyms are used throughout and identifying details are masked. Fieldnotes and related materials are stored securely, with access restricted to the researcher. Given the sensitivity of economic and political talk in Cuba, the article avoids naming specific officials, businesses, and exact locations when this could increase risk.

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[2]Aja Diaz and Rodriguez Soriano (2022) and Barcenas Alfonso (2023) analyse the exponential growth of formal resettlements to Cuba between 2013 and 2020, which saw the *reasentamiento* of over 60,000 Cuban emigrants, mainly coming from the United States and Spain. While no doubt significant, these numbers are not a good indicator of the number of Cubans returning to reside permanently in Cuba, whose experiences are the primary focus of my research. In their analysis of post-1989 Cuban mobility and migration in Canada and Western Europe, Krull and Stubbs (2021) point to the growing relevance of 'circular migration,' noting that while '[t]here has been some return migration, ... the trend is increasingly for it to be circulatory and for home to be split between places' (2011, 174). Such emerging forms of transnationalism are also highlighted by Bastian (2018, 141), who singles out 'circular migrants' as one of 'three new social groups that have gained importance in Havana as a result of recent policy changes' (alongside 'employers and employees' and '(satisfied) consumer-citizens').

Limitations

The study relies on a purposive sample and is skewed toward male interlocutors and returns from Europe; it does not claim statistical representativeness. The absence of audio recordings for many conversations limits the ability to reproduce exact wording, though it supports the analysis of everyday interaction as captured in contemporaneous fieldnotes. Finally, because the most intensive return-focused corpus predates the post-2020 acceleration of economic crisis in Cuba, the article speaks more directly to trajectories shaped by the 2012–2018 reform horizon.

Results

Crisis abroad, reforms at home, and the evaluative horizon of return

Return projects were often reconfigured during the economic crisis in Spain (see Simoni, 2016a). Among the Cuban migrants I met in Barcelona, return visits played a key role in terms of assessing how things were evolving in Cuba, and determining whether going back was really something worth considering. Hopes on this matter, in general, were not too high. Sceptical and cynical postures prevailed, the widespread assumption being that the Cuban 'system' remained largely dysfunctional, and that in spite of highly mediatized narratives of change, the situation on the ground remained marred by the 'usual' bureaucratic complications, arbitrariness, unaccountability, and corruption. For some, however, economic prospect in Cuba started to look at least better that those they could have in Spain. I could sense, in other words, a measure of optimism among Cuban migrants in terms of circulating back and forth from Cuba, eventually returning more permanently, and setting up viable businesses in the country (see also Aja Díaz *et al.*, 2017). As Cuban migrants in Barcelona debated such possibilities, they gauged the current transformations that Cuba was undergoing, most notably the new economic reforms encouraging private enterprise, and the new migratory law facilitating exits and returns (Castro Ruz, 2012). Some of my interlocutors were eager to test the potential of such transformations, exploring for instance business opportunities that could help them have a better life in Cuba than the one they had in Spain[3].

In conversations with migrants facing unemployment or precarious work, the possibility of return was framed less as a definitive 'homecoming' than as a recalibration of what counted as a viable life, materially and socially. Wilson, for instance, contrasted the insecurity of Europe when one lacked stable employment with the idea that, in Cuba, even in conditions of shortage, there remained a form of 'security' anchored in familiarity, friendships, and kinship. Yusniel's ironic remark, 'Cuba is the best country in the world to be poor!', pushed this contrast in a different register: not as nostalgia, but as a pointed comment on how poverty is lived, recognised, and socially buffered. Saúl, who had spent about ten years in Spain, placed the crisis in more explicitly moral-economic terms. Cubans, he said, had come to Spain to 'improve their economy' (*mejorar su economía*), but once the economy "got screwed" (*se jodió*), many were 'rediscovering and seeking sentiments'. They began to look for other Cubans, for what felt familiar, 'for their stuff' (*lo suyo*).

Yet this re-turn to social closeness was not simply comforting. In the same climate of crisis, Saúl grew frustrated at the multiplication of requests, favours, and solicitations from friends and acquaintances, and at what he saw as a troubling confusion of registers. 'There are people who no longer know how to separate business from friendship', he lamented. 'They are confusing everything'. His complaint echoed moral idioms traced elsewhere in Cuban contexts, where relationships are often evaluated through distinctions between 'real' ties and relations of interest, and where aspirations to a more 'normal' life abroad circulate as a powerful horizon (Simoni, 2016b)[4]. Saúl's point, however, was precisely that Spain's crisis was undoing any easy expectation of such 'normality', and in the process intensifying moral scrutiny around where sentiment ends and economic calculation begins.

The sections below show how this evaluative horizon structures livelihood-making. They trace (1) how returnees build economic critiques of the Cuban system while recasting migration as capital; (2) how performative work becomes necessary to sustain credibility; (3) how 'European' and 'Cuban' repertoires of doing business are negotiated in practice; and (4) how becoming a *dueño* (owner) is continually exposed to scrutiny.

The findings are organised into three clusters. First, they show how aspirations to become *dueños* and to run a *negocio* emerge as both an opening and a critique of state-centred *trabajo*. Second, they trace how projects are evaluated through everyday scrutiny and comparisons, generating pressure to display migratory 'results' and to prefigure success. Third, they examine how returnees navigate contrasts between 'European' and 'Cuban' ways of doing business—including

[3]Recent studies of Cuban migration have also been drawing attention to changes both in migratory legislation and Cubans' mobility patterns, and how these intersect with further openings of the Cuban government to private enterprise and business endeavors (see Aja Díaz *et al.*, 2017; Barcenas Alfonso, 2023; Bastian, 2018; Krull & Stubbs, 2021; Martín Fernández & Barcenas Alfonso, 2015).

[4]We find echoes here of the widespread critique, in post-Soviet Cuba, of the increased predominance of *relaciones de interés* ('relations for interest', i.e. instrumentally motivated) as opposed to normal, 'real' relationships and 'true love' (Fosado, 2005; Lundgren, 2011; Stout, 2014), a typical narrative of 'moral decline, evidenced by materialist interests in romantic relationships' (Fernandez, 2013: 12).

improvisation and emic notions of *invento* and *trapicheo*—and how these negotiations reshape post-migratory relations of belonging and entitlement.

Doing *negocios*, becoming *dueño*

This first cluster shows how the prospect of running a *negocio* and becoming one's own *dueño* crystallises returnees' hopes and moral critiques. Ownerhood is framed as a way out of the frustrations of low-paid *trabajo*, but it is also fragile: it must be enacted, justified, and defended in relation to family, neighbours, and state institutions. The cases below illustrate how returnees mobilise the idiom of 'being one's own owner' to make sense of return, while confronting doubts about legitimacy and the practical limits of autonomy.

Now in his forties, Roberto had never travelled back to Europe since his return to Havana. In my stays in Cuba since 2018, I spent a considerable amount of time with him, and had the chance to hear him recount his life in Italy and his return on many different occasions, to a variety of audiences. Roberto did not really have anything particularly striking to show in terms of being a 'successful' entrepreneur back in Cuba. He lived in his parents' house in Centro Habana, where he had refurbished the attic, and ran a small *ferreteria* (hardware store) in the house's entrance hall. His *negocio* (business) was selling plumbing material under a license for household items (*articulos para el hogar*). He told me his license did not really cover what he was actually offering, namely hard to find plumbing items and toilet facilities to a clientele of *casa particular* (bed and breakfast) and *paladar* (restaurant) owners. While Roberto always made a point of explaining to people that he had lived for a long time in Italy, the specter of having returned as a result of a somewhat failed migration tended to loom over him when he dealt with other Cubans. The need to justify his trajectory was, in this sense, always imminent. Roberto, who liked to speak Italian with me, criticized Cuban common sense, saying that most people on the island mistakenly thought that 'over there' (*allá*, abroad) everything was easy: '*é il sogno americano …*', the American dream. The frequent questioning and interpellation Roberto endured generated a certain unease. He always had to explain, tell a story, and elaborate on the reasons of his return. When I asked him about his reaction to such questions, he told me he generally told people he had a couple of good business here in Cuba, and that would generally suffice to quench their curiosity. Similar, rather vague evocations to profitable *negocios*, emerged or were more subtly hinted at by other returnees I engaged with, when I saw them interacting with other Cubans.

According to Roberto, Cubans did not know what 'real' work meant. When seen in the light of his experience in Italy, he claimed that there was no '*cultura del trabajo*' (culture of work) in Cuba, and that work was simply not in Cubans' DNA. Instead, what prevailed was 'business' (*negocio*), in which he included el *invento*, and therefore all sorts of informal and illegal business endeavors[5]. While he had 'worked' hard in Italy, Roberto was now fond of his 'business', and I could see he very much enjoyed being the 'owner' of his *ferretería.* As he repeatedly told me, his job was to *invertir*, to invest - notably in plumbing pieces and items for toilets and showers as soon as they appeared in the informal market, *por la izquierda* ('by the left', meaning 'under the table' in Cuban common parlance), to then resell them and carve out a profit. No doubt, Roberto's business gave him enough to get by. But after his first very optimistic references to his businesses, spending more time with him also made me realize that his day to day was rather modest. Any extraordinary expense, such as going out for food or a concert with his partner, had to be carefully monitored to stay within his tight budget. Getting a better picture of Roberto's everyday life, led me to temper my initial expectations as to the kind of life that returnees like him were living upon return.

Humbe, a Cuban man in his mid-forties who had returned to live in Viñales – a rural, town and touristic hotspot located 200 kilometres west of the capital - after almost twenty years in Austria, also emphasized the significance of the move from 'worker' to 'owner', in multiple conversations we had between 2018 and 2020. Humbe had first migrated alone to Austria, and then managed to bring his Cuban wife too. They had had a daughter there, who was only eight years old when they had decided to come back to Cuba. Humbe told me he had an extremely busy but economically successful life in Austria up to the time when he left, working in the restauration sector and managing two and at times three jobs at a time – from food catering to aide in a restaurant. After all this time in Austria, he told me his wife had started missing Viñales more and more. Seeing that things were starting to change and opening up in Cuba, they had taken the risk to invest back in their hometown, buying a house on the main street, and, after some years and the required refurbishment work, opening up a private restaurant, a *paladar.* His wife had returned first, and after a couple of years back and forth, once he was sure they could make a good living in Viñales, Humbe decided to sell all their belongings, leave Austria, and make a more

[5]Along with *la lucha* (the struggle, i.e. the everyday struggle to get by), an particularly since the 1990s crisis that followed the collapse of the Soviet Union, Cubans increasingly use terms like *conseguir* (obtain), *resolver* (resolve) or *inventar* (invent), each with various shades of meaning (Palmié, 2004: 242; Lubiński, 2022; Bastian, 2025), to refer to strategies for obtaining goods and commodities. Palmié (ibid.) discusses the meaning acquired by the term *inventar*: 'it designates acts of obtaining goods and commodities otherwise out of reach by means most likely to be judged devious'. For a thorough examination of vernacular language in Cuba's popular economies, see Lubiński's (2022) work.

definitive move to Cuba. As I enquired about his return, Humbe recognized that things had been tough at the beginning, and that it had taken a while to get accustomed to the usual scarcities that characterized life in Cuba, most notably the difficulties of provisioning and finding products both for his family and for the restaurant. But now, after a few years, he said he couldn't complain: coming back had been a good decision, and all things compared, his quality of life had much improved.

Jokingly, he pointed at his big belly, a visible sign that he was eating more than enough, and doing rather well on that side of things. He contrasted his busy life in Austria, where he had never stopped, working several jobs at a time and busy from dawn to nightfall, with his current life in Viñales. '*Son siete años que no trabajo …*' – 'It's seven years now that I don't work' he once claimed, a big grin on his face, minimizing his efforts in running the *paladar*, not considering it work, and putting the emphasis instead on what the life as a *dueño*, a business owner, afforded. Humbe loved going fishing, for instance, and that's what much of his conversations often revolved around - planning the next outing to a nearby lake, or discussing fishing gears and techniques. I could attest of such passion as I accompanied him, with some other friends, in a couple such fishing excursions, which proved to be good occasions to continue our conversations on his move from Austria back to Cuba, the frequent comparisons of life 'here' and 'there', and his relative 'good life' in Viñales. But like the for the economic life of the other returnees I met, Humbe also acknowledged a certain unpredictability, in that it was highly depended on the flow of tourists. A few years earlier, Humbe had separated from his wife, and left her the more profitable *paladar* on the main street to open a second one, in a less profitable location. He was now struggling to cover the costs of keeping the business open, and thought of selling his '*almendron*', the 1950s American car he had bought and repaired, in order to get some much-needed cash and start rethinking his business plans.

As I spent more time with returnees like Roberto and Humbe, who were in many ways still leading a life of privilege when compared to most other Cubans I know, I start realizing that they were doing less well, economically, than they themselves claimed in our initial conversations, or when talking to other Cubans. What emerged repeatedly, was thus a certain discrepancy between bold generalizations on the economic possibilities Cuba offered, and the everyday struggles to sustain and cultivate the image of the successful returnee, of well-off *dueños* and entrepreneurs. It is on such discrepancy, its reasons, and peoples' efforts to obviate it, that I now turn.

