

# To make a difference: Responding to migration and its (im)possible demands in returns to Cuba

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## Abstract

The article focuses on the experiences of Cuban migrants that have returned to live in Cuba. The focus is on the predicament they face as they strive to (1) respond to, (2) reformulate, and (3) resist societal pressures to make a valuable difference upon their return. Firstly, economic gains are the widely expected result of a successful migration, and returnees struggle to convincingly exemplify such achievement. In the effort to carve out alternative sources of value and prestige from their experiences abroad, on the other hand, feelings of exhaustion and estrangement also emerge. Resisting the pressures that weight on them as (ex)migrants, finally, returnees reframe migration and life itself in Cuba, but with ambivalent results. The exploration of Cuban returnees' responses to the (im)possible demands engendered by their migration illuminates workings of difference and overdetermination, belonging and exclusion, and ethics and responsibility that have broader significance for how these subjects are approached in migration and anthropological research.

## Keywords

Return Migration, Ethics and Morality, Value, Difference, Belonging, Expectation, Cuba

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I first met Walt<sup>2</sup> one Saturday night in January 2019, at an electronic music party in the Centro Havana neighborhood. A Cuban man in his forties, Walt had returned to Cuba four years earlier after over a decade in Rome. As he stood in the doorway, I was struck by his smart attire, a flowery shirt and sunglasses, and his affable and charismatic demeanor. Walt seemed pleased to practice his Italian with me, recalling episodes and impressions of his life in Italy that eventually led us to his return to Cuba. I could not help but notice the paradoxical way Walt presented his migration trajectory: as a smooth and satisfying journey that was reasonable, purposeful, and driven by choice on the one hand, and as a somewhat unavoidable, futile, and unsettling experience on the other. Exemplifying the latter, one of Walt's first considerations was that migration 'finishes a person off' (*la migración acaba con una persona*) and is perhaps not worth the trouble. Migration from Cuba is economically driven, he told me, but 'so what? You earn a bit more... and then? What then?' In a matter-of-fact tone, Walt was raising doubts about the very meaning and goal of migration. Leaving these questions hanging in the air, he then explained that in Cuba he was not doing badly at all. He had a double income: the first, renting an accommodation to tourists, and the second, selling household items, part of a privately licensed business that he ran on the doorstep of his family's house, where he lived with his mother and step-father. While downplaying the significance of his return, Walt also voiced criticisms of life in Cuba, singling out an excessive inclination for dependency, *la dependencia*. He said he preferred *la autonomia*, the autonomy people had in Italy, which he saw as more 'natural', and felt that in Cuba there was too much pressure put on men by women, notably in terms of providing and paying for things. Struggling to find the right words, he said he preferred the more 'feminist', 'egalitarian', and 'capitalist' aspects of life in Italy: 'There's more freedom, if you get what I mean'. Late into the night, as he opened a bottle of Italian Lambrusco wine with much ceremony, Walt emphasized the perks of life in Italy: '*il benessere, il benessere, all'Italiana!*', the taste for well-being, for living well, Italian style. 'That's what I brought back from Italy', he told me with a complicit grin. Although playing up his Italian experience, throughout the night Walt also foregrounded his being Cuban, stating repeatedly, as a matter of fact, 'I am Cuban, I grew up here'. Walt seemed somewhat

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<sup>2</sup> All personal names used in this article are pseudonyms. English translations of direct quotes are by the author.

absorbed with the question of his belonging, and felt the need to clarify where his allegiances lay. What he was pointing to was that after the experience in Italy it was only natural for him to come back for good – to be back to his country and among his people.

