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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Moral articulations of economic life in returns to Ecuador and Cuba

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Abstract

Background

Migration from Cuba and Ecuador to Spain and other European countries surged in the late 1990s and 2000s, largely driven by economic hardships in the migrants' home countries. Following the 2008 global financial crisis, some migrants chose to return. This article examines how these returnees navigate moral and economic expectations upon going back 'home'.

Methods

The study draws on seven months of ethnographic fieldwork with Ecuadorian returnees (2018–2022) and five months of ethnographic research among Cuban returnees (2018–2022), supported by over a decade of related investigations in both countries. Participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and informal conversations were conducted to capture experiences of return and local residents' assessment of the returnees' migratory trajectories and their value.

Results

Returnees faced intense scrutiny from family and community members regarding their economic activities and relations, with many expecting tangible signs of 'success'. In response, returnees sought to highlight new skills, business ideas, or personal growth derived from their time abroad. While disappointment and mistrust were common—due to business failures, financial setbacks, and unmet expectations—returnees also developed strategies to legitimize their

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choices and prefigure ‘better futures’, revealing competing moral assessments of what counts as ‘failure’ and ‘success’.

Conclusions

The preeminence of moral controversies and judgments surrounding the economic lives of returnees, reveals how broader power relations and institutional discourses shape grassroots criteria to adjudicate ‘success’ in relation to migration. Analyzing how returnees attempt to reconcile—or redefine—the ‘economic’ as part of a ‘good life’ offers new insights into migration’s transformative effects on individual and social evaluations of value and worth.

Plain Language Summary

This article compares the experiences of Ecuadorian and Cuban migrants who have recently returned ‘back home’ after living in Spain and other European countries affected by the global financial crisis. It highlights common concerns in their everyday lives, especially regarding economic activities and relationships, which become key topics of moral reflection and debate. Returnees’ economic narratives and practices attract significant attention from local communities, as people evaluate whether migration has led to meaningful change and how these migrants reintegrate into society. At the same time, returnees reflect on how their time in Europe has shaped their views on practices and ideals, leading them to reconsider the role of the ‘economy’ in relation to ‘culture’ and ‘society’. By examining how these moral concerns emerge and circulate, this article sheds light on the transformative effects of migration, more particularly on how people imagine and (re)consider what constitutes ‘success’ and what characterizes a ‘good life’.

Keywords

Migration, Return Migration, Ethics and morality, Value, Good life, Economy, Ecuador, Cuba

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Introduction

This article is part of a broader research project that addresses 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[1]. The case studies chosen to operationalize these lines of enquiry focus on the phenomenon of return migration. They consist of an analysis of the imaginaries and experiences of return by Ecuadorian and Cuban men and women who migrated to Spain, are dissatisfied with their life there, and envisage and carry out the project of going back to their countries of origin (Ecuador and Cuba respectively). The five-year project is based on a multi-sited ethnography – Spain, Ecuador, Cuba – and structured as three closely interrelated subprojects that rely on long term ethnography to achieve a empirically-grounded understanding of how imaginaries and concrete experiences of return migration relate to experiences of crisis and how they inform the (re)assessment of what counts as 'good life': what a good life is, where it is located, and the way it may be achieved. To provide some context to such trajectories of return, we must consider that notwithstanding the highly mediatized attention brought to the influx of migrants into Europe, often underpinned by assumptions on the 'better living' conditions that can be found on the continent, the 2008 global financial crisis, which hit migrants particularly hard, prompted people to consider a possible return to their countries of origin.

Cubans and Ecuadorians had migrated to Spain in large numbers, mainly towards the end of the 1990s and the 2000s, following dramatic economic crises in both countries of origin. The number of Ecuadorians in Spain thus skyrocketed from 4'000 in 1997 to almost 500'000 in 2005 (Colectivo Ioé, 2007). Scholars have viewed such surge as one of the most surprising migratory phenomena of the early 21st century that was not prompted by war or natural disasters (Herrera, 2008). From 2008 onwards, however, the numbers of Ecuadorians living in Spain stated declining. Ecuadorian migrants suffered particularly hard the effects of the crisis in Spain, and it is also among Ecuadorians that the largest numbers of returns have been recorded since the beginning of the economic downturn in this European country. By contrast to the Ecuadorian case, Cuban nationals living in Spain are much less in number. However, between 1990 and 2015, the Cuban population in Spain also saw a steep increase, rising from less than 3,000 to more than 125,000 (García-Moreno, 2011; Krull & Stubbs, 2021; Sánchez-Fuarros, 2012). By the mid-2000s, Spain had become the primary destination for Cubans seeking better living and economic conditions while retaining the ability to travel freely to and from Cuba—an option unavailable to those migrating to the United States (Martín Fernández, 2008). Always compared to the Ecuadorian case, there have been equally fewer reports of Cuban migrants' intention to return to Cuba (but see Footnote 4 and Aja Díaz & Rodriguez Soriano, 2022; Barcenas Alfonso, 2023; Maltó, 2013). By the mid-2010s, however, changes in Cuba, such as economic reforms encouraging private enterprise and a new migratory law (Castro Ruz, 2012) facilitating exits and returns (Martínez-Perez & Zaldivar-Valdes, 2015) generated some optimism among Cuban migrants in terms of circulating back and forth, eventually returning more permanently, and setting up viable businesses in the country (see Aja Díaz *et al.*, 2017; Aja Díaz & Rodriguez Soriano, 2022; Barcenas Alfonso, 2023; Bastian, 2018; Krull & Stubbs, 2021; Martín & Barcenas Alfonso, 2015; Simoni, 2019a; Simoni, 2019b).

For most migrants we encountered in our research in Ecuador and Cuba, there was no doubt that economic motives and the desire to improve their living conditions, acted as a primary migratory drive. Collective imaginaries of a better life have been seen as motivating migration in general (Appadurai, 1996; Benson, 2012; Salazar, 2011; Vigh, 2009), with migration viewed as 'a technology of the imagination, as an act through which people come to imagine better lives in other times or places' (Vigh, 2009: 94), and as 'an attempt to move forward in life, physically and socially' (Kleist & Jansen, 2016: 380, see also Hage, 2009). When living conditions in Spain became dire, many Cuban and Ecuadorian migrants faced what may be seen as a 'breakdown of expectations' (Narotzky & Besnier, 2014). We are inspired here by Narotzky and Besnier (2014) conceptualization of 'moments of disjuncture' (S7) in which moral economic consideration are likely to come to the fore, and by 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 & 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). It is such reconfigurations and changes that we explored in our research, via the case of return migration, following in the footsteps of anthropological scholarship linking notions of value, expectation, hope, with (frustrated) scenarios of social and physical mobility (Cole, 2014; de l'Estoile, 2014; Ferguson, 1999; Guyer, 2007; Jansen, 2014; Pine, 2014).