Economic critique and prefigurations of 'success'

The second cluster traces how returnees' accounts of work and business are embedded in broader economic critiques and comparisons between Europe and Cuba. These narratives help them interpret crises, justify return, and prefigure a horizon of success. At the same time, such comparisons feed into everyday evaluations—by returnees and by others—about what should count as a 'successful' migration and a deserved life after return.

Joel was a Cuban man in his late forties, whom I first met in Barcelona back in 2012, when he used to run a small Cuban joint in a popular nightlife area of the city, while also leading a Cuban band. The economic crisis in Spain had hit Cuban musician like Joel hard, with gigs paid less and less, and little chance of making a living with music alone, which was his passion. Widely circulating, for instance, was the story of a famous member of a Cuban band, who had migrated to Spain only to struggle to make ends meet after the crisis, and who had ended up living precariously on the street, or squatting friends' homes, before deciding to move back to Cuba. Joel's idea was to bring his musical 'project' - as he liked to call it - back to Cuba, make it grow from there, and then lead a more or less transnational life between Cuba, Spain, and wherever else playing with his band would lead. Between 2012 and 2022, I got a chance to speak to him repeatedly, both in Cuba and in Spain, and couldn't help noticing that his tales of life in Cuba were often couched in a tragicomic register, one punctuated by examples of misadventure and mishaps.

When I met Joel in Cuba in August 2019, he immediately began lamenting the *lucha titánica*—the titanic struggle—he was enduring to make his musical project succeed on the island. Beyond his musical endeavors, Joel had shared with me on previous occasions how he had ventured into various business initiatives since he had returned to Cuba about five years earlier. Unfortunately, all these ventures had failed to yield the anticipated results. More often than not, Joel found himself the victim of scams perpetrated by Cuban residents—individuals who perceived and treated him as a *Cuban coming from abroad*, akin to a tourist: a potential source of hard currency and an easy mark for subterfuge (cf. Simoni, 2022). Over time, Joel concluded that it was nearly impossible to find trustworthy business partners in Cuba. He saw the 'system' as fundamentally flawed and dysfunctional, with everything dependent on personal contacts and, consequently, riddled with corruption. In his view, people lacked the ability to work properly and with seriousness. Initially, Joel had harbored high hopes for a smoother reintegration into the island's economic landscape, attempting to establish several promising business ventures. He had identified two main sectors in Cuba as ripe with potential, still 'virgin' in terms of economic development: food and transport. Seizing these opportunities, Joel embarked on a small pig-breeding venture and purchased a vintage American car, intending to use it as a taxi by renting it out to a driver. However, neither of these

ventures bore fruit. According to Joel's account, the failures were largely due to the economic misbehavior, carelessness, and unreliability of his Cuban partners. These challenges reinforced his sense of disillusionment with the country's business environment and deepened his frustration with the systemic issues that continued to hinder his efforts.

Joel's criticisms, and the stories of his economic vicissitudes in Cuba, tell us of the disappointing aspects of return. In his narratives featured issues of mistrust in family, friends, fellow-nationals, and a broader 'economic' and 'political' context marred by corruption and mismanagement. To this we can add condemnations of economic incompetence and misconduct by Cuban people. The dissatisfactions of return, it must be said, are not a novelty for scholars of migration. In the first anthropological review of 'return migration', Gmelch (1980) affirms that most of returnees are unsatisfied and disappointed back in their homeland. Cerase's (1974) earlier account of the return of Italians from the United States, also highlights the returnees' frustration, with many coming back to Italy with innovative ideas to implement business only to find 'local power structures' put a spoke in their wheels. Returnees may come to see their non-migrant compatriots as 'narrow and old-fashioned' (Oxfeld & Long, 2004: 10) and develop an identity of 'returnee' out of heightened reflexivity as to who they were and have become (Oxfeld & Long, 2004: 14). Scholars of return migration encourage us to examine how imaginaries and expectations of return relate to the concrete experiences of re-settlement, so as to ascertain '[w] hether the homecoming is liberating and empowering, leading to satisfaction and self-discovery, or, on the other hand, an experience of disenchantment, culture shock and new displacement' (King & Christou, 2011: 461).

Urging us to move beyond the tendency to privilege 'the "questions of unhappiness and dissatisfaction" (King, 2000: 19)' (Stefansson, 2004: 8) in the analysis of homecomings, Stefansson calls for an approach that views return as 'a creative effort oriented towards constructing better and more satisfying futures' (2004: 12, see also Hammond, 2004). If 'breakdowns of expectations' (Narotzky & Besnier, 2014) in destination countries, such as those resulting from the profound economic crisis in Europe, could inform my Cuban interlocutors' return projects, my initial findings suggest that upon going 'back home', many returnees, like Joel, confronted yet another set of breakdowns and challenges (see also Simoni, 2025)[6]. The concrete experience of return, tended to raise specific sets of difficulties and dilemmas resulting mainly from a disjuncture between migrants' hopes and expectations, and the concrete vicissitudes of life once back. Migrants' expectations were, in this sense, put to the test of living, of finding their way – yet again – in a range of everyday situations that raised their own material challenges and moral demands. But rather than simply surrendering to 'disappointment' (Zigon, 2017) in return, interlocutors like Joel strived to keep alive and prefigure scenarios of economic success. In this endeavor, much effort was dedicated to generating value from their experiences abroad, and in showing how such value could eventually pay off 'back home'.

While spending time with Joel, I observed how he frequently invoked the 'Spanish card' of a transnational lifestyle in his interactions with his bandmates. This strategy appeared to serve as a motivational tool, encouraging his band members to remain invested in the prospect of a successful international music career, one that held the promise of tours in Spain and beyond. 'When we'll travel … ' Joel repeatedly prophesied one evening as we sat chatting over a bottle of rum. This conversation took place after he and his bandmates had performed as an opening act in a modest, run-down venue in Havana. Joel's remarks were peppered with directives: 'We have to be ready,' 'We have to practice more,' and 'You have to follow my advice—for when it gets big …'. His words seemed aimed at sustaining a sense of potentiality and preparing the group for an imagined future of musical success on a global stage. The "Spanish card" was not only a narrative resource but a practical one, whose force depended on whether it could enrol others and withstand the small tests of everyday cooperation. These allusions served to generate an atmosphere of excitement and euphoria, maintaining high spirits by invoking imaginaries of a successful international career. They foreshadowed the possibility of imminent recognition in the national charts, which would, in turn, pave the way for international fame, lucrative opportunities, and performances across various venues. The imagery of financial success and widespread acclaim was particularly compelling for many of the band's members, most of whom had never left Cuba. Their enthusiasm was palpable, as they eagerly envisioned the prospect of venturing abroad and achieving the success Joel so vividly described.

Joel relied on his transnational connections, the allure of imaginaries of a better life abroad, and the narrative of his past successes as a musician in a renowned Cuban band (he had indeed toured internationally with a well-known group before moving to Spain) to inspire his bandmates. These elements were instrumental in persuading them to embrace the vision of a promising future he laid out—a future where their efforts would eventually pay off. By drawing on these aspirations,

[6]I am drawing here on Narotzky and Besnier (2014) conceptualization of 'moments of disjuncture' (S7) in which moral economic consideration are likely to come to the fore, and on their view of situations of crisis as 'expressing people's breach of confidence in the elements that provided relative systemic stability and reasonable expectations for the future' (Narotzky and Besnier, 2014, S4). Breakdowns of expectations resulting from crisis situations, as articulated by Narotzky and Besnier, have the potential to lead to a reconfiguration of values and a change in people's 'imagining of possible futures and how to make them happen' (*ibid.*: S4).

Joel encouraged his bandmates to stay committed, follow his guidance, and continue honing their skills. For now, they worked for minimal compensation, sustained by sporadic concerts, but always with the promise of a brighter horizon. 'But we have to make more rehearsals,' he emphasized, 'We have to make more sacrifices'; 'That's how successful bands make it: You've got to trust me on this, I have been (out) there, I know how things work.' These declarations conjured a sense of potentiality, binding the group to his leadership and to the shared dream of eventual success. Read this way, rehearsal, discipline, and 'being ready' were not simply practical requirements but sites where Joel's promise of future success could be tried out - confirmed, deferred, or quietly undermined. Joel lived the life of a band leader, keeping the dream of success on the 'imaginative horizon' (Crapanzano, 2004), believing in his 'project', and striving to enroll those around him in his vision. Importantly, this horizon did not sit "outside" the present: it folded into the group's everyday dealings, giving form to what counted as effort, loyalty, and sacrifice.

What mattered was not only whether Joel believed in this future, but how he worked to make it socially plausible, turning anticipation into a shared horizon that could, in principle, become self-fulfilling. I am mindful here of the questions Zigon's recently urged us to address when analysing fieldwork material, moving 'beyond the actual' and towards 'the incipient no-yet' (2018: 14), and asking: 'What potential for becoming is trying to be enacted? Or, what other possibilities of being are pointed toward?' (2018: 15). In the light of Zigon's observations, we may argue that Joel was attempting to open possibilities, but if his 'worldbuilding' efforts acted as 'temporary prefigurations', their potentiality for 'actually happening and sticking' (2018: 4) remained very much uncertain. This is also why the question is not simply whether the vision was 'true', but how such projections acquire traction in practice, through mundane trials, material supports, and the virtual ideals that silently format what becomes thinkable and doable. Joel deliberately crafted a state of make-believe, one that performatively functioned as a rallying device to garner support, assistance, and favours. This positioning elevated him to a perceived superior level—economically, socially, and culturally. It appeared to grant him a certain ascendancy and a form of persuasive power across a wide range of social and economic relationships. The imaginaries Joel invoked not only sustained his vision but also facilitated various aspects of his life in Cuba, reinforcing his influence and enabling him to navigate challenges more effectively. Within this framework, Joel positioned himself as the potentially rising star, leveraging the allure of future success to consolidate his role as a charismatic and aspirational figure. However, the reality he was striving to bring about remained a fragile one, punctured by occasional insinuations of failure and humbling doses of irony and derision, also from his band members, which at times made him notice that, 'actually', and for the moment at least, they were really struggling, barely getting by, and going nowhere.

Jorge was another returnee in his forties, back for five years in Viñales after having spent twenty in France. Thanks to a French friend who helped him with ideas and capital, Jorge had just built a rather big house, were he lived with his Cuban wife and daughter. When I met him in August 2019, Jorge had finally got the license to start renting for tourists in his bed and breakfast (*casa particular*), but business was very low, with much competition in the village, and not enough tourists around. '*No tengo nada*, *ni cinco fulas* [US dollar equivalent] *tengo*' ('I have nothing, not even five dollars')[7], told me Jorge, referring to the fact that he was broke. But people still believe that I am a millionaire', he continued, 'and this suits me'. When I asked him what was so good in people thinking him a millionaire, while he was in fact broke, his answer was rather straightforward: '*Mejor que te tengan invidia de que te tengan pena*' – better that people envy you, than pitying you, was his reasoning. '*¡Que no se note la miseria!*', keep the misery out of sight - was another of his favorite mottos, which he repeated for instance when inviting us to have some food or coffee. Jorge acted the generous guest, while alluding with complicity to the fact that this was all about cultivating appearances[8], and that his real economic situation was rather dire – '*la miseria*', the misery he ascribed to most people in Cuba. Not unlike the case of Joel, my impression was that Jorge too, reflexively activated a state of make believe that could serve to his own advantage. Gorge often referred to himself as having another status, as being French, but also Cuban, and a member of *las grandes ligas*, the 'big leagues', drawing a parallel with the realm of sports and top-ranking champions. He could allegedly play, and play well, in both realms, what he imagined as the 'Cuban' and the 'French/European' way of doing things, notably business.

Concretely, for now, Jorge had to make do with what the Cuban context allowed him, with severe limitations on his business expansion, having to keep a low profile, and with very little, if no income. But in his imaginative horizons and the virtual scenarios he activated lay a potentially brighter future, an even better life, in which the efforts of his migratory trajectory would bear their fruits. In his day to day, I saw Jorge constantly playing up his difference[9], striving to transform

[7]The use of U.S. dollars was officially banned in Cuba in November 2004, when convertible pesos (pesos convertibles, CUC) replaced them in a measure designed to counteract what Fidel Castro saw as a U.S. attempt to obstruct the sending of dollars to Cuba (Brotherton, 2008: 268). At the time of this interaction with Joel, CUC where what he was referring to as '*fulas*'.