While normalizing his return such way, the fact that Walt was back elicited much scrutiny from Cubans who had never left the island. He made this clear to me on our second encounter a few days later, as we enjoyed a beer on the terrace of the Hotel Inglaterra, in Havana's Parque Central. The bluntness of his remarks took me by surprise: 'The three questions everybody asks me? The first: When are you leaving again? The second: Why did you leave [Italy]? And the third: Can you take me with you [next time you go to Italy]?' Telling me he had no intention to go back to live in Italy, Walt went on to criticise Cubans for mistakenly assuming that 'over there', *allá* - meaning abroad - everything was easy: '*é il sogno americano...*', it's the American dream. In the weeks that followed, I noticed Walt often signaled to people in our company that he had lived in Italy for a long time. This seemed to give him prestige and enhance his status as a not-so-ordinary Cuban. But every time he said something good about Italy or his life there, another set of questions could easily emerge: what was he doing back in Cuba? Many of his interlocutors would have loved the chance to live in Italy. His return to Cuba thus posed a puzzle and called for an explanation. When I asked Walt about this frequent interrogations, he brushed it off, saying that he generally explained that he had a couple of good businesses running, and that would quench people's curiosity, keeping any suspicion that his return could have been 'a failure', *un fracaso*, at bay.

These initial encounters and conversations with Walt serve to introduce the issues I address in this article. My focus is on situations of return in Cuba, and more particularly the predicament in which returnees found themselves as they sought to (1) respond to, (2) reformulate, and (3) resist the expectations and pressures engendered by migration. Evoked in the article's title, I perceive such pressures as demands to 'make a difference', a difference that would lend meaning and value to migration and return. I start (1) by addressing returnees' responses to the expectations and demands of making a material difference 'back home', in reference to the economic privileges, resources, and redistributive gestures associated with a 'successful' return. Satisfying such demands proved a challenge to most returnees I met, and I subsequently (2) explore their efforts to carve out alternative sources of difference and value from their experiences abroad, beyond material gain, paying attention to the feelings of estrangement and exhaustion that

frequently ensued. I finally (3) consider the returnees' re-framing of migration and life itself in Cuba, including the ambivalent results of their efforts to do so and what these tell us about migration's promises and (im)possible demands. Analyzing little studied experiences of return, my broader aim is to provide new insights on workings of difference and overdetermination, belonging and exclusion, freedom and responsibility, and failure and success in people's lives, and to do so in ways that contribute to current debates on migration, and on ethics and morality in anthropology<sup>3</sup>.

The empirical material on which I draw is informed by twenty months of fieldwork conducted in Cuba between 2005 and 2020 – in Havana, the rural town of Viñales (located 200 kilometres west of the capital), and the beach resort of Santa Maria (thirty minutes east of Havana) – and by four months, since 2012, with Cuban migrants in Barcelona, Spain. Most examples I present come from four one-month stays, since August 2018, in Havana and Viñales, during which my focus shifted from exploring the lives and aspirations of Cuban men and women hustling and struggling (*luchar*) at the margins of the formal tourism sector (Simoni 2016a) and the experiences of Cuban migrants in Spain (Simoni 2016b), to the situation of return on which I concentrate in this article<sup>4</sup>. In the last three years, I have established relationships with twenty Cuban men and women who migrated (mainly) to Europe within the last two decades, and came back to Cuba after living abroad for several years. Some of them I first met in Cuba and Spain during earlier research, while others, like Walt, I encountered from 2018 onwards.

The notion of 'diasporic generation' (Eckstein & Berg 2009) has been used to differentiate the more recent generation of 'migrants', from the first wave of Cuban 'exiles' who left the country between the early 1960s and about 1980, following the 1959 Revolution. Susan Eckstein and Mette Louise Berg (2009) signal a shift from politically to economically driven migration, starting with the 1990s crisis that struck Cuba after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Much like Walt, my research participants, mostly men in their forties and fifties, would correspond to the 'migrant' generation identified by Berg (2011), their migration dating from the mid-1990s

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<sup>3</sup> In spite of the relative increase in studies of return migration in the last fifteen years, starting with the volumes edited by Long & Oxfeld (2004) and Markowitz & Stefansson (2004), in a recent review of the field anthropologist Julia Pauli pertinently notes that 'in-depth treatments of the actual experiences of return are still comparatively rare' (2021:101).

<sup>4</sup> See Simoni (2019) for a brief account of such research trajectory and its main rationales, as well as relevant empirical and analytical continuities.

onward, being relatively diverse in terms of class and racial background, and approximating that of other so-called economic migrants from Latin America. Living in different countries in Europe, they were all affected by the adverse economic climate that followed the 2008 financial crisis, most of them being employed in the construction or hospitality sector, albeit in positions as varied as owning a well-established Cuban restaurant in Barcelona, to on-demand work in building sites in Marseille.