Other bodies of anthropological research, seldom connected to the ones briefly sketched above (but see, for instance, Borisova, 2024; Meloni, 2020; Schielke, 2015; Simoni, 2023; Simoni, 2025; Simoni & Voirol, 2021), also inform our thinking. In the last two decades, anthropologists have started paying explicit attention to notions of 'happiness', 'well-being' and the 'good life' (Corsín Jimenez, 2008; Fischer, 2014; Mathews & Izquierdo, 2009; Stoller, 2014), thus catching up on topics that had

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already garnered traction in the fields of psychology, economics, development studies as well as moral and political philosophy. Ethnographic enquiries into 'the good life' show the interest of departing from longstanding philosophical debates and abstractions to uncover what our research participants tell us about the kind of life they value, aspire to, and aim to achieve. Understanding how different ideals of the good life emerge, and being able to fully appreciate their content, accordingly, requires moral reflexivity from researchers (Fassin, 2008), given that such ideals may clash with deeply held beliefs on what good living ought to be about. With its focus on the empirical, bottom up study of moral conceptualizations and dispositions, including 'the way people understand the good and define its proper pursuit' (Robbins, 2013: 457), recent anthropological scholarship on morality and ethics provides valuable analytical tools for our research. Answering recent calls to explore what counts as ethical, moral, valuable and 'good' in a given ethnographic context (Cassaniti & Hickman, 2014; Fassin, 2012; Faubion, 2011; Keane, 2015; Laidlaw, 2013; Lambek, 2010; Massé, 2009; Mattingly, 2014; Robbins, 2004; Sykes, 2009; Zigon, 2008), our research uncovered how moments of crisis and projects of return led migrants to explicitly (re)formulate their views on the good life and what it could consist of – be it, just to mention some such aspects, improved economic conditions, a fulfilling social life, the ability to dwell and belong in familiar worlds, or else (including of course any articulation or combination of the above).

Migration scholars have highlighted how migrants may simultaneously occupy 'two or even three different regimes of value' (Pine, 2014: S101), a situation prone to value conflict and moral controversy. This sort of multiplicity and the moral dilemmas and concerns it raises, we argue, is precisely what an anthropological focus on morality and ethics – or what Zigon theorizes as 'moral and ethical assemblages' (2010) – may help us recognize and account for in our analysis. Zigon (2007; 2009) maintains that the anthropology of morality ought to focus on the 'moral breakdowns' and 'ethical moments' of conscious reflection that occur 'when some event or person intrudes into the everyday life of a person and forces her to consciously reflect upon the appropriate ethical response' (2009: 262). Favouring a broader framing of the question, Robbins (2009) encourages us to pay attention to the specific kinds of 'intrusions' that generate such an ethical response so as to identify, in a more structural way, the key areas of moral difficulty that may exist in a given society.

If breakdowns of expectations in destination countries, such as those resulting from the profound economic crisis in Spain, may inform migrants' return project, our findings in Ecuador and Cuba suggest that upon going 'back home', many returnees confront yet another set of challenges. Such challenges, we argue, may also be fruitfully approached as exemplifications of a breakdown – be it in Narotzky and Besnier's (2014) or in Zigon's (2007; 2009) sense (and notwithstanding the different epistemological groundings between these authors)[2]. Migrants' decisions to return to their countries of origin are informed by the comparison and assessment of different life scenarios (cf. Simoni *et al.*, 2024), which already require careful pondering on life 'here' and 'there', and linking such assessment to one's own circumstances and possibilities. Following returnees' trajectories, we found that concrete experience of return tended to raise their own set of difficulties and dilemmas, resulting mainly from a disjuncture between migrants' hopes and expectations regarding return, and the concrete vicissitudes of life once back. Migrants' expectations are, in this sense, put to the test of living, of finding their way – yet again – in a range of everyday situations that raise their own material challenges and moral demands. It is to such challenges and demands, and to migrants' responses to them, that we turn attention in this article, by exploring the key areas of life that become sources of moral concern and deliberation. As we will now show – starting with a series of ethnographic vignettes –the economic conditions, activities and relations in which migrants become entangled upon returning constitute one such area of moral difficulty.

Methods

In terms of research methods our study employed a multi-sited ethnographic approach. Fieldwork was conducted between 2018 and 2022 in Ecuador (seven months) and in Cuba (five months), supplemented by over a decade of related research in both contexts. We both relied on previous contacts stemming from earlier fieldworks stays in these countries and used purposive and snowball sampling strategies to recruit adult return migrants who had lived abroad for at least one year and returned to their country of origin post-2008. Additional participants included local community members and family members of returnees. In total, we were able to engage, via participant observation and interviews, with approximately fifty returnees and sixty community members in each fieldwork site. Empirical data were gathered primarily through participant observation (in everyday life, business activities, family gatherings) and semi-structured interviews. Interviews lasted between 60 and 90 minutes, and in some cases follow-up conversations were held informally. Interviews were audio-recorded (with participant consent) where possible, and extensive field notes were kept in all circumstances. Interviews were transcribed verbatim and coded thematically, triangulating codes across field notes and interview transcripts to ensure validity. We used an iterative process of coding to

[2] Without overlooking scholars' differences in terminology and in their theoretical inclinations and interests, which lead them to differently conceptualize 'breaches of confidence' and 'moments of disjuncture' (Narotzky & Besnier, 2014), 'value conflicts' (Robbins, 2007), and 'moral breakdowns' (Zigon, 2007; Zigon, 2009), it is the points of juncture in their approaches we wish to build upon here, inasmuch as these can help us shed light on the situations we encountered during fieldwork.

capture salient themes related to our enquiry's focus on how return migration trajectories inform people's (re)assessments of what makes for a 'good life'. Regular peer debriefings and discussions with our research participants helped refine our interpretations. As detailed in footnote 1, ethical approval for this study was granted by the European Research Council Executive Agency (ERCEA) Ethics Review and Expert Management Unit, which also reviewed and approved the use of oral informed consent procedures. All participants were informed about the purpose, risks, and voluntary nature of participation. Pseudonyms are used throughout to protect anonymity.

Breakdowns

Ethnographic Insights

Cuba. Since 2015, Joel[3] had been returning to live in Cuba from Spain, where he had first arrived about a decade earlier. While living predominantly in Cuba, this Afro-Cuban man in his late forties still regularly went back to Spain, where his Spanish wife and his daughter resided. At the time of Valerio's fieldwork, however, Joel spent most of his time in Cuba, having completed the formal 'repatriation' procedure needed to re-acquire residence in this Caribbean country[4]. During his time in Spain, Joel had taken on various roles in the cultural and hospitality sectors while primarily striving to establish himself in the music scene as the leader of a Cuban band. However, the economic crisis had made it increasingly difficult for Cuban musicians in Spain, with performance fees dwindling to mere tokens and little hope of sustaining a livelihood solely through music. A widely shared example was that of a well-known member of a prominent Cuban band who had migrated to Spain, only to struggle financially after the crisis, ultimately facing precarious living conditions—either sleeping on the streets or staying with friends—before deciding to return to Cuba. Joel's plan was to bring his musical 'project', as he called it, back to Cuba, develop it there, and eventually lead a transnational life, moving between Cuba, Spain, and any other places where opportunities for his band might arise. In the last ten years, I got a chance to speak to him repeatedly, both in Cuba and in Spain, and could not help noticing that his tales of life in Cuba were often couched in a tragicomic register where critique, misadventure and mishaps featured heavily.