[8]A useful parallel can be drawn here with Cole's analysis of an 'economy of appearances' Malagasy migrant women maintain when visiting back home, a posture "that helps paper over the contradictions that structure their relationships to one another" (2014: S90)

[9]For a more thorough reflection on the societal pressure that returnees in Cuba tended to face in terms of 'making a difference', and their responses to such demand, see Simoni (2025).

the prestige of having being abroad and the promises of a potential transnational live between France and Cuba into social and economic advantage. Jorge didn't shy away from asking people for favors. Banking on the prestige of being a returnee and the positive connotations of such transnational trajectory, Jorge cultivated relations with people 'of use', people that 'mattered', and who could look upon him as a possible provider of help and of useful connections, notably connections to the outside world. Jorge lived between playing the 'true' Cuban who knew how to dwell in 'Cuban things', and the 'cosmopolitan transnational', the 'French-like' guy who was equally at ease with foreigners, who knew what foreigners wanted and how to care for and entertain them, notably in his *casa particular.* Several times, he told me and his Cuban friends that he had learned about commerce and how *negocios* worked 'out there', and that this gave him an indisputable advantage in doing good business. As he put it, Europe had 'educated' him', and taught him much, notably in terms of economic behavior and planning. '*Europa me explotó, con el trabajo*' ('Europe exploited me, with work'), admitted Jorge when referring to the hardship of his life as a construction worker in Marseille, 'but taught me to use my head, to be intelligent'. Jorge thus marked a difference and imbued with value his experience abroad. What he implied, was that he had become a better person, notably in economic terms, a more competent economic actor, someone who knew how to provide proper service, European-style, or how to separate friendship from business, the latter being something that he repeatedly criticized other Cubans of being unable to do (cf. Simoni, 2014, 2016a).

In spite of such claims, according to my friend Jacob, who was Jorge's cousin and always accompanied me on my visits, the latter was not actually practicing what he preached. On the contrary, most of his getting by, on a day to day basis, was predicated on a mixing of friendship and favors that had little to do with alleged 'European ways' of separating sentiment and friendship from *negocio.* Jacob was getting tired of Jorge's requests for a helping hand in construction work in his *casa particular.* He kept receiving guarantees of further retribution and favors in exchange for such help, but Jorge had never given him what he promised, and Jacob had no reason to think this would ever change in the future. Given this, Jacob preferred working for other people, with Viñaleros who, in spite of never having lived abroad, knew how to pay and how to separate 'business' from 'sentiments' (*el negocio de los sentimientos*). Mindful of these contradictions, and the way they were spotted by Jacob, I address in the next section the disjuncture between narratives of 'business the European way' (*negocios a la Europea)*, such as those prefigured by Jorge, and the practice of doing business 'the Cuban way' (*a lo Cubano*), which other returnees I met referred to and praised. Without a priori reifying nor analytically postulating any such distinction, it is the way such distinctions emerged in the discourses and enactments of my interlocutors that interests me here, and the way some returnees ended up qualifying and embracing a 'Cuban way' of doing *negocios.* This was the way, or so they claimed, that enabled them to move their businesses forward in Cuba, adapting to the specificities of the economic context. Doing *negocios* '*a lo Cubano*', however, did not imply relinquishing the ascendancy and advantages that being a returnee could grant, including showcasing the distinctive economic competences and skills one had learned '*allá*'.

Negocios and '*trapicheo*' 'the Cuban way'

Returnees frequently contrast 'European' and 'Cuban' ways of doing business, where *invento*, informal exchanges and practices sometimes named *trapicheo* appear at once as skills for getting by and as morally contested manoeuvres. Rather than treating informality as a mere constraint, the section shows how returnees negotiate it as a field of moral positioning, shaping relations of trust, respectability and belonging. I turn back to the case of Joel first. In one of our last conversations in August, the band leader told me of his latest fiasco in making it in the '*mulas*' business - the term *mula* (lit. 'mule') denoting a person profiting from travelling abroad and buying goods to resell informally in Cuba (see Cearns, 2023). Reflecting on this umpteenth business failure, Joel reached the conclusion that he was not good at *negocios.*

'*Lo mio'*, 'my thing', he told me, is doing '*algo concreto*' (something concrete): '*mi música*, *mi trabajo!*' (My music, my job!), told me a frustrated Joel. In other contexts of conversation, I had often heard Joel pride himself of being an entrepreneur, of having come back from Europe with a clear idea of how business ought to be done, ready to make a difference in Cuba. His latest acknowledgment of failure made me think that Joel's ways of doing business were perhaps out of synch with the way *negocios* tended to be done in Cuba. My impression upon leaving Cuba in August 2019, was that the returnees I had seen fearing better tended to be those that had (re) attuned themselves to the unwritten rules of *la lucha* and the *trapicheo* – the 'dealing', often referring to shady and informal transactions, the scraping of a living by buying and selling, '*a lo Cubano*'. Padrón Hernández (2012: 91–94) and Köhn & Siré (2023) have pertinently highlighted the ambivalence in Cuban society, where cheating and a lack of solidarity are lamented as indicators of a societal crisis, yet street smartness and cunningness are simultaneously valued as essential skills for navigating the current economic conditions.

Street smartness, guile, and shady deals *a lo Cubano* were explicitly praised by Pedro, whom I had first met on the plane to Cuba in February 2019, right at time in which he had decided to come back to Cuba for good. After twenty years living in Barcelona, this Cuban man in his early fifties had finally taken the decision to live on the island, and apply for formal

repatriation. His plan was to set up a business with the money from his severance payment, after he had been laid off by his employer in Barcelona, a restaurant liquidated a few months earlier. To this, Pedro could add the cash he got from selling his small apartment in the Catalan capital. On the plane, Pedro told me how he eagerly awaited such return, including getting back to the Cuban *trapicheo*, fiddling and doing business in the informal sector. At the time, I had been captivated by his delight at such prospect, the prospect of engaging in various *negocio*s and *inventos*, from reselling imported goods, to the more consequential plan he had of buying a house and refurbish it for a tourist rental. When I met Pedro again, after barely three weeks from his arrival in Havana, he had already bought a house and was busy with renovation work. Answering my surprise at his fast progress, Pedro said that '*con dinero se hace todo'* ('with money, you can do anything'). '*Aquí [in Cuba] hay de todo, y si tienes bala [money] lo consigues rápido*' ('Here [in Cuba] there is everything, and if you have bullets [money] you can get it fast'. When we met again in August 2019, the house was ready to receive tourists, and Pedro had already started renting informally (*por la izquierda*), carefully and discretely, so as not to compromise his future business, for which he was expecting the official license. Pedro seemed well versed in such informal scheming, and while he also relied on the prestige and ascendancy of being a *Cubano-Español*, his economic undertakings showed an embracing of alleged 'Cuban ways' of doing *negocios.*

A similar attunement to, and praising of the *trapicheo* was evident also the case of Ramon, whom with his Spanish wife had decided to come back to Cuba three years earlier, after over a decade living in Madrid. The crisis in Spain had struck both of them hard, and they had been left without job and little prospects of making a decent living in Madrid. '*Si tenemos que inventar, ¡mejor inventar en Cuba que en España!*' ('If we have to come up with something [re. informal ways to get by], better to do it in Cuba than in Spain'), told me Ramon's wife Manuela. In their early sixties, they were highly aware of the difficulty of finding employment in Spain, and were thus planning their future in Cuba, were they had arrived with some savings and several ideas of the type of *negocios* they could set up. Ramon and Manuela had bought a house in a *reparto* (low class neighborhood) a bit removed from the center of Havana, which they were slowly refurbishing 'Spanish style', as he liked to put it - complete with AC, glass-windows, and kitchen and bathroom appliance directly imported from Spain. Their latest plan was to build a pool in the ample patio at the back of the house, to rent out by the day, for parties and other celebrations which, Ramon assured me, were much on demand among Cubans who had money to spend these days. From a pool, you could get as much as 60-80 CUC a day, so that seemed to him a great plan to cash in good rent money. In the meanwhile, the two got by reselling imported goods and with other *inventos* Ramon took care of, in the black market.

As we can clearly see, we are moving away here from the image of migrants returning with 'European' business ideas and economic ways of doing, as highlighted for instance by Joel and Jorge. Instead, we are faced with savvy adaptations to what the Cuban economic context was deemed to afford, including what several of my interlocutors saw as typical Cuban ways of doing business. As in the case of Pedro, Ramon seemed to benefit from the ascendancy that his double Spanish-Cuban citizenship afforded, and didn't hesitate to mobilize alleged European competences and skills in his dealings with his Cuban family, neighbors, friends, and business partners.

Discussion

Moral economy and the evaluative stakes of return in post-2012 Cuba

The ethnographic materials above show how reforms in Cuba have not simply shifted opportunities; they have sharpened the moral stakes of economic life. *Trabajo* and *negocio* are not neutral descriptors but evaluative registers that organise claims to dignity, autonomy and deserved prosperity. To analyse their deployments, the notion of 'moral economy' (Thompson, 1971, 1991) proves useful. As scholars have shown, this notion is best apprehended not as confined to a residual domain outside markets, nor as a shorthand for solidaristic alternatives, but as an analytic for how entitlements, obligations, and justifications are made explicit and consequential in contexts of political-economic rupture and reconfiguration (Palomera and Vetta, 2016).

This framing also helps treat 'Cuban' and 'European' economic ideals, discourses, practices, and relations not as if these were 'two separate economies'. Rather, different moral economic scripts take shape and compete within the same wider field of constraint and enablement - scarcity, regulation, access to hard currency, and shifting private-sector possibilities – without neglecting actors' markedly unequal positions within it. The 'Cuban' and 'European-style' repertoires discussed here unfold within the same Cuban political economic conjuncture, even if they are enabled and constrained unevenly depending on returnees' differential access to capital, mobility channels, legal status, and local networks[10].

[10]Here, I use 'political economy' to refer to the shared field of constraints and opportunities through which livelihoods are pursued (scarcity, regulation, access to hard currency, and shifting private-sector possibilities) while recognising that actors occupy unequal positions within it.

The focus on how returnees mobilise these categories, and on how others respond to them, helps add an interactional, moral economy angle to debates on return migration and reintegration, showing how the latter becomes a contested process of evaluation rather than a linear 'outcome'. This also means taking seriously that what is morally at stake is often the very delineation of what should count as legitimate economic practice, and what kinds of personhood such practice is taken to index (e.g., dignity through *trabajo*; autonomy through *negocio*). A key implication is that 'good' economic conduct is judged not only by how one produces wealth, but also by how one is seen to circulate it, notably through sharing, helping, paying, and sustaining relational obligations that can be heavy, contested, and unevenly enforceable.

Success under scrutiny, and the double bind of return

This perspective helps refine broader discussions of 'success' in migration. Work on the Caribbean 'successful return' and on the 'difficult art' of being a successful migrant stresses that success is socially demanded, narratively produced, and continuously negotiated (Olwig, 2012; Scalettaris et al., 2019; Gardner, 2015). In Cuba, these demands were channelled through the idiom of business: returnees were expected to translate mobility into visible 'results', yet visible prosperity could trigger suspicion and accusations of illegitimacy. The cases presented thus point to a double bind in which success is required and policed at the same time. Importantly, this double bind is not merely an interpersonal predicament; it is a site where broader disputes over deservingness, inequality, and legitimate accumulation are condensed into everyday judgments, rumours, and 'tests' of character. It is also a site where evaluative hierarchies, about what 'proper' economic conduct looks like, and who is competent to enact it, are reproduced and contested in practice. In the examples I presented, the 'test' was not only whether one could build or expand a *negocio*, but whether one could do so without appearing to exit a shared struggle for getting by, that is, while remaining recognizably bound to obligations of reciprocity and redistribution.

Informality, redistribution, and economic personhood

To shed light on the situations of return migration at hand, it is helpful to bring into the picture recent anthropological work on Cuba's post-Soviet moral economies of money, care and commensuration (Andaya, 2014; Holbraad, 2017; Wilson, 2009; Wig, 2021) and on emerging entrepreneurial ventures and inequalities (Gold, 2016; Bastian, 2025). Returnees' negotiations of *trapicheo* resonate with analyses of informal economies and exchange patterns (Armengol, 2013; Köhn and Siré, 2023), but show how these patterns become especially charged in post-migratory encounters, where questions of entitlement, belonging and moral worth are debated through the practicalities of business. Put succinctly: *trapicheo* is evaluated not only as a technique for getting by, but as a relational practice through which accumulation becomes more or less acceptable, depending on how it is tied to obligations of reciprocity and redistribution (Armengol, 2013; Gold, 2016; Wig, 2021).

Building on my earlier work on economization/moralization (Simoni, 2016a; Simoni, 2025), my goal is to trace how the very boundary between 'work' and 'business' becomes an object of moral struggle. Rather than opposing a 'moral economy' to 'the market', what is important is to foreground how moral evaluation - of persons, practices, and outcomes – still operate within market-making dynamics, including by providing justificatory languages that can normalize, contest, or re-rank inequalities (Palomera and Vetta, 2016). A moral economy lens, in this sense, highlights the practical and justificatory work through which market-making transformations are argued over, legitimized, criticized, and made livable - or intolerable (Palomera and Vetta, 2016), including through distributive expectations that condition the legitimacy of accumulation (Wig, 2021).