When I met Joel again in Cuba in February 2019, I was not surprised to hear him lament the '*lucha titánica'* —the titanic struggle— he faced in trying to make his musical project succeed on the island. Beyond music, he recounted how, since he had started returning to Cuba about five years earlier, he had attempted several business ventures, all of which had failed to yield the expected results. More often than not, he had found himself the victim of scams orchestrated by local residents—people who saw him as a 'Cuban from abroad', akin to a tourist, a potential source of hard currency, and an easy target for deception. He had come to the conclusion that finding trustworthy business partners in Cuba was nearly impossible. The 'system', in his view, was deeply flawed and dysfunctional, built entirely on personal connections and, consequently, plagued by corruption. People, he claimed, did not know how to work properly or take business seriously. Initially, he had hoped for a smoother transition back to Cuba and had invested in several potentially lucrative ventures. A few years earlier, he had identified two sectors with untapped economic potential: food and transport. Betting on both, he launched a small pig-breeding business and purchased a vintage American car to rent out as a taxi. Neither endeavor proved successful, which, according to him, was primarily due to the irresponsibility, economic mismanagement, and unreliability of his business associates. As Joel repeatedly told me, the only person he could truly trust in Cuba was his mother.

Abde is another Afro-Cuban man in his forties that I first met in Spain when doing fieldwork among Cuban migrants between 2012 and 2022 (about four months in total). It was a bit by accident that I came across him one day in Havana, and he immediately started recounting the misfortunes of his return to Cuba (the reasons for which remained somewhat shrouded in mystery, at least during our first encounters). As his story went, in the twenty years or so Abde had spent in Spain, he had been sending thousands of Euros back to his family in Cuba, giving them clear instructions as to how the money ought to be used, notably to buy property in prime locations that could gain value and be ideal for the opening of private businesses such as a small restaurant (*paladar*), a guesthouse (*casa particular*), or else. Upon his return to Cuba, after many years of absence, to his dismay Abde had found out that all the money he had been sending back had been mismanaged by his close relatives. Nothing was left of it, and the only thing his family bought was a 'tiny ugly house', in an inconvenient location, where his sister now resided. What livelihood opportunities were left for Abde - who for legal reasons and lack of money could not return to Spain at his will - was going back to hustling for tourist dollars in the streets of Havana, as he had been doing twenty years earlier, prior to his migration to Spain.

Ecuador. Agustín and Lola returned to Ecuador six years ago, after having spent nearly thirteen years in Spain. The reasons were that Agustín had insecure employment, Lola's mother was sick and they wanted to spend time with their children who had not migrated with them. Since returning to Ecuador, Agustín and Lola tried several economic activities. They opened a restaurant on the beach (where Lola is from), and attempted to innovate with new ideas they brought from Spain. They sold Spanish dishes (*tapas*), striving to create a nice and special atmosphere in the restaurant. According to Agustín, the attempt failed owing to Ecuadorian people's not understanding the value of paying more for sophisticated things, and prefering instead to go cheap. Agustín said that it was difficult for them to

[3] Personal names and certain factual details have been altered to protect our research participants' anonymity. Quotes from participants have been translated into English by the authors, and are based on recollection after the events took place or on transcription of recorded interviews.

[4] While popularly referred to as '*repatriados*', the official nomenclature to designate return migration to Cuba and the official procedures that it required employ the notion of '*reasentamiento*'. Aja Díaz and Rodríguez Soriano (2022) and Barcenas Alfonso (2023) analyze the exponential growth of returns to Cuba between 2013 and 2020, which saw the *reasentamiento* of over 60000 Cuban emigrants, mainly coming from the U.S. and Spain

adapt to this kind of 'mentality' when they came back, and that they even regretted to have returned. After this first attempt, they had set up a fast food in the capital, Quito (where Agustín is from), but neither that was successful. Since then, Agustín had had no further job. Building on his experience as a carpenter, before migrating, and as a bricklayer, in Spain, he just did some repairs in his condominium when people called him. His wife worked part-time, as an employee in the same grocery shop she used to work for, before leaving for Spain. Agustín accompanied her to work every day since the time that the shop had been assaulted and robbed, and Lola had been threatened with a gun.

Agustín blamed the current dire economic and unsafe situation on the politics of the current president L. Moreno, deemed to be 'favouring rich people'. By contrast, the previous president, R. Correa, in office until 2017, was said to have made a lot of improvements in education and in the public health system, which had benefited poor people. In his view, the country had now moved backwards, and looked like when he first left for Spain: that was the reason, he explained, his wife sold ever less and was mugged, his daughter was recently fired from a public job, and he was unable to find work. Augustín liked to contrast the situation in Ecuador with that of Spain, where everyone, even poor people, had free access to good education and public healthcare, could own a car, and live in a suitable flat or house, no matter who was ruling the country.

As a result of the economic crisis in Spain, Yessica and Johnny had returned in 2013 to the region of Esmeraldas, in the Pacific coast of Ecuador, where they were originally from. Johnny had arrived in Sevilla in 1999 and his wife Yessica and their three children respectively one and three years later. Johnny lost his job, and had access to unemployment benefits in Spain when he was offered a poorly paid occupation one that was not sufficient to lead a decent life. That was when he and his family decided to return to Ecuador. As Johnny recounted, the return had been difficult, actually more difficult than the migration to Spain; his wife and him had no money and they could not get a bank loan to open a business, having had no previous bank record in Ecuador. 'You have to begin from zero' (*Empiezas de cero*), Yessica told Jérémie. However, she and Johnny were eager to work and to move forward. They started renting a restaurant, where they first thought to serve Spanish dishes with the idea of offering something 'different', something that did not exist in Esmeraldas, but soon realised that Esmeraldan people were not interested in that; they preferred what they knew already and were not keen on discovering new flavours, according to Yessica and Johnny, who adapted their menus accordingly. Ultimately, the restaurant became quite successful, but after only one year, the owner refused to renew their contract, taking on the restaurant himself and banking on the good reputation it had acquired. The six following months were difficult, as Yessica had no job and Johnny worked three months as a driver for a carpenter's workshop. They finally managed to get a small bank loan to open another restaurant close to the seaside. The business was doing quite well, but had had to face the crises that resulted from the 2016 earthquake and from a period of 'terrorism' at the hands of 'drug smugglers' in 2017. According to Yessica and Johnny, their enthusiasm to work, and engage in business activities contrasted with the attitude of Ecuadorian people, whom they criticized for being lazy, unwilling to work, and expecting one family member to provide for all the others. For Yessica, each adult member ought to work and be independent much as she strived to do, and to teach others. Her children helped in the restaurant when they were not studying, especially during weekends, when it got particularly busy.

Analytic pathways

The brief vignettes above tell us much of the disappointing aspects of return. In these stories feature, among other things, issues of mistrust in family, friends, fellow-nationals, and the broader 'economic' and 'political' situation, said to be marred by corruption and mismanagement. To this we can join critiques of economic incompetence and misconduct, ranging from business partners to customers lacking 'good' taste and sophistication. The dissatisfactions of return are not a novelty for scholars of migration, and this is an aspect that has received much attention in the literature. In what is perhaps 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. Many came back to Italy with innovative ideas to implement business, only to find 'local power structures' put a spoke in their wheels. Zetter (1999) talks of 'the myth of home' to highlight how the homeland is always different from the way it is imagined from abroad (cf. also Oxfeld & Long, 2004: 10). Returnees may face material, practical and social difficulties (Conway *et al.*, 2012; Gmelch, 1980; Stefansson, 2004a), such as unemployment (Stefansson, 2004b), troubles to re-enter their homeland (Behar, 2004; Levy, 2004), or the jealousy and envy of the relatives who stayed behind (Gmelch, 1980; Oxfeld & Long, 2004: 10). Returnees may come to see their non-migrant compatriots as 'narrow and old-fashioned' (Oxfeld & Long, 2004: 10) and develop an identity of 'returnee', which emerges from the perception of a 'cultural difference' (cf. Cornish *et al.*, 1999; Mandel, 1990; Tsuda, 2009), or heightened reflexivity as to who they were and have become (Oxfeld & Long, 2004: 14).

Linking these reflections to the Cuban material and the case of Abde, one must note that the attitude of residents interacting with him was one that seriously questioned the point of his return, casting a shadow of 'failure' over his overall trajectory. In regards to his family, Abde argued that they had seriously failed him. This had led him to cut relationships with them. Those who shared his hustling line of work tended to see him as an odd and borderline character, and rumors circulated of him being (half)crazy (*medio loco*). His return didn't seem to have a worthy justification: What had all those years abroad come down to, if he was still stuck where he had started, hustling tourists? The economic motive, in this case and in others considered above, is strongly foregrounded, becoming an issue of moral questioning, interpellation, and calling for some

kind of response from returnees. In Cassaniti and Hickman's (2014) words, we could argue that the economic domain was a 'morally saturated' (2014:256) one for the people we worked with, a domain of experience that absorbed much of their moral deliberations. As several of our interlocutors made clear, they had gone to Europe to improve their economic conditions and that of their family (be it the kin travelling with them, or those left behind in Cuba and Ecuador). It does not come as a surprise, therefore, that once these migrants returned to Cuba and Ecuador, one of the key dimensions guiding other people's assessment of their return, was precisely the economic one, the way they fared economically, and what had they 'brought back'. Given that most of our research participants didn't fare that well, but nevertheless wished to infuse their trajectories with meaning, worth and value, critical reflections on the economy and economic life were foregrounded in the stories they told us and in their interactions with Cubans and Ecuadorians back home.

Our findings thus show that economic aspects, and the very definition of what counted as 'good' economic rationality and practice, were key aspects of moral concern and articulation. Situations abounded, for instance, in which returnees felt compelled to justify and show evidence of the reasonableness of their return, in economic terms. The specter of having returned as a result of a failed migratory project loomed over them, and with it the disparaging view of their ability to capitalize on what many saw as 'the chance of having been there' (i.e., abroad). The prevailing judgment, especially salient in the Cuban case, was that two main reasons could explain one's return. The first, valued one, was that you had been successful and that you were now duly coming back to 'your country', to dwell among 'your own', to set up a profitable business and/or make the most of the money earned abroad. The second, much less valued reason, was that you had somewhat failed: that you were back because something went wrong, because you couldn't make it 'out there', because you had been unable to make money, adapt to life in Europe, or gotten yourself into trouble (e.g. legal, criminal issues.). The details could vary, but the widespread assumption, especially in Cuba, was that if you had not made it, it was somewhat your fault[5], something that explains the stigma attached to a 'return of failure', to borrow on Cerase's (1974) typology. In Ecuador, this second, dire assessment seemed to be more tempered by a kind of empathy generated in particular by the discourse of the Ecuadorian state, who widely broadcasted blame on the global 'economic crisis', and held especially banks accountable for the hardship migrants had had to suffer. Such institutional and public discourse, which turned Ecuadorian migrants in Europe into victims of a ruthless system, did not seem, however, to exonerate them from justifying their return and morally articulating its economic vicissitudes.

But where does the analysis of our interlocutors' misfortunes, critiques, and expressions of disappointment lead us, we may ask at this point in our reflection? Besides the breakdowns – those originated by the crisis and collapse of expectations in Spain and those characterizing return situations – the immanence of 'failure', and the divergences between expectations, aspirations, hopes, and the less rosy realities of living as a migrant in Spain or a returnee in Cuba or Ecuador, what other analytical paths did their experiences and accounts open to us? No matter how tough and uncertain the realities of return, people had to make do with it, and find ways to move forward. As it will appear, any account of breakdown and distress was a partial one, one that downplayed people's resourcefulness and ability to confront an adverse situation, and still find hope, aspire, and strive to carve possible paths for satisfaction and improvement. 'Moral breakdowns', tells us Zigon, are also 'ethical moments' of 'conscious acting on oneself … so as to make oneself into a more morally appropriate and acceptable person not only in the eyes of others but also for oneself' (2010: 8). In the next section, we move from considering expressions of disappointment, critique, and justification, towards the exploration of returnees' ways of prefiguring and outlining more positive and satisfying potentialities and horizons of possibility. As we shall see, in the face of difficult and precarious situations, with the public ascription of a 'failed return' on the balance, our interlocutors redoubled their efforts to seek out sources of value and worth, striving to make a difference (cf. Simoni, 2025), to delineate trajectories of (be it limited) 'success' that somehow responded to the moral demands they were facing, and that could give meaning to their migration trajectories and the difficult choices they had had to make. Often, meaning, value and worth took the shape of backward- or forward-looking projections, of invocations that strived to highlight previous successes (to also mark a difference in the present), or to work as self-fulfilling prophecies that could performatively conjure and bring about better living conditions and prospects (and therefore, also, positively affect the present).

Ethical work and striving for 'the good'

Analytic pathways

For scholars of return migration, examining how imaginaries and expectations of return relate to the concrete experiences of re-settlement ought to be a way 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, 2004a: 8) in the analysis of homecomings, Stefansson has called for an approach that views return as 'a creative effort oriented towards constructing better and more satisfying futures' (2004a: 12, see also Hammond, 2004). We are thus encouraged, for instance, to pay attention to returnees efforts to '(re)create home' (Stefansson, 2004a), to understand performative 'homing' processes working towards the constitution of a 'home' (Constable, 1999; Conway & Potter, 2007; King & Christou, 2011; Long & Oxfeld, 2004; Markowitz & Stefansson, 2004), or of 'multiple homes' (Clifford, 1994; Sapritsky, 2018).

Such insights can be fruitfully prolonged with Zigon's reflections on 'dwelling', which this author sees 'not only as

[5] On the 'individualization' of migrants' 'failure', see the interesting parallels with the situations explored in other parts of the world by Hernández-Carretero (2016), Kleist (2016), and Sørensen (2022).

a moral concept but also as an ethical imperative for human existence' (2017: 121). For Zigon, dwelling is 'an existential modality for being-in-the world', and one 'that only becomes possible in an attuned world' (2017: 120). Dwelling includes 'the being and feeling at home, the sociality, and the openness of possibilities to become otherwise' (2017: 121). It is to our interlocutors' efforts in striving to achieve this that we turn our attention in this section. Zigon's recent proposal for an 'anthropology of potentiality' (2018: 15), one aligned with what he characterizes as a 'critical hermeneutics' approach, resonates with the work of a number of scholars that acknowledge 'the necessity', as Joel Robbins has put it, 'to be attentive to the way people orientate to and act in a world that outstrips the one most concretely present to them.' (Robbins, 2013: 457), 'and to avoid dismissing their ideals as unimportant or, worse, as bad-faith alibis for the worlds they actually create' (Robbins, 2013: 457).