Regimes of value and evaluative hierarchies

Anthropological research linking notions of value, expectation, hope, with (frustrated) scenarios of social and physical mobility has highlighted how migrants may simultaneously occupy 'two or even three different regimes of value' (Pine, 2014: S101). The ethnographic material presented in the previous sections shows how such multiplicity plays out among returnees in Cuba, notably in relation to the way they imagine economic life 'back home', envisage their economic possibilities, enact economic activities, and cope with the disjuncture between their expectations and the concrete test of life upon return. The point, however, is not only that multiple regimes coexist, but that they become visible, arguable, and practically consequential in moments of disruption - precisely the kinds of conjunctures in which 'moral economy' becomes an ethnographically traceable field of controversy and justification. These controversies are not only about 'how the economy works' but about what a 'good' economic actor owes to others, and what counts as legitimate discretion in giving (or not) for people involved in *negocio.*

Facing a context of economic crisis in Spain, and encouraged by changes in Cuba's economic and migratory policies, several of my interlocutors came back to the island with hopes of starting a profitable business *(negocio)* and live the life of a business owner (*dueño*). After the hardship of working menial jobs in Europe, notably in the hospitality and restauration sector, most of the returnees I met hoped to achieve a better quality of life in Cuba. It is significant that many

of the Cuban non-migrants they interacted with, harbored the opposite hope of travelling and finding a better life abroad. In this context, returns were heavily scrutinized; they raised questions as to what lead migrants to come back to a place that so many still wished to leave. The widespread assumption was that if they did so, it was because they had good money to spend, and plans for a profitable business. The grim alternative, was that they had simply failed *allà*, (over there), and were coming back tail between their legs because they had no other alternative. There could be other 'reasonable' reasons, most notably family ties, but my impression was that the economic dimension could hardly be avoided in the assessment of a return (see Simoni and Voirol, 2025).

The 'failure' scenario was to be avoided, even when people had little to show in terms of economic progress and upward mobility. Having to respond to the widespread expectations of a 'successful return', my interlocutors, most of whom returned from difficult economic situations in Europe, could be judged as not having been up to the task, as having missed a golden opportunity, and this was generally attributed to their own inability to make the most of migration. What could thus be seen as a primarily political economic issue – the crisis in Europe and the difficulty of capitalizing on the time spent there - was thus turned into an issue of individual responsibility and a moral criticism of failed economic behaviour (see also Simoni, 2016b)[11]. This is the first sense in which multiple regimes of value matter here: they provide different evaluative grammars through which political-economic constraints are re-described as personal merit or failure. Regimes of value also differ in their relative authority, a point that becomes especially visible in the competing 'European' and 'Cuban' economic repertoires discussed below. At the same time, they do not circulate over a flat terrain: within Cuban political economy, returnees and non-migrants occupied unequal positions (capital, mobility status, transnational channels), and this stratification intensified both envy and demands for redistribution, making 'what you do with it' a central dimension of how success was judged.

Competing economic scripts and the work of credibility

This was the specter of 'failure' with which people had to come to terms when facing the critical gazes, commentaries, and judgments of those who had not migrated. Such climate of suspicion could lead returnees to redouble efforts to mark a difference, to show that something had been achieved in their stay abroad, that some 'progress' had been made after all, that they had not 'wasted' the opportunity. Materializations of economic progress – a business, a new house, expensive commodities – were the widely expected 'proofs' of such success, and Humbe for example, with two *paladares* and an *almendron* in his 'curriculum' for everyone to see, had no problem in showing that his trajectory had been an overall success. But those who did not have anything obvious to exemplify this, could resort to other means to give value to their time abroad. This is when skills, competences, and the foreign connection could be activated and put to use. 'I have good connections and [potentially] an open door for international musical careers', could claim Joel to his bandmates, capitalizing on his past successes and his transnational lifestyle to draw them into his 'project'. I have not much to show, but my 'mentality' has changed and I know how to set up a business and deal with tourists *a la Europea*, the way they like it, could claim others. Specific modes and models of economic behavior, deemed more 'sophisticated' and 'advanced', such as Jorge's alleged competence in separating business from sentiment, could be foregrounded as distinctive qualities that would make a difference in the Cuba of the near future, a country several returnees saw on the verge of 'capitalism' (Simoni, 2018). Such competences could be cast, like in Jorge's case, as invaluable qualities that only years of experience abroad would help you achieve, and which if not in the present, bore the promise of success in the future. Some claimed such success to be imminent, and strived hard to get their claims heard, taken seriously, and work like self-fulfilling prophecies.

This is where the 'force' of scripts and models becomes analytically central, as it helps highlight that these are not simply parallel 'regimes' between which actors choose; they are hierarchically charged formations whose persuasive power varies. Some circulate with the backing of broader imaginaries of development and liberal economic personhood—what counts as 'proper business', what counts as 'economic rationality', what counts as legitimate autonomy, and thus tend to operate as privileged standards against which other practices (*invento*, *resolver*, *trapicheo*) can be rendered inferior, backward, or merely 'Cuban'. In this sense, claims to 'European-style' business competence do not only describe an anticipated way of acting; they aspire to reposition the claimant within a ranked moral geography of economic modernity. At the same time, the 'Cuban' repertoire can carry its own practical authority because it is recognizably tied to local expectations about wealth circulation and distribution, and thus functions as a legible way of remaining within the shared struggle – *la lucha* - rather than appearing to exit it.

The authority of 'European-style' claims, however, is tested in interaction: it can secure credibility and enrolment, yet it can also trigger suspicion when it appears uncorroborated or out of tune with expectations of reciprocity and

[11]See the work of Hernández-Carretero (2016); Kleist (2016), and Sorensen (2022) for similar reflections on such 'individualization of failure', and how it helped people eager to leave their countries keep the 'migration dream' alive.

redistribution. This instability is ethnographically productive: it is in the friction between scripts - between what is locally workable in everyday practice, and what is valorized as a future aspiration - that moral economies become visible as a field of struggle and justification (Palomera and Vetta, 2016). A lesson we may draw from these interactions, is that what gets to be seen and cast as 'proper business' is never only a matter of competence or method; it is a distributive and relational wager as well, since credibility may depend on whether one can (or will) give, share, and reciprocate in the right ways.

Globally circulating models of 'proper' economic conduct carry unequal moral prestige and unequal reach. Their relative ascendancy matters because it shapes who can plausibly claim competence, who is credited with 'modern' economic sensibilities, and which prefigurations travel with greater legitimacy, especially in a world where 'Europe' can function as an index of development and superiority (Ferguson, 2006). A relatively 'purified' script - business as rational calculation, a sharp separation between interest and sentiment, and entrepreneurial autonomy as a sign of competence - can operate as a recognizable idiom in transnational contact zones, even as a kind of lingua franca, precisely because it resonates with hegemonic liberal ideals of self-governance and personhood. This does not mean that actors simply internalise it; rather, it can be mobilised strategically as a claim to recognition and belonging in an evaluative order in which autonomy and 'proper' economic conduct are valued.

In this sense, invoking 'European-style' business is a claim to moral status as much as to competence: a way of presenting oneself as not reducible to necessity, and as capable of governing one's relations in a 'normal' (i.e. 'European') mode. Such claims can also offer leverage in concrete negotiations over trust, credit, and deference, and can function as aspirations to membership in a ranked moral geography of modernity and 'development'. Yet the same idiom is locally vulnerable: it can be punctured as arrogance or empty self-promotion, or as a refusal to participate in compelling obligations of reciprocity and redistribution. At the same time, 'Cuban' repertoires can remain locally compelling because they fold together provisioning, relational maintenance, and redistribution in ways that sustain everyday viability—even when they also generate contestation, burdens, and accusations of unwarranted demands or abuse (*abuso*) (Armengol, 2013; Gold, 2016; Wig, 2021). If anything, the cases suggest that autonomy is not simply opposed to obligation; it is often performed through the ability to manage obligations - deciding what to give, to whom, and on what terms - without losing credibility or being read as either naïve or abusive.

From models to practice: Prefiguration, performativity, and trials of proof

This leads to a further question: how do such models - precisely because they are hierarchically charged and relationally tested - acquire traction in practice, and under what conditions do they become more than projected futures? It is at this point that Fischer's (2014: 207–208) discussion of the space between 'aspiration and opportunity,' meaning, as this author explains, 'that aspiration - the will - is alone insufficient to effect change' (2014: 208). Instead, aspiration 'must also have a way, the space to operate among a range of substantive opportunities' (ibid.). To address such quandary, this, Zigon (2018: 13) has called for 'a theoretical-analytic that is attuned to this link between potentiality and possibility'. It was precisely at this intersection of potentiality and possibility that my interlocutors, navigating the challenges of life upon their return, engaged in what might be termed 'performative work', following Callon's (2007) conceptualization of it. Callon's approach suggests that the success or failure of such claims does not depend on words alone, but on the tests they undergo and the cooperation and controversy they trigger (Callon, 2007).

This helps clarify how models and ideals acquire 'reality effects', and finds support in analytical reflections developed in other fields of study. Willerslev's in (Venkatesan et al., 2011) Deleuzian engagement with the relation between the virtual and the actual, developed through an analysis of 'love' and 'the gift' among Siberian Yukaghir hunters, shows that virtual ideals do not stand outside practical life, but accompany and shape actual transactions as a real horizon through which they are given form and morally judged (Venkatesan et al., 2011). Applied to the material presented in the previous section, the virtual figure of the competent *dueño*, or the 'European-style' entrepreneur, is not a detached fantasy, but as an evaluative horizon that returnees invoke to organize expectations, solicit investment, and position themselves as credible agents of future success. This is also why such horizons matter politically and socially: they can reorganize relations in the present - eliciting cooperation, credit, patience, deference - by making an anticipated future feel actionable, even when its realization remains uncertain. In many cases, the 'proofs' that allow such horizons to gain traction include not only assets and visible projects, but also the relational work of distribution, as exemplified in paying workers, sustaining favours, helping kin, and demonstrating that accumulation is not severed from obligation.

At the same time, my research participants' verbal claims, if pushed too far and unsubstantiated, could in the long run or upon closer inspection become counterproductive, and come to be seen as simply 'showing off'. '*Està inflando*' ('he is showing off') would Jacob argue, for instance, when assessing his cousin Jorge's claims of having become an infallible economic agent, thanks to his experience in Europe. '*Quien hace negocios conmigo nunca pierde*' ('who does business with me never loses') maintained Jorge, but Jacob had stopped believing such thing, and the more the cousin insisted in

his unique economic skills, the more Jacob came to see them as examples of his arrogance, further discrediting him and his chances of making it big in the tourism business.

To become more persuasive and move beyond 'temporary prefiguration' to 'actually happening and sticking' (Zigon, 2018: 4), claims and evocations like those of Jorge, or Joel with his bandmates, needed to anchor themselves in concrete elements capable of generating 'reality effects'. This required some form of corroboration within the worlds returnees inhabited, tangible aspects that could be publicly recognized as 'proofs' that their assertions were either true or at least on the verge of becoming so. In the performativity framework proposed by Callon, this process falls within the domain of 'performation struggles,' involving concrete 'tests' and 'trials' (2007: 330) that determine the 'success or failure' of an individual's 'act of language' (ibid,). These struggles depended on the 'enrolment' of others in the reality returnees sought to foreshadow and realize, enabling it to transcend mere wishful thinking or the unfulfilled aspirations of a wannabe self-fulfilling prophecy. In the case for Jorge, for instance, he banked on others' believing him 'a millionaire' to gain respect and recognition, and by the same token make his life easier. The life of a *dueño*, made of satisfying and profitable social relationships with people who worked for him, and with others like him, the latter being generally Cubans who had also been *allà*, associates in *las grandes ligas* (the 'big leagues' of top performing champions).

A further implication is that virtual horizons differ in their capacity to mobilise enrolment: some scripts are more recognisable and resonant than others. Some are more credible, recognisable, and institutionally resonant than others. Put differently: the success of a prefiguration depends not only on its anchoring in 'proofs,' but on the relative authority of the script it draws on and the audiences it addresses. It also depends on the specific costs those audiences expect the would-be *dueño* to bear, costs that may include redistribution, assistance, and reciprocal upkeep, and not merely 'good business'.

From aspiration to pressure: return and heightened expectations

Compared to Jorge and Joel, people like Pedro, Ramon, and Roberto, held discourses on the economy and economic practice that suggested they had both feet on the ground, so to speak. Their narratives and moral dispositions were said to embrace the specificities of economic life in Cuba, including what were seen as more vernacular 'Cuban' ways of doing *negocios* and *resolver.* Rather than insisting on prefiguring the advantages of business 'European style', these interlocutors spoke of their willingness to reattune themselves to the ways in which economic life and livelihood opportunities worked on the island. These ways, according to Roberto, gave more prominence to *negocio* than work: the former was what Cubans were good at, in his view, and he was determined to do his best at it, including putting to fruition what he had learned in Italy on the matter. Such embracing of the Cuban world of *negocio*, indeed, did not mean relinquishing the ascendancy that coming back from Europe could provide. As shown above, this reattunement is itself evaluated through competing scripts of competence and obligation, and through the distributive costs that audiences expect successful returnees to bear.