In our approach, we are inspired by the body of scholarship to which Zigon (2018) refers, which includes the work of Povinelli (2011), Robbins (2013), Mattingly (2014), Throop (2014), and Hage (2015), but we also draw upon other authors' work on people's hopes, aspirations, and striving for 'the good life' (Fischer, 2014). Besides Robbins proposal for an 'anthropology of the good', which shows the interest of investigating 'the way people understand the good and define its proper pursuit' (2013: 457), we are mindful of Fischer's (2014) call to move 'towards a positive anthropology', one that is able to 'make claims based on understanding collective desires about what "better" for our own contexts and society could be' (2013: 215). As argued by Fischer, '[c]onceptions of the good life are laden with deeply held moral valuations' (2014: 12), and that is why 'a subjective understanding of what people value, what their view of the good life is and could be, the pathways they see for realizing their aspirations' (2014: 207) becomes essential.

We believe that the exploration of imaginaries and experiences of return is particularly well suited to uncover notions and aspirations of 'good living'. The notion of imaginary (Appadurai, 1990; Crapanzano, 2004) brings attention to the horizons of possibility and creative expansion of one's understandings of the world that acts as charter for action in migrants' project of return. 'Moral imagination' has also been used to describe how people conceive 'other possible social worlds' and imbue them with value (Wendland, 2012: 170) before mapping them in both time and space to outline possible paths to a better life. This finds echoes in Appadurai's (2013) call for an anthropology of the future that is concerned with people's aspirations and efforts in devising situations that can enable them to lead a life worth living, and in Moore's (2011) reflections on the forms of hope, desire, and satisfaction that animate people's 'ethical imagination' and inform their own 'theories of change' (2011: 21). In interrogating the examples that follow, we are mindful of the above mentioned insights and scholarship, and of the questions Zigon urges us to address when analyzing 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)[6]. Accordingly, our interlocutors' efforts to find spaces for dwelling may be read as attempts to open 'new possibilities for thinking, saying, doing, or being' (Zigon, 2018: 15). Whether they managed to do so, whether their 'worldbuilding' efforts were effective or ended up being more of a 'temporary prefiguration', as opposed to 'actually happening and sticking' (2018: 4), is what remain to be seen – something to which we turn to in our conclusion.

Ethnographic insights

In our respective field sites, we found that our interlocutors dedicated much effort in generating value from their experiences abroad, and in argumenting how such value could eventually pay off 'back home'. The attempt was to infuse worth and potentiality in their life upon return. One such key realm of value creation related to their economic situation, activities, and mindset. Much scrutinized by those who had not migrated, the economic realm was one on which returnees felt the weight of expectations, and upon which they acted, if not to show visible signs of success (a challenging task when these were not obvious nor tangible), at least to mark a difference – a difference that was cast as ripe with potentialities, and which was performed and enacted in ways that could eventually also bring about material advantages, as some of the examples below illustrate.

Cuba. In Joel's case, Valerio observed that he consistently played the 'Spanish card' in his interactions, presenting a transnational lifestyle as a way to keep his band members motivated and engaged. He fueled their aspirations by painting a picture of an international music career, filled with potential tours in Spain and beyond. 'When we'll travel…', he predicted, as we sat together one night, sharing a bottle of rum after his band had played as an opening act in a modest Havana venue. Phrases like 'We have to be ready', 'We have to practice more', 'You have to follow my advice', and 'For when it gets big…' helped create a particular 'mood' (Throop, 2014) of anticipation and excitement. This sense of imminent success—entry into the national charts, international recognition, a packed concert schedule, and financial rewards—kept spirits high, especially among band members who had never left Cuba and were eager to do so. Joel leveraged his transnational

[6] Another interesting analytical proposal going in a similar direction is that of Willerslev (Venkatesan *et al.*, 2011), who grounds his reflection on the notions of 'virtual' and 'actual' as advanced by Deleuze. His reflection on love and the significance of ideals of love among Siberian Yukaghir hunters shows that '[t]he actual does not exist separately from the virtual', and that 'the two dimensions are given as facets of one and the same expression or reality – that is, our actual existence duplicates itself all along with a virtual existence' (2011: 228). For Willerslev, the presence of such virtual ideals should be apprehended as an aspect of the real, as having a significant impact on reality. The implications of this change of perspective for anthropology ought be profound, according to this author, who goes on to argue that '[a]nthropology will reach its analytical climax only at the moment that it invents a form of thinking that is capable of bypassing the actual and advancing into the virtual ideality of reality itself.' (2011: 232, cf. Simoni & Throop, 2014).

ties and past achievements, recalling his time as a musician in a well-known Cuban band that had toured internationally before he moved to Spain. These references served to make his bandmates buy into the vision he was crafting — one where they had to 'train harder', 'make sacrifices', and trust in his guidance because, as he assured them, 'that's how successful bands make it'. He frequently reinforced his authority by stating, 'You got to trust me', 'I have been (out) there', and 'I know how things work'. Through these invocations of potential success, Joel not only embodied the role of a band leader but also worked to sustain belief in his 'project'. His ability to inspire and enroll others in his vision allowed him to maintain a certain level of influence—both economic and social—positioning himself as someone with superior knowledge and experience. To many around him, Joel appeared as a rising star, someone on the verge of success. However, the reality he was attempting to manifest remained fragile. His grand aspirations were frequently undercut by moments of doubt, ironic remarks, and even outright skepticism from his own bandmates. At times, they reminded him that, 'actually', at least for now, they were struggling to make ends meet and had little to show for their efforts.

In his conversations with Abde, Valerio noticed similar virtual flights into to the past and to the future as moments of value creation. Adbe's situation was visibly more dire than that of Joel, who had at least some money flowing in regularly from Spain. By contrast, Abde 'the hustler' seemed to be living by the day, struggling in the risky business of informal deals with tourists in Havana (cf. Simoni, 2016a). Rather than delving on his current predicament and the disheartening scenarios it could evoke – failure, stuckedness, 'back to zero' – Abde liked to dwell on tales of his glorious past in Spain, where he had always lived like a king, in comfort, without doing much, lucky to have always lived (and made a living) with well-off European women. 'Even if things are a bit tough now, I can't complain, I have lived my life, a good life already'. Moving from past to future, Abde explained his plan, to set up innovative, much needed, small-scale grocery stores in key spots in Havana, stores that, he was certain, would soon replace the street hawker's carts that roamed the narrow streets of Old Havana, peddling fruits and vegetables. Abde valued his ideas – his 'entrepreneurial spirit' as he put it – which he had cultivated in Europe, and which he deemed was consequently more original and rife with potentialities than that of other Cubans, 'people who had never left the island', and who knew nothing of how business worked and which ideas would triumph in the future. Following his reasoning, Cuba was in a sort of economic past, and his experience in Spain helped him prefigure what would come next, and how to capitalize on it by moving faster than others. His economic behavior, he emphasized, was also different. 'All these people', he claimed, pointing at other Cubans engaging in similar hustling activities, 'they don't know what saving means'. 'I am putting money aside', he assured me, working towards a bigger horizon, a much more ambitious plan, instead of doing what he alleged others were doing – which was to waste all daily earnings in alcohol or in crack-cocaine, living by the day, running after what were for him futile pleasures, and getting stuck in addictions and other unproductive scenarios. Abde would become big, he had plans, he had ideas, he was an entrepreneur, he would be the first doing this and that – or so he assured me.

Ecuador. In Ecuador, Agustín drew from his experience in Spain to reflect on present and future. He liked to emphasize the values of egalitarianism, honesty and respect he associated with Spain but claimed were absent in Ecuador. Him and his wife did not like arrogant people and/or those who believed themselves superior. These values, they sought to apply both in social and in work relations, as they argued was the case in Spain, for instance in labour or in relations between doctors and patients, in spite of the hierarchy commonly assigned to these different statuses. In Spain, contrary to Ecuador, Augustín felt treated as 'human' and as a 'person' in the world of work. According to Agustín, Spanish work habits transformed the working behaviours of Ecuadorian migrants in Spain. This explained why migrants had difficulties to adapt, once they returned in Ecuador. Ecuadorian people back home lacked punctuality, they did not hurry up in their jobs, while in Spain the work rhythm was faster and 'time is money', as he put it. The way of living and working in Spain suited Lola and Agustín, who told me they had felt good there, and well recognized professionally. Agustín proudly told me that his Spanish friends even wondered if he was not European, so close they felt to one another. Being seen as 'tall' and 'white', they found he even looked like a European person, and his two surnames could have been those of any Spanish person. The impression seeping from all these remarks was that Augustín felt being in the wrong place, and that it was obvious he was not satisfied in Ecuador. In Spain, Lola and Agustín had worked hard and saved as much as they could, avoiding superfluous expenses (like partying, drinking alcohol, etc.). While having suffered the effects of the crisis, in Ecuador they had still been able to buy a house in the north of the capital Quito. Agustín admitted that it was not the house of his dreams - it was in a closed condominium without direct access to the street, in which case he could have established a business - but that he liked it anyway because it was quiet and welcoming. Such an asset – owning a house - also enabled them to show that they got something out of their migrant life.

In spite of their business failures, Lola and Agustín still had a project of building bungalows at the seaside, where Lola had inherited some land. Their plan was to build comfortable bungalows, including an outdoor space with a barbecue, to welcome families, who could rest and enjoy a good and quiet time. Agustín particularly liked the place, a region in which he felt at peace; he would have liked to live there. But Lola and Agustín also missed Spain and aspired to travel again there to see if they could find a job, stay until retirement, and get the Spanish pension. They justified this project pointing at the unsatisfactory economic and political situation in Ecuador. Agustín claimed to have connections who could help him find such job back in Spain, and that the knowledge of the 'Spanish world' of work would be a further asset in that. 'We'll travel next February', they told Jérémie in August 2019, the same words they had said the previous year when he had first met them…

To finish with a more positive note, we can quote Yessica: 'I'm fine [here], I eat well, I sleep well, I live well, I do what I want […] I'm my own boss, I've my own business' ('*estoy bien, como bien, duermo bien, vivo bien, hago lo que yo quiera […] soy mi propia jefa, tengo mi propia empresa*'). Although she missed several aspects of the Spanish life, she claimed to be happy in Ecuador. With her husband, they had their own business and, more importantly for them, they did not owe money to anyone. Additionally, they did not employ anybody and ran the restaurant on their own, with the help of her children during weekends. Yessica valued the sense of independence, which rested on the ideal of the nuclear family. The nuclear family was the relevant unit in her discourse, and she contrasted it with the primacy of extended families in Ecuador, whose interdependency she criticised. Her business, in which all members of her nuclear family were now involved, allowed her to be closer to her husband and children. For Yessica, it was a positive aspect, which contrasted with their life in Spain, where they had all separate activities.

Yessica and Johnny told me that they brought back from Spain 'ideas' and the kind of work ethic and sociability habits that were integral to the success of their restaurant. For example, they embellished the place with nice tablecloths and hammocks. They cooked local dishes with local products (particularly fish and seafood), valuing personal relations with producers. They always kept the restroom very clean. Through these distinctive elements, and most notably the special attention to clients, they sought to mark a difference and stand out from other similar businesses. They claimed to be treating every client in the same manner, be them politicians, police officers, friends or 'ordinary' people. *No hay tratos preferenciales*, 'there are no preferential treatments', they argued, implicitly distinguishing themselves from the stereotype they assigned to other Ecuadorians who had never left the country, and which they criticized for always doing favours for powerful people.

Yessica and Johnny planned to stay in Ecuador and to develop further their business, building, for instance, a swimming pool behind the restaurant to attract more clients. Swimming pools were allegedly often used by owners of establishments like theirs as an argument to increase prices, but Yessica and Johnny said they preferred to have more clients, and continue charging the same prices, something they saw as manifesting a fairer attitude toward their patrons, a way of 'treating them well'. One year earlier, Jessica had told Jérémie that when he would came back, he would hopefully be able to use the swimming pool. When Jérémie visited Yessica and Johnny again in the summer of 2019, the swimming pool was still 'a project', but they showed him the pile of gravel beside the restaurant as evidence that they were working on it. Even if Yessica and Johnny did not always put it explicitly, the emphasis on their different way of 'doing things', and notably conducting 'business', helped them claim a valued difference, and set them apart from other 'Ecuadorian people'. Their experience of life abroad was thus cast as a valuable and positive one, on which they currently capitalized, and could rely upon to envisage a good and prosperous future.

Discussion and conclusion

Among the aims of this article, was to uncover the emergence of moral issues in return situations, the way these affected some domains of life over others, and in which manner. This led us, in turn, to explore how such moral concerns were linked to specific political economic contexts and changes in living conditions. It is to these contexts and conditions that Abde, Joel, Yessica, Johnny, Lola and Agustín were all responding to, both in the concreteness of their everyday lives and actions, as well as discursively, when they criticized, reasoned, and sought justification for their choices. The 'economy' and the 'economic' were a key realm of moral critique, argumentation, and justification, be it on the side of the returnees, or on that of the residents they encountered upon return. By this, we are not implying that this realm was the only domain of moral critique and controversy, nor are we implying that it constituted a clear cut, separate domain of people's lives. On the contrary, different realms, and people's positionings and judgments in relation to them, tended to relationally inform and shape one another. In terms of our interlocutors' narratives, however, and of the contests over value and worth in which they engaged to articulate and justify their return experiences, different life domains were often teased out and assessed separately, in ways that recall Boltanski and Thévenot's reflections 'on justification' and what these authors call 'economies of worth' (2006). Building on their approach, is the notion that as people strive to justify their views and actions, they tend to resort to 'higher principles' and meta-values that hold purchase in relation to specific realms and domains- in the case we address, the 'economic' one standing out.