For all of my interlocutors, the question still remained of the difference that having been in Europe made. Some had concrete economic assets to show – a house and/or a business, like in the cases of Humbe, Pedro, Ramon, Jorge – while others, like Joel, banked on their highly transnational life to accrue their economic profile. All these returnees' economic lives remained under scrutiny, with the pressure to 'succeed' heightened by the simple fact that they had left 'developed' Europe to come back to Cuba. Their years of hard labour and the experience gained in Europe had to be worth something, and the expectation was that they would make a difference in the changing economic landscape of Cuba, and be on the frontline of what would come next. The future seemed to call for '*más desarrollo*' ('more development'), for '*más negocio*' (more business) in an island that was, in the narratives returnees helped spread and socialize, still 'virgin', where 'everything' still needed to be done. We can perhaps argue that in their efforts to give value to their migration and return, to make their trajectories a success story, and to cast themselves as the harbingers of Cuba's economic future, returnees were adding fuel to the flames, feeding the very same unreasonable expectations that ended up weighting heavily on them. Read through the lens of moral economy as a field of justification (Palomera and Vetta, 2016), this is also a reminder that moral labour can be productive of inequality: by rendering certain aspirations reasonable, certain accumulations legitimate, and certain failures personal, even when the underlying constraints are structural. And read through the lens of script 'force', it also shows how globally valorised models can intensify local pressures: when 'Europe' is presumed to embody the future, returning from Europe can become a heightened demand to personify that future, whether through assets, entrepreneurial success, or the performance of an allegedly superior economic rationality. At the same time, where local legitimacy hinges on the visible circulation of resources, the demand is not only to 'succeed', but to succeed in ways that do not sever one from obligation - an expectation that can both stabilise belonging and generate new vulnerabilities.

Conclusion

Return to Cuba, in the period examined here, emerges as more than a geographical movement: it is a public evaluation of what migration was worth and of what kind of person one has become. Traced through the vernacular contrast between *trabajo* and *negocio*, the article has shown how returnees narrate and enact a hoped-for passage from subordinated labour to ownerhood, while confronting the fact that scarcity, regulation, and shifting monetary conditions make 'results' difficult to stabilize and easy to contest. In this sense, return is not an outcome but a field of contestation where categories like *trabajo* and *negocio* become practical yardsticks for judging trajectories, obligations, and the legitimacy of particular ways of making a living and of using resources.

Following my earlier attention to processes of economization and moralization (Simoni, 2016a), and in line with Palomera and Vetta's (2016) insistence that moral economy must be analysed alongside capital accumulation, inequality, and struggles over legitimacy, a 'moral economy' lens sharpens the analysis. It helps show that these evaluations are not merely 'cultural' misunderstandings, but disputes over entitlement, obligation, and justification in a moment of political-economic reconfiguration. The point is not that returnees inhabit "two economies", one Cuban and one European, but that they mobilise competing scripts of what counts as proper economic conduct—scripts that are uneven in authority and that are tested, endorsed, or punctured in everyday scenes of scrutiny. What becomes visible is a moral economy of economic life in which the legitimacy of accumulation is conditioned not only by how wealth is produced, but by how it is seen to circulate: through paying, helping, sharing, reciprocating, and managing the distributive expectations that bind people to *la lucha* even as they attempt to differentiate themselves from it.

This is why credibility becomes central. Returnees' projects and self-presentations rely on performative labour: the work of making futures plausible, assembling proofs, and enrolling others into horizons of success that are always vulnerable to reversal. The analysis has shown how 'European-style' idioms of competence and autonomy can function as powerful claims to recognition within a ranked moral geography of development, while remaining locally fragile when they appear uncorroborated or out of tune with expectations of reciprocity and redistribution. Conversely, practices named *trapicheo* can acquire practical and moral traction precisely because they remain legible within local demands about circulation and obligation, even when they are also morally contested and can attract accusations of *abuso.*

What remains constant, however, is the article's central claim: return is an evaluative horizon in which economic categories become moral coordinates, and where the struggle to become a dueño is inseparable from the struggle to make that status credible, legitimate, and livable. These findings open several paths for further research. They invite closer attention to post-2020 trajectories, when crisis conditions intensified and altered both opportunities and evaluative expectations; to gendered differences in the moral stakes of *trabajo*, *negocio*, and respectability; and to how host-country histories, sectoral positions, and legal statuses shape the kinds of proofs that can be assembled and the kinds of obligations that can be resisted or enforced.

The article also suggests that these evaluative dynamics are not merely descriptive of return; they have distributive consequences. They can contribute to the reproduction of inequality, not only by personalizing failure under structural constraint, but also by normalising an accumulationist horizon in which 'keeping' and expanding one's holdings can be defended as competence, rationality, or deserved autonomy—an economic paradigm less encumbered by the imperative to share, redistribute, or provide. These stakes feel sharper beyond the immediate empirical window of this study. In a context where Cuba's economic future is increasingly debated in terms of deeper marketisation and reintegration into wider circuits of capital (whether via domestic policy trajectories, diaspora investment, or international actors), including renewed external pressure and coercive threat-making that re-enters the scene as a material political horizon, the question of what returnees 'owe' to others - and what others can legitimately demand in return - becomes an especially charged site for observing how moral economies shift, harden, or unravel.

Today, the external horizon has sharpened. Recent reporting links the deepening crisis in Cuba to renewed US pressure targeting energy supplies and tourism-linked income streams, including threats of tariffs on countries supplying oil to Cuba. What matters for the argument developed here is not predicting outcomes, but recognising how the prospect of a more abrupt capitalist 'resolution' - one that recasts basic provisioning as something one can or cannot afford, and legitimates accumulation less encumbered by redistributive obligation - re-weights the stakes of everyday evaluation. Even if the post-2012 'return as project' analyzed here has become harder to imagine and pursue, and been displaced by renewed exit, waiting, or fragmented circulation, the analytic remains. In such a moment, disputes over *trabajo* and *negocio*, legitimate accumulation, and the terms of reciprocity and redistribution become not only interpersonal frictions but a privileged window onto the remaking (or unravelling) of economic personhood and rights.

Ethics and consent statement

Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study. Informal consent procedures were reviewed and approved periodically by ERC Ethics Reviews and Monitoring Notes (cf. footnote 1), the first of which dates 27th of October 2017. As explained in the text above, and accepted in ERC Reviews and Monitoring Notes, data for the research were obtained via the ethnographic method of participant observation and interviews. In terms of informed consent, both these methods required the understanding and collaboration of the participants involved, and the full disclosure of the research process and the nature of participants' involvement. Written consent was initially considered; however, the ethics committee due to the following three main reasons formally approved oral consent procedures. 1) Context-specific concerns: In Cuba, some prospective participants expressed mistrust or discomfort about signing official documents, particularly given the country's politically sensitive environment. 2) Participants' protection: Ensuring anonymity and confidentiality was paramount. Introducing written forms risked deterring participation and increasing suspicion of institutional surveillance. 3) Longstanding ethnographic practice: Consistent with established anthropological ethical guidelines and the principle of 'do no harm', I found that an oral approach, carefully explained and documented in a confidential log, was the most ethically appropriate. These procedures were reviewed and approved by ERC Ethics Reviews and Monitoring, and complied with guidelines for qualitative social science research with human subjects. The research underwent five Periodic Ethics Reviews by European Research Council, always receiving ethical clearance. The last ethics approval by the European Research Council was received upon completion of the research, on July 18 2023 - Ethics Monitoring Note-759649-006, Ref. Ares(2023)4985918-18/07/2023. See also Footnote 1 for more details on Ethics review procedures and Ethics Monitoring Notes.

Concretely, the oral consent procedure adopted for the research involved giving participants all the information contained in an Information Sheet prepared for the project, and approved in periodic ERC Ethics Reviews and Monitoring Notes. The Information Sheet detailed the purpose of the study; Participants received information on the nature of the research and their expected involvement, its potential risks and benefits, the person in charge of the research and his funding, as well as participants' right to confidentiality, anonymity, and withdrawal at any time from the research process. The collaborative nature of participant observation also required constant monitoring, bearing in mind that the consent gained initially could require renegotiation throughout the course of a research project. Concrete measure were taken to ensure that participants were always aware that their participation remained voluntary, and that they could withdraw their participation – including destruction of the data already gathered from them - at any time without any consequences. To this end, Research participants knew how to contact the researcher and its institution (electronic and telephone contact information was provided) to have questions answered, receive additional information, make complaints, announce withdrawal, or resolve a grievance. The author created a register of the persons who had given oral consent that is anonymized, with individual entries taking the following form. 'Respondent n [n designating a number] was presented the consent form and has agreed to participate orally, [date and place]'.

Data availability statement

The qualitative data (field notes) supporting the findings of this study are not publicly available due to ethical and security considerations. All participants were promised strict confidentiality and anonymity, given the sensitive nature of their personal narratives and the potential political and economic ramifications of disclosure. The empirical data contain identifying details related to migrants' family situations, economic activities, and community dynamics in a context where disclosure could pose social or legal risks. Sharing field notes could inadvertently compromise participants' identities.

This data restriction was reviewed and approved by the European Research Council Executive Agency's (ERCEA) Ethics Review Unit, which confirmed that disclosing raw ethnographic data would violate confidentiality agreements with participants (ethics clearance on 27 October 2017, Ref. Ares(2017)5270670 – 28/10/2017).

Requests for access to anonymized excerpts of the data may be directed to Valerio Simoni, at valerio.simoni@ics.ulisboa.pt. Access will be considered for qualified researchers who submit a methodologically sound proposal and obtain ethics approval (or an equivalent institutional review). Any shared data will be thoroughly anonymized, and recipients will be required to sign a Data Use Agreement stipulating that no attempts will be made to re-identify participants or share data publicly.

Author contributions statement

In accordance with the CRediT authorship taxonomy, Valerio Simoni contributed to the following: conceptualization, data curation, formal analysis, funding acquisition, investigation, methodology, project administration, resources, writing – original draft, and writing – review and editing.

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Thank you for the opportunity to review your revised manuscript. The manuscript has benefited considerably from the rewriting and restructuring process. It reads much better overall and is now organised in a more logical sequence, comprising an introduction, methods, results, discussion, and conclusions. The sample is more specifically described (17 men and 5 women), and you have included some methodological detail.

However, a number of inconsistencies remain. For example, the research period is given as 2005–2023 in the abstract, but 2012 and 2018 appear in the introduction. While your broader ethnographic perspective may encompass the former period, it needs to be made clearer why the latter dates were selected, with explicit justification for each phase and a clarification of how pre-2018 fieldwork contributes to the analysis. The reader is left uncertain about what role, if any, the pre-2018 fieldwork plays in the analysis and findings. The author should provide a clearer account of how the different phases of fieldwork contribute to the article's argument or explicitly acknowledge that the early fieldwork serves as background rather than primary data for the claims made here.

We also noted that some Spanish-language terms, including those appearing in the abstract, currently lack translations on first use. Beyond translation, we would encourage you to differentiate more precisely between these concepts and to clarify their relationship to formal, grey, and black economy activity, as conflating them risks obscuring important distinctions that are central to your argument. The analysis would benefit from more attention to the asymmetries within the negocio category itself.

The article treats negocio as a broadly positive horizon against which trabajo is defined as low-status and constraining, but the material also suggests internal differentiations: a paladar in Viñales, a hardware store in Centro Habana, a musical "project," informal reselling of imported

goods, and a pool-rental scheme are all coded as negocio, but they carry quite different moral values in practice. Roberto's ferretería, for instance, is run under a licence that does not quite cover what he actually sells, itself a form of invento, yet Roberto presents himself as a legitimate business owner.

A more sustained analysis of the internal gradations within negocio and of when informal practices slide from the morally tolerated to the morally contested would sharpen the argument. Invento, trapicheo, resolver, la lucha, these are treated as broadly synonymous in much of the analysis, but Lubiński (2022), whom you cite, and Armengol (2013) suggest meaningful distinctions. A more detailed explanation of these distinct terms, even in a footnote, would add precision and demonstrate engagement with the complexity that long-term ethnography is uniquely positioned to reveal.

Your argument is that structural constraints are recoded as personal failures, but the cases themselves show a more complex picture in which some failures appear to result from individual choices (Joel's business ventures, Jorge's overextension) as much as systemic dysfunction. A more nuanced treatment of this distinction, engaging with the sociological literature on the individualisation of failure, would strengthen the Discussion.

A related concern is the treatment of "moral economy," which is used throughout the paper without a clear working definition or appropriate referencing at first use.

We recommend providing this at the earliest opportunity, and, more broadly, we encourage you to substantially expand your engagement with the relevant theoretical literature. At present, the literature review is limited to many of your own citations, while the paper would benefit significantly from engagement with acculturation theory, Bourdieu's concepts of habitus and field, Baumol's "rules of the game," and comparative literature on post-Soviet and post-command economies. Many claims, particularly those relating to moral economy and economic personhood, are currently unsupported by existing scholarship and will need to be grounded in the literature.

You draw on Pine (2014) on "regimes of value", but do not clearly differentiate economic value (capital, income, assets) from cultural or symbolic value (prestige, recognition, cosmopolitan status). This distinction is important, so you should be more precise here. In addition, the institutional context of Cuba (its licensing frameworks, currency system, and regulatory environment) should be more systematically contextualised, as this backdrop is essential for readers unfamiliar with the setting.