On the one hand, we partake anthropological insights to challenge the analytical framework of 'the economy' and move beyond taken for granted, typically western divisions of life into distinct domains (e.g. 'the economic', 'the social', 'the political', 'the religious', see de l'Estoile, 2014; Latour, 2005). On the other hand, we also recognize the importance of paying attention to the ways in which people incorporate, work over, and eventually reformulate prevailing compartmentalisations of life in different domains (Simoni, 2016b), whereby the definition of one such domain and the establishment of value within it can themselves become a morally charged issue, and a source of moral struggle and controversy. Is this behaviour a 'properly economic' one? Is this the appropriate way families ought to behave? Is this how friends should treat each other? Is this how a European/Cuban/Ecuadorian 'normally' reacts? The way people (re)defined qualities and contextual dimensions (in Spain, in Cuba, in Ecuador) of different domains of life, and (re)assessed their value and significance, can thus become a key subject of enquiry. In retracing such struggles, what is analytically pertinent is also to retrace the relative power of different justifications and moral deliberations, retrace where these justifications come from, how they circulate, and which 'higher principles' (Boltanski & Thévenot, 2006) they make reference to. Zigon's (2008; 2010) proposal for the study of morality 'at three different but interrelated aspects: 1) the institutional; 2) that of public discourse; and 3) embodied

dispositions' (2010:6) is another fruitful way, we believe, to account for such power differentials. This is a move that accounts for the way people are often caught at the intersection of a diversity of moral spheres and discourses, and one that enables us explore the connections between powerful, globally circulating, potentially hegemonic narratives, and personal justifications and embodied dispositions.

In the last section of this article, we moved beyond disappointment and critique to focus on ethical work, aspirations, and the potentialities brought about in response to challenging situations of return. How to read out interlocutors' aspirations, hopes and desires? Were these simply instances of 'cruel optimism', which Berlant defines as that kind of relation that 'exists when something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing' (2011:1)? For Berlant, such may be the case for 'a fantasy of the good life', an 'optimistic relation that is not inherently cruel', but which can easily become so 'when the object that draws your attachment actively impedes the aim that brought you to it initially' (2011: 1). Returnees' fantasies of the 'good life' were driven by imperatives that were largely not of their own making, such as the imperative of a 'successful' return, a normative ideal that weighted heavily on them, and which was arguably channeled by hegemonic narratives of migration as the way to improve your economic conditions and, if possible, 'getting rich' in comparison to those that had been left behind. Drawing on Zigon, we may argue that the 'moral breakdowns' and the 'ethical moments' of return saw multiple aspects of institutional moralities, public discourses of morality, and embodied moral dispositions 'come together to inform the ways in which a person works on herself' (2009: 262)[7]. Institutional moralities and public discourses on morality were precisely the loci where the imperative of economic 'success' and 'progress' via migration and, consequently, a 'successful' 'return', found powerful channels of dissemination. A solution for migrants might have been to contest such imperative, and voice alternative claims for other ways of dwelling upon return, one that didn't necessarily require showing proof of their economic success abroad (cf. Simoni, 2025). However, being confronted with the widespread, hegemonic expectations of a 'successful return', our interlocutors – returning from a crisis-ridden Spain – were likely to be judged as not having been up to the task, as having missed a golden opportunity, and this was, especially in the Cuban case (and all the more cruelly we may say), attributed to their own inability to make the most of migration.

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 hadn't migrated. Such climate of suspicion could lead them 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, but those who didn't have anything obvious to exemplify this, could resort to other means of giving meaning and value to their time abroad. '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 and nourish his 'project'. I have not much to show, but my 'mentality' has changed, could claim others[8]. 'Personal growth', 'education', 'sense of civism', 'cosmopolitanism' could then be cast as invaluable marks of distinction and self-worth, qualities that only years of experience abroad would help you achieve, and which if not in the present, bore at least the promise and potentiality of success in the future. Some claimed such success to be imminent, and strived hard to get their claims heard, taken seriously, and work as self-fulfilling prophecies.

We find ourselves here in the space between aspiration and opportunity (Fischer, 2014), a gap where the will to change, no matter how strong, is not enough on its own. Aspirations must be accompanied by the means to act on the conditions that support them. This tension between potentiality and possibility (Zigon, 2018) was evident in the experiences of our interlocutors, who navigated adverse conditions upon their return. Verbal claims, if pushed too far and unsubstantiated, could in the long run or upon closer inspection become counterproductive, and be seen as simply 'showing off' (*inflar*, litt. 'inflating', 'blowing up', being the typical Cuban jargon to denounce that), something that would further discredit the person and (re)cast the return as being, most likely, a 'failure'. To gain traction and become persuasive, our research participants' narratives of a worthy, migration-related change and virtuous difference required other people's recognition (Simoni, 2025), a collective acknowledgment that was not easily achieved when tangible proofs of material success were lacking. Those who managed to get some such recognition - be it by close friends and family, or by us ethnographers (acting as allies in the task) - could only wish for it to spread, intersubjectively, and help them bring about the kind of social world they wished to inhabit: a world in which their migratory trajectory counted as something valuable, or at least kept the stigma of 'failure' at bay. In the most disheartening cases, such as Abde's, in which not even close friends and family could help sustain his prefigurations of future 'success', it seemed that a 'cruel optimism' (Berlant, 2011) drove his everyday hustling in Havana's streets, as he chased plans and projects that gave him the strength to continue moving ahead, but that were at the same time the source of his own frustration. These plans and project also became

[7] In his formulation, Zigon insists on 'inform' rather than 'determine', since in those ethical moments of conscious reflection and engagement with moral dispositions and with institutional and public discourses of morality, there is always a certain scope for creativity and emergence, which in turn explains why people's moral dispositions, together with institutional and public discourses of morality, change overtime, shifting the range of possibilities of what counts as moral and ethical, together with 'the moralities of their social worlds' (2009: 262).

[8] In another context, and bearing some similarities with our findings, Rogozen-Soltar (2016) shows how Andalusian returnees capitalise on their migration experience to claim moral superiority when judging immigrants from the global south in Andalusia.

the object of scorn by all those that did not give them any credit and saw them as fantasies – the daydreaming of a 'half-crazy' man – further obstructing any possibility for such prefigurations to achieve any socially recognized 'reality effect'.

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 by the researchers, and accepted in ERC Reviews and Monitoring Notes, data for the research were obtained via the ethnographic methods 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, due to the following three main reasons, the ethics committee formally approved oral consent procedures. 1) Context-specific concerns particularly in politically sensitive environments: In both Cuba and Ecuador, some prospective participants expressed mistrust or discomfort about signing official documents. 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', we found that an oral approach, carefully explained and documented in a confidential log by the researchers, 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 the 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, the nature of the research participants' involvement, its potential risks and benefits, the persons in charge of the research and their 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 the research. Concrete measure were taken to ensure that participants were always aware that their participation remained voluntary, and that they could withdraw it – including destruction of the data already gathered from them - at any time without any consequences. To this end, 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. Both authors of the article 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 in the interview orally, [date and place]'.

Restricted data statement

The qualitative data (interview transcripts and 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 potential political and economic ramifications of disclosure. To describe the restriction, we refer to the fact that the empirical data contain identifying details related to migrants' family situations, economic activities, and community dynamics in settings where disclosure could pose social or legal risks. Sharing unredacted transcripts or field notes could inadvertently expose participants' identities. ERCEA's Ethics Review Unit reviewed and approved our plan for restricted data access, agreeing that revealing raw ethnographic data would compromise participants' confidentiality (ethics clearance on October 27th, 2017, Ref. Ares (2017)5270670 - 28/10/2017). Requests for access to anonymized excerpts of the data can be directed to the research PI, Valerio Simoni, at the following address valerio.simoni@graduateinstitute.ch. Access will be considered for qualified researchers who present a methodologically sound proposal and secure ethics approval (or an equivalent review) from their own institution. Any shared data will be anonymized thoroughly, and requestors will be required to sign a Data Use Agreement stipulating that no attempts will be made to re-identify participants or share data publicly.