The tension between returnees' European-acquired economic dispositions and the Cuban institutional environment is not simply a matter of individual adaptation but reflects a broader process of institutional change. The returnees described in this paper are not simply coming home; they are re-acculturating to a changed Cuba after years of immersion in European economic cultures. The concept of anomie is particularly apt for cases like Joel, who finds that his European-acquired business instincts are repeatedly defeated by Cuban economic realities.

If the article's argument is that entrepreneurship functions for returnees as a form of cultural and economic adaptation to a changed home context, this should be made explicit in the framing of the context, supported by sufficient evidence. Currently, the article does not explore this adaptation as a concept, which is a missed opportunity given how directly the material speaks to

it. While the anthropological framing is appropriate and productive, the article would benefit from a brief acknowledgement of how behavioural economic concepts (loss aversion, social comparison, status signalling) might complement or complicate the moral economy framing.

Your methodology requires further clarification. You mention choosing five cases without explaining the rationale for that number, and in other places, you refer to them as vignettes, though they do not function as vignettes in the conventional sense. Given that the article presents a significant gender imbalance in the sample, even a brief analytical note here would add texture and demonstrate awareness of what the current sample cannot fully illustrate. It is also unclear whether you employed case study methodology or thematic analysis, as both are mentioned. If thematic analysis was used (which appears to be the case), you should specify which protocol was followed, for example, Braun and Clarke or another recognised framework, supported by citations and a clear outline of the steps taken. We would also encourage you to explain how you arrived at your themes. A thematic diagram, accompanied by discussion and illustrative quotes, would add considerable transparency and rigour.

Regarding the cases themselves, three contain richer data than the remaining two, which appear underdeveloped. This is particularly notable given that you claim to have spent significant time with participants and kept detailed field notes. Because your conversations were not recorded, a considerable amount of detail may have been lost, and the depth of data presented does not reflect the length of the research period. The examples cited are quite limited and are not organised clearly by theme or linked explicitly to your research questions. For example, Jacob, Jorge's cousin, appears as an important secondary figure, providing an ethnographic check on Jorge's self-presentation. His perspective is valuable precisely because it complicates the returnee's own narrative. The article would benefit from a brief methodological or analytical note acknowledging the analytical role that such interlocutors (non-returnee Cubans, family members, neighbours) play in the study, as they function almost as embedded critics of the returnee's performative claims. This would also speak to the broader question of whose evaluations "count" in the moral economy described in the article.

We would encourage you to revisit these sections with a view to presenting fuller, more thematically structured material, supported by quotes. In doing so, it would also be worth addressing the "what is new here?" question more directly. The paper would be strengthened by a clearer articulation of what the Cuban case contributes to existing accounts of returnee disillusionment and moralised failure. In this respect, we suggest considering whether the Discussion might be restructured around the "credibility as performative labour" framing, which we see as the article's most distinctive and promising contribution. We also encourage you to revisit the Conclusion to make a stronger, more explicit statement of the paper's contribution to the field.

Finally, it would be beneficial to have a native speaker proofread this manuscript, as there are several spelling errors, missing words, and awkward constructions that require attention.

Your revised manuscript is a clear improvement on the first version, and we recognise the work that has gone into it. We hope these comments are helpful.

Competing Interests: No competing interests were disclosed.

Reviewer Expertise: Entrepreneurship, Innovation

We confirm that we have read this submission and believe that we have an appropriate level of expertise to state that we do not consider it to be of an acceptable scientific standard, for reasons outlined above.

Reviewer Report 15 April 2026

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Aleksy Kwilinski
The London Academy of Science and Business, London, England, UK
Maciej Kardas
The London Academy of Science and Business, London, England, UK

Dear Author
Thank you for the opportunity to review the revised version of the manuscript. The article addresses a relevant and timely topic, and its long-term ethnographic grounding remains one of its principal strengths.
Compared with version 1, the revised text is more clearly organised and methodologically more explicit. The presentation has been brought closer to the conventions of a research article, with a more distinct differentiation of the introductory, methodological, analytical, and concluding sections. This reorganisation improves the legibility of the text and allows the line of argument to emerge with greater clarity. The account of the empirical material has also been made more transparent through the explicit specification of the sample (N = 22; 17 men, 5 women), the recruitment logic, the mode of documentation, the analytical procedure, and the study's acknowledged limitations. The revised introduction also formulates the research problem, guiding questions, and intended contribution more clearly than in the earlier version.
These revisions address several of the formal concerns raised previously. They do not, however, fully resolve a number of more consequential issues that continue to affect the force of the manuscript.
Most importantly, the scale of the argument is not always commensurate with the empirical material on which it rests. The study is grounded in sustained ethnographic engagement, but the evidentiary base remains relatively narrow, unevenly composed, and marked by a pronounced gender imbalance. Such features do not in themselves invalidate an ethnographic inquiry; they do, however, require a particularly careful discipline in the framing of claims. At several points, the interpretive reach of the article exceeds what the material can securely bear. The result is a recurrent tension between empirical demonstration and conceptual ambition.
A related difficulty concerns the distribution of evidence across the cases discussed. Although the analytical sections are more clearly structured than before, the exposition continues to depend heavily on a limited number of extended examples, above all the recurring centrality of Joel's trajectory. Rich case material is, of course, integral to ethnographic writing. Yet the manuscript

presents itself as a cross-case thematic analysis, whereas the comparative dimension remains only partially realised. Several of the broader insights appear to be carried by a narrow and analytically privileged subset of cases, which weakens the weight of the larger interpretive claims.
The expanded methodological discussion clarifies how the material was generated and handled, but this clarification does not in itself resolve the underlying imbalance. Reliance on unrecorded informal conversations documented through fieldnotes is entirely defensible within an ethnographic design. At the same time, such a corpus calls for a corresponding degree of interpretive restraint. In the present version, some of the larger claims - particularly those linked to moral economy, value regimes, and economic personhood- still appear more assertive than the evidentiary distribution fully warrants.
The Discussion section is more developed than in version 1 and is more effectively situated in relation to the relevant literature. Even so, the synthesis remains less compelling than it might be. The theoretical vocabulary is articulated with care, but its empirical purchase is uneven. In consequence, parts of the discussion read less as the unfolding of an argument grounded in the presented material than as a conceptually sophisticated restatement of themes already established elsewhere in the literature.
The prose has also been tightened, yet the article would still benefit from a further editorial pass directed toward greater compression and stylistic consistency. Some passages remain more expansive than analytically necessary, and greater economy of expression would sharpen the precision of the argument.
In sum, the revised manuscript is more coherent, more transparent, and better structured than the original submission. Nonetheless, important concerns remain with respect to the relation between claim and evidence, the uneven balance of case material, and the ultimate strength of the article's analytical contribution. These limitations do not negate the value of the study, but they do continue to constrain its robustness and persuasive force in its present form.

Competing Interests: No competing interests were disclosed.

Reviewer Expertise: Academic writing, research reporting standards (Introduction/Methods/Results/Discussion), manuscript structure, clarity, and citation style compliance. My review focuses on structure and adherence to guidelines rather than subject-matter expertise in Cuban/return migration studies.

We confirm that we have read this submission and believe that we have an appropriate level of expertise to state that we do not consider it to be of an acceptable scientific standard, for reasons outlined above.

Version 1

Reviewer Report 10 January 2026

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Renata Osowska
Edinburgh Napier University, Edinburgh, Scotland, UK

Aga Gordon
Canterbury Christ Church University Business School, Canterbury, England, UK

Dear Valerio,

We found your paper genuinely interesting to read. The topic—exploring how Cuban returnees transition from low-status work abroad to entrepreneurial pursuits back home—is both timely and important. Your ethnographic material is rich and engaging, offering real insight into lives shaped by migration, economic crisis, and return. The narratives of Joel, Roberto, Jorge, and others bring these experiences vividly to life. However, the manuscript needs substantial work before it can be considered as an academic research article.

While the stories you tell are compelling, the paper currently reads more like a collection of ethnographic narratives than a structured academic article. This isn't to diminish the value of what you've captured—quite the opposite. The material is too good not to be given proper analytical treatment and theoretical framing. Below, we outline the main areas for improvement in this paper.

The manuscript lacks the conventional structure readers expect from an academic article. You have an Introduction and Methods section, then several narrative subsections, and finally a lengthy Conclusion—but critically, there is no dedicated Results section and no standalone Discussion section. This makes it difficult to distinguish where you're presenting findings, where you're interpreting them, and where you're connecting them to broader scholarly conversations.

Your Introduction currently reads as study background—it tells the story of how you came to this research—rather than positioning the study academically. The first-person narrative ("I was carrying out field research...") gives it an autobiographical quality that, while engaging, doesn't serve the purpose of an introduction.

Missing critical elements:

1. No substantive literature review: You cite relevant work, but don't engage with it systematically. There's no synthesis of key debates in return migration studies, no mapping of where your study fits, and no clear articulation of what gap you're addressing.
2. Limited and dated citations: The literature cited is relatively thin and, in places, dated. Return migration, transnational entrepreneurship, and diaspora studies are well-established, dynamic fields with substantial recent scholarship that should be engaged.
3. No research aim or questions: You never explicitly state what you're trying to find out. While readers can infer your interests, an academic article needs a clear statement of aims or research questions.

Your empirical material touches on several theoretical areas that you don't explicitly address, such

as:

- Diaspora studies and the diaspora effect: Your returnees maintain transnational connections and identities—this needs theoretical grounding
- Circular migration theory: The back-and-forth patterns you describe align with circular migration literature
- Entrepreneurship theories:
  - Entrepreneurial typologies and motivations
  - Mixed embeddedness theory (entrepreneurial agency in constrained contexts)
  - Push versus pull entrepreneurship
  - Transnational entrepreneurship
- Social and cultural capital: How returnees leverage their overseas experience
- Cultural adaptation and clash: The tensions between "European" and "Cuban" business practices
- Identity and belonging: Questions of who returnees become in relation to both contexts
- Moral economy: You gesture toward this, but it needs fuller development

Your Methods section is simultaneously too long (because it contains Results material) and too thin (because it lacks procedural detail).
Specific problems:

1. Sample ambiguity: You state "approximately 15–20 Cuban returnees" then later "mainly men." You need to specify:
   - Exact number of participants (was it 15? 18? 20?)
   - Why this sample size?
   - What were your inclusion/exclusion criteria?
2. Case selection unexplained: Despite having 15-20 participants, you present only five in detail (Roberto, Humbe, Joel, Jorge, Pedro). Why these five? Are they representative? Exceptional? Purposefully selected to illustrate variation? The cases are interesting, but this could be a case study method—if so, you need to justify your case selection explicitly.
3. Data collection procedures unclear:
   - How many conversations/observations with each participant?
   - What was the duration of these interactions?
   - In what contexts (homes, businesses, social settings)?
   - When did you write field notes (during, immediately after, later)?
   - Did you use any interview guides or was it entirely unstructured?
4. Analytical approach absent: You don't describe how you analysed your data. Did you:
   - Use any software?
   - Identify themes iteratively or deductively?
   - Reach saturation? How did you know?
   - Use any validation procedures (triangulation, member checking, peer debriefing)?

An example of a field note would help readers assess validity.

5. Participant observation underspecified: "The method of participant observation needs more details" including your role, how you built relationships, what you participated in, and how you maintained analytical distance.

6. Ethical approval timing unclear: You state research began in 2005, but ethical approval was

obtained in 2017. This 12-year gap needs explanation. Did you have earlier approval? Was the 2005-2017 work exploratory? This needs clarification for ethical integrity.

Your writing is engaging and evocative—you're a skilled storyteller. But academic writing requires something different: it needs to move from description to analysis, from particular cases to general patterns, from narrative to argument. You present stories without sufficient analytical scaffolding.

Your material touches on numerous analytical concepts that remain implicit, such as:

- Types of entrepreneurship and entrepreneurial identity formation
- Entrepreneurial motivation ("or be entrepreneurial?" "this also could be linked to motivation")
- Cultural clash between business cultures
- Perceptions and institutionalisation of entrepreneurship
- Identity and belonging negotiations
- Material aspects of entrepreneurship and consumerism
- Social and human capital development
- Agency and constraint
- Returnees as "agents of change"

These connections could be made explicit and systematic, not left for readers to infer.

Without a Results section, your findings remain scattered. Without a Discussion section, your analysis lacks depth and your contribution remains unclear. You could:

- Interpret findings in light of existing literature
- Show how your findings confirm, challenge, or extend current knowledge
- Develop theoretical insights
- Address implications (what does this mean for understanding return migration? Transnational entrepreneurship? Cuban economic transformation?)
- Acknowledge what you can and cannot claim based on your data

Your Conclusion is currently doing work that should have been done earlier. It's introducing new theoretical references, presenting fresh case material, and offering interpretations that belong in Discussion. Reviewers need to know what new knowledge your study generates. Is it:

- Empirical? (New information about an understudied group—Cuban returnees post-2012)
- Theoretical? (New concepts or frameworks for understanding return migration entrepreneurship)
- Methodological? (Novel approaches to studying transnational lives)
- Practical? (Insights for policy or practice)

Right now, this isn't clear. Make your contribution explicit, specific, and compelling.

This paper has real potential. Your ethnographic material is valuable, your cases are rich, and your topic matters. But it needs substantial restructuring and analytical development.

With focused revision addressing these structural, methodological, and analytical concerns, this could become a strong contribution to migration and entrepreneurship studies.

We hope you will find our comments useful.

Best wishes,
Renata and Aga

Is the work clearly and accurately presented and does it engage with the current literature?
Partly

Is the study design appropriate and is the work technically sound?
No

Are sufficient details of methods and analysis provided to allow replication by others?
No

Are all the source data and materials underlying the results available?
Partly

If applicable, is the statistical analysis and its interpretation appropriate?
Not applicable

Are the conclusions drawn adequately supported by the results?
No

Competing Interests: No competing interests were disclosed.

Reviewer Expertise: Entrepreneurship, Innovation

We confirm that we have read this submission and believe that we have an appropriate level of expertise to state that we do not consider it to be of an acceptable scientific standard, for reasons outlined above.

Author Response 09 Mar 2026

Valerio SIMONI

Dear Reviewers, Thank you for the generous reading of the ethnography and for the direct and helpful diagnosis: the initial submission was narrative-heavy and insufficiently scaffolded as an academic article. We have substantially reworked the manuscript to address structure, framing, methodological transparency, and analytic depth. The revised version now follows a clear IMRaD architecture, includes a strengthened literature positioning and explicit research questions/contributions, and develops a standalone Discussion that connects findings to debates on return migration, entrepreneurship in constrained contexts, and moral economy as a field of justification and evaluation. Structure (IMRaD) and analytic separation Comment: No Results section; no standalone Discussion; Conclusion doing too much.
Response: Fully addressed. The manuscript now has clearly separated Methods, Results,

Discussion, and Conclusion sections. The Conclusion no longer introduces new theoretical frames or fresh case material; it synthesises contributions, limitations, and future research directions, with a short epilogue-style note on contemporary relevance. Introduction (academic positioning, aims/questions, literature)

1. Comment: Introduction reads as autobiographical background; needs academic positioning.
   Response: Revised. The Introduction now begins with the research problem (return as evaluative moment), situates it in the post-2012 reform conjuncture, and positions the contribution.
2. Comment: No substantive literature review; thin/dates; no gap.
   Response: Strengthened. The revised Introduction synthesises: (i) return migration and "successful return" as social demand; (ii) moral economy/economization–moralization approaches; (iii) Cuba scholarship on money/care/value and entrepreneurship/inequality/informality. The gap is stated explicitly: insufficient attention to everyday interactional evaluation of returnees' economic initiatives and to how trabajo/negocio and 'European'/'Cuban' repertoires become moral coordinates.
3. Comment: No explicit aim/questions.
   Response: Added. The Introduction now presents three guiding questions and four contributions, plus a roadmap.

Methods (sample, case selection, procedures, analysis, ethics)

1. Comment: Sample ambiguity; specify exact number, gender distribution, criteria.
   Response: Corrected. Methods now specifies 22 returnees (17 men, 5 women), and details inclusion criteria, recruitment, and return timing patterns.
2. Comment: Case selection unexplained; why five cases?
   Response: Clarified. Methods now explains that the five most extensively discussed cases were selected to capture variation (trajectory/resources/sector position) and to enable fine-grained analysis of evaluation in interaction; the broader corpus informs coding, cross-case comparison, and theme development.
3. Comment: Data collection unclear: contexts, documentation, guides.
   Response: Expanded. Methods now specifies the settings of observation and informal conversations and clarifies that documentation relied on detailed fieldnotes written during or immediately after encounters.
4. Comment: Analytical approach absent (themes, saturation, validation).
   Response: Added. Methods now describes iterative inductive thematic analysis with abductive engagement, cross-case comparison, attention to discrepant cases, and triangulation across sites/phases. We clarify the emphasis on transparency/audit trail and transferability rather than statistical replicability.
5. Comment: Participant observation underspecified (role, relationships, distance).
   Response: Partly addressed. We expand procedural description (sites/settings/interactional contexts), while also retaining the appropriate ethnographic level of description for an article-length Methods section. We avoid over-dramatizing positionality, but clarify how long-term relations enabled repeated encounters and how fieldnotes and analytic memos supported interpretive discipline.
6. Comment: Ethical approval timing unclear (2005 start vs 2017 approval).
   Response: Clarified. Ethics section now explains early exploratory work under host-institution procedures, later phases under formally approved institutional and

externally funded projects, and current measures (oral consent, pseudonymisation, secure storage, masking of identifying details).

Fieldnote example request: We did not add a verbatim fieldnote excerpt, primarily to avoid risking identifiability in a politically sensitive context; instead we strengthened the audit trail via procedural clarity and explicit linking of claims to evidence in Results and Discussion.

Analytic development and theoretical framing (including "entrepreneurship theory" concerns) Comment: Concepts remain implicit (types of entrepreneurship, motivation, mixed embeddedness, transnational entrepreneurship, identity/belonging, etc.).

Response: We agree that the initial submission left too much for readers to infer. In the revised manuscript, we address these concerns in two ways:

1. Explicit analytic scaffolding: The Results section now organises evidence into clearly signposted thematic clusters, and the Discussion explicitly develops the analytic moves the narratives previously implied: evaluation and the social demand for success; informality and redistribution; competing scripts of economic competence; performativity, proofs, and enrolment.
2. Scope and positioning: We acknowledge entrepreneurship theory as a relevant neighbouring field, but we intentionally anchor the paper in an anthropological problematic: how return is evaluated through vernacular categories (trabajo/negocio) and contested repertoires ('European-style' vs 'Cuban'), and how this produces distributive effects. Rather than building typologies of entrepreneurial motivation or adopting a business-school framework as the primary lens, we treat "entrepreneurship" ethnographically—as a morally charged and socially tested form of personhood and legitimacy under constraint. That said, we now speak more directly to entrepreneurship and inequality scholarship in Cuba (and to the constraints shaping enterprise) and clarify how transnational resources and scripts are mobilised as claims to competence and recognition.

Discussion and contribution Comment: No Discussion; contribution unclear; conclusion doing analytic work that belongs earlier.

Response: Fully addressed. The revised Discussion systematically interprets findings in relation to relevant literatures and articulates the article's contribution as: (i) specifying trabajo/negocio as an emic analytic for worth/obligation/legitimacy; (ii) theorising credibility as performative labour under scrutiny; (iii) showing how 'European' and 'Cuban' repertoires are uneven in authority and tested in interaction; and (iv) clarifying how these evaluative dynamics have distributive consequences. Conclusion (what new knowledge is generated) Comment: Clarify whether contribution is empirical/theoretical/methodological/practical.

Response: The revised Conclusion states the empirical contribution (fine-grained ethnography of post-2012 return evaluation), the theoretical contribution (return as evaluative horizon; moral economy as justification/obligation/legitimacy within reconfigured economic arrangements; performative labour and trials of proof), and the methodological contribution (long-term ethnography focused on everyday interaction and evaluation). We also clarify limitations and propose future research paths. Thank you again for the review; your comments were instrumental in pushing the revision from a narrative collection toward a clearer academic argument with explicit analytic scaffolding.

Competing Interests: No competing interests were disclosed.

Reviewer Report 18 November 2025

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Aleksy Kwilinski
The London Academy of Science and Business, London, England, UK
Maciej Kardas
The London Academy of Science and Business, London, England, UK

Dear Author,

thank you for the opportunity to review your manuscript on Cuban return migration and the revaluation of work, business, and moral economies in the post-2012 reform context. The topic is timely and relevant, speaking to debates on return migration, transnationalism, and the moral–economic dimensions of livelihood in conditions of crisis and transformation. The long-term ethnographic perspective has clear potential to yield rich, situated insights. At the same time, the manuscript would benefit from revisions to enhance conceptual positioning (explicit research gap and contribution), structural coherence (clear separation of Methods, Results, Discussion, and Conclusions), methodological transparency (sampling, data collection, analytic procedures, ethics), and consistency in academic register and citation style. Below I provide detailed, constructive suggestions aimed at strengthening clarity, rigor, and the overall scholarly impact of the work.

Abstract

1. The phrasing “about 15–20 returnees” is too general. The manuscript should provide a precise number of participants (e.g., “18 individuals”) and—if relevant—the gender distribution. Additionally, the abstract refers to “men,” whereas the Methods mention “mainly men”; it is recommended to harmonise this description.
2. A brief, unambiguous statement of how the data were collected and analysed is missing. It is recommended to specify the sampling approach, techniques, and mode of analysis.
3. The abstract states the aim but does not explicitly indicate the research gap or the novel contribution (e.g., the moral–performative dimension of the economic reintegration of returning men in the context of the most recent reforms). It would be worthwhile to add this.
4. The abstract should signal limitations (e.g., small, purposive sample; focus on men) and future directions (e.g., gender comparisons; differentiation by host country/type of business); it is suggested to add 1–2 sentences.
5. The current abstract is divided into sections (Background/Methods/Results/Conclusions). According to the guidelines, it should be a continuous text.

Introduction

1. The introduction is written in the first person (“I…”), giving it an autobiographical character. It is recommended to use an impersonal style and focus on the research problem and state of the art rather than the author’s research trajectory.
2. The introduction includes field vignettes and respondent quotations (e.g., Wilson, Yusniel,

Saúl), which belong to the Results section. The empirical material should be moved to Results or shortened to 1–2 motivational sentences without quotations.

3. The introduction does not clearly articulate why this problem requires analysis under current conditions (post-2012 reforms, dynamics of returns) nor situate it in the current state of knowledge; it would be worthwhile to clarify this.
4. The introduction does not explicitly state which gap in the literature the article addresses nor what is novel; it is recommended to add a short paragraph.
5. The introduction lacks a clear study aim, which makes it difficult to assess the adequacy of subsequent methods and analyses; it is suggested to include a one-sentence aim at the end of the introduction.
6. Citations are incidental and descriptive; a concise synthesis of key strands (return migration, transnationalism, moral economy) and positioning of the paper's contribution is missing; it would be worthwhile to add a brief review.
7. Inconsistency and non-conformity of citation style. Various formats occur (author–year with/without page numbers, "&" vs "and", footnotes). It is recommended to standardise to the required style.
8. The introduction does not end with a brief outline of the manuscript's organisation, which typically indicates the scope and sequence of sections; this reduces navigability and transparency of the analytical flow; it is suggested to supply the missing information.
9. Information such as "fieldwork started in 2005… I started undertaking fieldwork…" would be better placed in Methods; only minimal context should remain in the introduction.

Methods and Results

1. The Methods section contains empirical material and interpretations (e.g., descriptions of practices "doing *negocios*, becoming *dueño*," vignettes of Roberto/Joel/Jorge). These elements should be moved to a separate Results section; Methods should be limited to the project description, sample, data collection procedures, mode of analysis, ethics, and limitations.
2. There is an inconsistency between "men" (in the introduction/abstract) and "mainly men" (in Methods). A precise sample size (N) and exact gender structure (e.g., "N=18; 18 men" or "N=18; 16 men, 2 women") should be provided and used consistently throughout the manuscript.
3. The formula "about 15–20 returnees" is insufficient. The Methods section should provide a single unambiguous N with justification of sample size (e.g., inclusion/exclusion criteria, point of saturation).
4. Mentions of "fieldwork and complementary research" do not amount to a clear project plan. It is recommended to present the chronology and phases (sites, field periods, stages of data collection) and the relation between "main" and "complementary" components.
5. The description of participant selection is insufficient: it lacks clarity on the procedure used (e.g., purposive sampling, snowball sampling), inclusion/exclusion criteria, recruitment channels, and sources of field contacts. It would be worthwhile to add this information to enable assessment of transferability and credibility.
6. Participant observation and repeated informal conversations (without recordings) were used. It is suggested to add the approximate number and duration of conversations/meetings, contexts (domestic/occupational), language and documentation mode (timing of field-note writing), and whether a conversation guide was used.
7. The text presents vignettes of several individuals (e.g., Joel) while a larger sample is declared. It is recommended to clarify how many cases are presented in detail and how material from the remaining participants was incorporated into the analysis (e.g.,

contribution to themes/codes).

8. The mode of analysis is missing (e.g., inductive thematic analysis, iterative coding, abductive approach), tools (e.g., CAQDAS), code scheme, validation procedures (triangulation, peer debriefing), and criteria for ending analysis (saturation). A full description of the analysis is recommended.
9. Ethics and participant protection: consents are indicated only generally; standard elements are missing—type of consent (oral/written), approving body (ERC/ethics committee), pseudonymisation, data storage, handling of sensitive data. It would be worthwhile to add these details.
10. Mode of exposition (impersonal style and academic register). First-person formulations dominate. It is recommended to use impersonal forms ("was conducted/was observed/was coded").
11. The statement "Most had returned and undergone the formal repatriation process between 2013 and 2020." should be specified: how many individuals, when, and whether repatriation status was an inclusion criterion.
12. In qualitative research, strict quantitative replicability is not required; the standards are transparency, credibility, confirmability, and transferability. The current description would benefit from a clearer audit trail (details of sampling, analytical procedures, and decisions).
13. Inconsistencies in the citation system occur in Methods and elsewhere in the manuscript. It is recommended to standardise to the required style.
14. Case proportions. The Joel vignette is disproportionately extended relative to others, which disrupts representativeness and structure. In Methods it would be advisable to avoid extensive single-case exposition; move it to Results and balance across cases.
15. The narrative style dominates over procedural description. It would be worthwhile to discipline the sections by using short, precise sentences describing who/what/when/how/why.