Acknowledgments

We warmly thank all our research participants for their collaboration, without which this article would have been impossible. The Instituto Cubano de Antropología (ICAN) provided institutional affiliation for Valerio Simoni's research in Cuba, and the Facultad Latinoamericana de Ciencias Sociales (FLACSO) Ecuador for Jérémie Voirol's research in Ecuador, and we are very grateful and acknowledge the assistance received.

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?

Remus Gabriel Anghel
The National University of Political Studies and Public Administration, Bucharest, Romania

The paper analyses return experiences among Cuban and Ecuadorian returnees who return from Spain to their countries of origin after the 2008 economic crisis. Different from much literature on return migration, the paper engages with a moral economy approach, a perspective that brings a theoretical rich perspective to dive into returnees' positions and return experiences, navigating obstacles and trying to assess merits of their migratory careers. In this sense the paper tells a different story from many studies showing a greater optimism highlighting the nexus between return migration and development, returnees' entrepreneurship, or studies on return migration, highlighting their agency, and social and economic remittances. Different from studies emphasising returnees as rational economic and political actors, the paper also distinguishes as it analyses their economic adaptation enmeshed in wider societal values and moralities, and migrants' pursuit of worth and meaningful life. In this sense, the paper aligns with recent efforts to emphasise moral economy approaches to migration and transnationalism studies (Čiubrinskas and Glick Shciller 2025).

I greatly enjoyed the use of vignettes for a theoretically-informed discussion on returnees' experiences and positionality. The selection of cases, with Cuba and Ecuador returnees, is another strength of the paper, as comparatively, more research is with return processes from Western Europe to countries in Central and Eastern Europe, Morocco, or Turkey.

My main comment regards the need for more dialogue (and integration) between the theory and the empirical parts and if possible of focusing more the main argument. For instance, reading through the paper, one of the main aims, the pursuit (and realisation?) of good life, actually does not materialise for many returnees, it is a rather relegated to the future. Empirically, much of the data actually unfolds around "moral difficulties" of returnees (see also last sentence before methods). While people may seek "good life", which can change given particular circumstances people go through, as authors argue, the paper mostly discusses cases of failure. These are people whose remittances were spent by relatives, of returnees engaging in the same kind of economic activities as before departing for Spain, and whose economic initiatives and labour broke, as it unfolded in the case of returnees who lost their restaurant business.

If focusing on return as failure and projecting and seeking good life in spite of the odds, the paper will do more justice to the very rich and interesting empirical material that unfolds. It could unfold contradictions, tensions and articulations of their return experiences. References to “good life” also revolves around past experiences as migrants in Spain. For instance the reference to Joel and his migration experience seem to be as a way to convince the band to stay together; Abde referenced his previous good life in Spain not the current one, while Augustin remembered the egalitarianism he experienced in Spain vis-à-vis Ecuador. Yessica and Johnny seem to be the only ones who value their actual life in Ecuador and a sense of freedom and accomplishment. If authors chose to focus on failed return and how morality plays out in return, this case can be then dropped.

Some theoretical concepts are interesting, useful, yet they do not play out substantially in the analysis. For instance the concept of home (and homing) does not feature in empirical data too often; as it stands, more data and analysis would be required to tie it and develop it in relation to the material and the main theoretical argument. For instance how returnees conceptualise home and are engaged in processes of homing may be better spelled out and substantiated in the empirical analysis. As a minor suggestion, Zigon’s reference on three connected dimensions of morality: institutions, public discourse and embodied dispositions, could be announced well before, thus helping the reader to have this frame of reference since the beginning; this will make also connection to the analysis in the last part of the paper.

Minor points
In the introduction, where referring that migrants were dissatisfied with their lives. Migrants can do well, yet they can prefer to return for a variety of reasons, as the scholarship of return migration shows. The cases presented here were of migrants who had economic difficulties due to the Spanish economic crisis and had to return. Perhaps the word “dissatisfied” could be changed with a more precise one. In the first paragraph authors can also say that returnees had left Cuba and Ecuador due to economic crises and returned from Spain due to the 2008 Spanish economic crisis. This is just an argumentative strategy to make clear the reader the context of research and of the crisis that is announced since the beginning.

Second paragraph, “one of the most surprising phenomena” – please explain “surprising” – it needs qualifying; there are also other migratory flows with similarly rapid evolution, such as the Romanian one. Stating a surprising phenomenon may suffice.
“living in Spain stated..” grammar error, “started” should replace “stated”
same paragraph in the second column, “an option unavailable” – it is unclear why the reference to migration to the US.

Next paragraph, same column, the sentence referencing Narotzi and Besnier is unclear. Sentence structuring.

Another problem is with referencing. On several occasions, such as on page 5, first column, “Answering recent calls” authors cite a series of authors and publications, yet they do not engage them. Perhaps keeping more references that are actually used would be better.

Page 7, second column, before “Analytical pathways”, the previous section needs a closing sentence.

Thank you for the opportunity to read and review the paper, it is a really interesting perspective and I congratulate authors for their theoretical effort and interesting empirical insights.

References

1. Transnationalities of Migrant Moral Economies in a Transforming World. 2025. Publisher Full Text

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

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

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

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?
Yes

Competing Interests: No competing interests were disclosed.

Reviewer Expertise: return migration, migration and ethnicity, migration studies

I confirm that I have read this submission and believe that I have an appropriate level of expertise to confirm that it is of an acceptable scientific standard, however I have significant reservations, as outlined above.

Reviewer Report 04 April 2025

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?

Maurizio Ambrosini
University of Milan, Milan, Italy

The article is interesting and well written. It delves into the rather neglected topic of immigrants'

return to their country of origin.

However, it should be improved in two respects.

The first is methodological. The authors claim to have collected between fifty and sixty interviews, in addition to having carried out extensive ethnographic work, but they present only four cases. As a reader, I wondered whether all the other cases are similar to these, or whether there are also different stories and trajectories: for example, returns with a certain success, or for emotional and family reasons, or nostalgia for the place of origin. Without demanding a rewrite of the article, I think it would be appropriate to introduce a section in which to briefly present the overall panorama of the responses and the reasons why the authors have chosen to focus on those specific cases. T

he second aspect is theoretical: in the title, the authors evoke the perspective of moral economy, in some points they echo it, but they should more clearly show how their results dialogue with this theoretical approach, which they have used in the past. A greater reference to the literature on the subject would be desirable. Even more, what they call moral arguments seemed to me rather forms of justification and self-justification of the failure of their migratory experience: to me they seem to have little of the moral, and much more of the psychological, of attempts to defend threatened self-esteem.

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

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?
Partly

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

Are the conclusions drawn adequately supported by the results?
Partly

Competing Interests: No competing interests were disclosed.

Reviewer Expertise: Sociology of migration

I confirm that I have read this submission and believe that I have an appropriate level of expertise to confirm that it is of an acceptable scientific standard, however I have significant reservations, as outlined above.