Discussion

1. There is no standalone Discussion section. Interpretations are scattered within results; there is no synthetic treatment of findings against the literature, no articulation of theoretical/practical implications, study limitations, or future directions. It is recommended to create a separate Discussion that links the findings to the aim and research gap, compares them with prior work, presents limitations (e.g., purposive sampling, male-skewed sample, two locations, no recordings), and outlines future research paths.

Conclusion

1. The use of "I hope…" lowers the formal academic register. It is recommended to use impersonal and conclusive formulations (e.g., "The article shows that…").
2. Breach of the division of functions between Discussion and Results. The Conclusions contain extended interpretations, empirical examples, and theoretical frames (references to Fischer, Zigon, Callon), which should be moved to Discussion. The final section should be limited to a concise synthesis of findings, contribution, implications, and future research.
3. Lack of synthesis of key findings. Instead of a concise set of 3–5 summary points, the section repeats illustrative narratives; it is suggested to present clear bullet-pointed claims.
4. Underspecified contribution to the literature. The novelty of the paper is not stated explicitly; it is recommended to articulate the contribution clearly.
5. Lack of articulation of limitations and research agenda. Project limitations (purposive sampling, male-skewed sample, two locations, no recordings) and specific proposals for future work (gender comparisons, differentiation by host country and sector, post-2020 trajectories) are not signalled; it would be worthwhile to add these.

6. Redundancy of narrative material. Recalling detailed vignettes (Humbe, Joel, Jorge) duplicates results content and overextends the Conclusions; it is recommended to remove single-case examples from Conclusions.
7. Inconsistency and occasional nature of citations. Bibliographic references in Conclusions are sporadic and not formatted consistently; it is recommended to standardise citation style according to the guidelines.
8. The Conclusions do not relate the findings directly to the study aim (no clear aim in the Introduction), which reduces argumentative coherence and logical continuity; it is suggested to add a conclusive sentence indicating how the findings address the aim/research questions.
9. The Conclusions lack a single, high-level "take-home message" that condenses the main contribution and its significance for the literature; it would be worthwhile to add a final, high-level statement.

Kind regards
Reviewers

Is the work clearly and accurately presented and does it engage with the current literature?
Partly

Is the study design appropriate and is the work technically sound?
Partly

Are sufficient details of methods and analysis provided to allow replication by others?
Partly

Are all the source data and materials underlying the results available?
Yes

If applicable, is the statistical analysis and its interpretation appropriate?
I cannot comment. A qualified statistician is required.

Are the conclusions drawn adequately supported by the results?
Partly

Competing Interests: No competing interests were disclosed.

Reviewer Expertise: Academic writing, research reporting standards (Introduction/Methods/Results/Discussion), manuscript structure, clarity, and citation style compliance. My review focuses on structure and adherence to guidelines rather than subject-matter expertise in Cuban/return migration studies.

We confirm that we have read this submission and believe that we have an appropriate level of expertise to state that we do not consider it to be of an acceptable scientific standard, for reasons outlined above.

Author Response 09 Mar 2026

Valerio SIMONI

Dear Reviewers,
Thank you for the careful and constructive review. We substantially revised the manuscript to address the concerns about conceptual positioning, IMRaD structure, methodological transparency, and academic register. The revised manuscript now includes: (i) a fully revised continuous abstract with precise sample information and analytic approach; (ii) a reworked Introduction that states the research gap, aims/questions, contributions, and a roadmap; (iii) a Methods section that is strictly procedural (design, sampling, data collection, analysis, ethics, limitations); (iv) a clearly separated Results section; (v) a standalone Discussion that synthesizes findings against relevant literatures; and (vi) a Conclusion that is concise, impersonal, and aligned with the article's stated aims, limitations, and future research paths.

Abstract

1. "about 15–20 returnees" too general; harmonise 'men' vs 'mainly men'.
   Response: Corrected. The revised manuscript specifies N=22 returnees, with gender distribution (17 men; 5 women) in both Abstract and Methods, and uses consistent wording throughout.
2. Missing statement of how data were collected and analysed.
   Response: Added. The Abstract now specifies long-term ethnographic fieldwork, participant observation, fieldnotes (non-recorded informal conversations), purposive and snowball sampling, and inductive cross-case thematic analysis.
3. Gap and novel contribution not explicit.
   Response: Added. The Abstract now explicitly frames the article's focus on return as an evaluative moment, and highlights the contribution: how trabajo/negocio and 'European'/'Cuban' repertoires become moral coordinates in everyday evaluation; and how credibility is sustained through performative labour under scrutiny.
4. Signal limitations and future directions.
   Response: Added. The Abstract now notes that the study is based on a purposive sample and speaks most directly to trajectories shaped by the post-2012 reform conjuncture prior to post-2020 intensification; the Conclusion and Discussion also flag future lines (post-2020, gender, sector/legal status variation).
5. Abstract must be continuous, not structured.
   Response: Corrected. The revised Abstract is now a single continuous paragraph (no Background/Methods/Results/Conclusions subheadings).

Introduction

1. First person/autobiographical; use impersonal style.
   Response: Revised. The Introduction is now written in an impersonal academic register and opens with the research problem (return as evaluative moment), not the author's research trajectory.
2. Field vignettes/quotations belong in Results.
   Response: Addressed. Empirical material is now located in the Results section. The Introduction no longer relies on vignettes/quotations for framing.
3. Clarify why the problem requires analysis under current conditions.
   Response: Added. The Introduction now explicitly situates the analysis in the post-

2012 reform conjuncture (migration policy changes; expansion of licensed private enterprise) and links this to heightened scrutiny of return projects under scarcity and regulatory uncertainty.

4. State research gap and novelty.
   Response: Added a dedicated paragraph clarifying the gap: limited attention to how returnees' economic initiatives are evaluated in everyday interaction, and how trabajo/negocio and 'European'/'Cuban' repertoires become moral coordinates for worth and legitimacy.
5. Lack of a clear aim.
   Response: Added. The Introduction now includes explicit guiding questions (three) and states the article's analytic focus and contributions.
6. Citations incidental; need concise synthesis of key strands and positioning.
   Response: Strengthened. The Introduction now provides a more systematic positioning in relation to (i) return migration and the social demand for "successful return"; (ii) moral economy/economization–moralization approaches; and (iii) scholarship on Cuba's post-Soviet/reform transformations of money/care/value and emerging entrepreneurship/informality.
7. Citation style inconsistency.
   Response: Standardised across the manuscript to a consistent author-date format (and harmonised "and" vs "&", page number style where used, and reduced footnote-style citation drift).
8. Missing outline of manuscript organisation.
   Response: Added. The Introduction now ends with a roadmap indicating the purpose and sequence of Methods, Results, Discussion, and Conclusion.
9. Fieldwork timeline belongs in Methods.
   Response: Corrected. Timeline and phases are now in the Methods section; the Introduction keeps only minimal contextual framing.

Methods and Results

1. Methods contained empirical material/interpretation; move to Results.
   Response: Fully addressed. Methods is now strictly procedural; empirical vignettes and interpretations are in Results.
2. Men vs mainly men inconsistency; provide exact N and gender structure.
   Response: Corrected. Methods now specifies N=22; 17 men, 5 women and consistent wording is used throughout.
3. Sample size "about 15–20" insufficient; justify.
   Response: Corrected and clarified. We specify N and describe inclusion criteria, recruitment, and the logic of long-term ethnographic saturation/coverage (without claiming statistical representativeness).
4. Clarify chronology/phases and relation of main vs complementary components.
   Response: Added. Methods now distinguishes the long-term Cuba-based fieldwork (Havana/Viñales) from the complementary multi-sited research in Spain (Barcelona area, 2012–2018) that contextualises crisis-driven return recalibrations.
5. Participant selection unclear; add sampling procedure, criteria, recruitment channels.
   Response: Added. Methods now specifies purposive and snowball sampling, starting from long-term acquaintances and expanding through family/neighbourhood/workplace networks, plus inclusion criteria (extended residence in Europe; resettlement decision; livelihood-making after return).

6. Participant observation/informal conversations need more detail (contexts, language, documentation mode, guide).
   Response: Added. Methods now specifies the settings of interactions (homes, neighbourhoods, workplaces/small businesses, routine activities), the fact that conversations were unrecorded, and that documentation relied on fieldnotes written during or immediately after encounters. We also clarify the conversational mode (informal, repeated engagement rather than a fixed interview schedule). Given the long time horizon and ethnographic design, we avoid pseudo-precision (e.g., reporting a "count" of conversations) and instead provide the scope of documentation (1000+ pages of fieldnotes) and the analytic process used to work across them.
7. Clarify case selection (why five cases; how remaining material used).
   Response: Added. Methods now explains that the five most extensively discussed cases were selected to capture variation in trajectories/resources/sectoral positions and to allow close analysis of evaluative dynamics, while the broader corpus informs theme development and cross-case comparison.
8. Mode of analysis missing (inductive thematic, abductive engagement, validation, etc.).
   Response: Added. Methods now details an iterative, inductive thematic procedure combined with abductive engagement, cross-case comparison, attention to discrepant cases, and triangulation across sites and phases. We clarify the emphasis on transparency/audit trail and transferability (rather than quantitative replicability).
9. Ethics and participant protection underspecified.
   Response: Expanded. The Ethics subsection now clarifies the phases of institutional ethics coverage (early exploratory work vs later formalised projects), the mode of consent (oral, revisited), pseudonymisation and masking, secure storage, and the rationale for withholding identifying details given the sensitivity of economic/political talk.
10. Academic register; reduce first person.
    Response: Revised throughout. The manuscript is now written in a more impersonal academic register; first-person formulations have been minimised, particularly in Introduction, Methods, and Conclusion.
11. Specify repatriation process statement and whether inclusion criterion.
    Response: Clarified. Methods now states that return occurred largely between 2013 and 2016, "often—though not always—through the formal repatriation process," and that formal repatriation was not required as an inclusion criterion.
12. Need clearer audit trail (credibility/confirmability/transferability).
    Response: Addressed via expanded Methods (sampling, data generation, documentation, analysis) and explicit statement of analytic priorities and limitations.
13. Citation inconsistencies in Methods and elsewhere.
    Response: Standardised across the manuscript.
14. Joel vignette disproportionately extended; balance and move out of Methods.
    Response: Addressed. The extended Joel material is located in Results (not Methods) and is framed as part of a broader comparative analytic structure, with other cases mobilised to avoid single-case dominance in the overall argument.
15. Narrative dominates; discipline sections with clear who/what/when/how.
    Response: Addressed primarily through the revised IMRaD structure and Methods re-

write, keeping narrative where it is analytically necessary (Results) and ensuring procedural clarity in Methods.

Discussion

1. No standalone Discussion; interpretations scattered; need synthesis, implications, limitations, future directions.
   Response: Fully addressed. The revised manuscript includes a standalone Discussion with clear sub-sections: moral economy framing; success under scrutiny/double bind; informality/redistribution/economic personhood; regimes of value/evaluative hierarchies; competing economic scripts/credibility; performativity/virtual-actual/trials of proof; and from aspiration to pressure. Limitations and future research directions are made explicit (Methods/Limitations and Conclusion).

Conclusion

1. Avoid "I hope…" and maintain formal register.
   Response: Addressed. Conclusion is now impersonal and conclusive in tone.
2. Move extended interpretations/theory to Discussion; keep Conclusion concise.
   Response: Addressed. The theoretical scaffolding (Fischer, Zigon, Callon, Willerslev, script force) is in the Discussion; the Conclusion synthesises contributions, limits, future research, and a brief epilogue-style relevance note.
3. Need synthesis of key findings (preferably bullet points).
   Response: We provide a compact narrative synthesis (without bullets, consistent with the article's style), articulating the main takeaways and contributions explicitly.
4. Contribution underspecified.
   Response: Addressed. Contribution is now stated explicitly in Introduction and revisited succinctly in Conclusion.
5. Limitations and research agenda missing.
   Response: Added: Methods includes a Limitations section; Conclusion signals post-2020 trajectories, gender, host-country/sector/legal status differentiation.
6. Remove redundant vignette material from Conclusion.
   Response: Addressed. Conclusion does not re-tell vignettes; it synthesises.
7. Citation consistency in Conclusion.
   Response: Standardised.
8. Conclusions should relate to aims.
   Response: Addressed. Conclusion returns explicitly to the article's stated analytic focus and contributions.
9. Need a single high-level take-home message.
   Response: Addressed: the Conclusion ends by re-asserting the central claim about return as an evaluative horizon where economic categories become moral coordinates, with distributive consequences.

Thank you again for the review; we believe the revisions have substantially strengthened the manuscript's clarity, transparency, and scholarly contribution.

Competing Interests: No competing interests were disclosed.