Despite the similarities in their migratory trajectories – the ‘generational’ aspect considered by Berg and Eckstein – the personal stories of my interlocutors and their vicissitudes as migrants were also unique. Tellingly, when I explained my research topic to George, a Cuban man in his forties, he responded that his story was likely to be ‘different’, which I took as a plea not to ‘black box’ his experience into a broader migration pattern, typifying aims, drives, and reasons for both leaving and returning to Cuba. If in this article I introduce aspects related to the peculiarities of my interlocutors’ lives, my focus is on the puzzles and challenges generated by the situation and demands of return. While their stories of migration and return were no doubt singular, such challenges, and the responses they engendered, gradually started appearing markedly similar. This tells us something important about the demands of migration, the way people are caught in them, and how they inform their becoming, ‘back home’.

### Negotiating ‘success’: Responding to migration’s expectations

Why did Walt call my attention to the three questions that, allegedly, ‘everyone asked’ him? Why were these questions so present in his life? What do they tell us about his migrant trajectory as seen from his Cuban interlocutors? To answer this, we must start thinking of international migration as seen from Cuba, and the expectations such migration tends to engenders. My interlocutors all left Cuba in the late 1990s and 2000s, at a time in which a peculiar Cuban expression – *tener fe* – held much currency in local parlance (see de la Fuente 2008; Palmié 2021; Weinreb 2009; Wig 2020). Literally meaning ‘to have faith’, the word *fe* was used as an acronym for *familia en el extranjero*, suggesting that the key to a good life in Cuba was to have ‘family living abroad’ who could send money, bring gifts, and so on (de la Fuente 2008: 714-15). Considering the strong drive to migrate that permeated the lives of her Cuban interlocutors, Amalia Weinreb argues in 2009 that in Cuba ‘there are countless potential migrants who are

waiting to leave' (129, cf. Eckstein and Berg 2009: 166). My engagements with (mostly underprivileged) members of the Cuban population over the last fifteen years, often saw them articulating a strong desire and hope for a better life *allá*, 'over there' (Simoni 2018).

Those who made it abroad, unsurprisingly, were subject to significant material demands from kin and friends left behind. As Wig (2020: 102) pens, to 'become the "faith" of family members back home was a heavy burden to bear', tied to notions of the virtuous, self-sacrificing migrant devoted to 'handling distributive claims' (2020: 98, drawing on Ferguson 2015) from relatives in Cuba. Lily, A Cuban woman in her forties, had spent over twenty years in Spain and only recently come back to live in Cuba when we met in 2019. As we discussed her experience, she poignantly recounted her disillusionment with family upon her return. Praised as 'the good daughter' and 'the good sister' while she was in Spain and sending monthly remittances, her decision to return had generated much discontent, notably as it marked an end to the flow of hard currency. Her remarks pointed to a common difficulty faced by migrants returning to Cuba, namely how to continue satisfying the economic expectations and demands their migration had engendered in the first place (Simoni and Voirol 2021).

An 'affective sense of obligation and pressure' (Graw & Shielke 2012: 10) has been described as a widespread feature of migration. Anthropologists paying attention to imaginaries and experiences of return (e.g., Hernández-Carretero 2016; Schielke 2019; Lucht 2019) have underscored how fraught with doubts and dilemmas the decision to come back can be, leading to frequent postponements out of fear of frustrating the expectations of families left behind. Similar anxieties were palpable among my Cuban interlocutors in Barcelona, with some attesting a wish to return before judging that they could better help their families from abroad. Given the charge of expectations placed on migration, feelings of shame and embarrassment could easily be associated with an unjustified return. During fieldwork in Cuba, I thus observed tense situations of interaction marked by lively debates and controversies, in which return migrants were openly challenged by fellow Cubans questioning their migratory trajectories, most notably their being back.

Such was the case with Ozmin, who had lived in Japan for over a decade. What was he doing back in Cuba, roaming the streets of Old Havana as he so often did? Did he have some good business venture in mind? No, argued most of my acquaintances, who had known him well

before his first marriage with a Japanese woman and his departure for Japan, a country many saw as the pinnacle of development and technology. My friend Isaac openly challenged Ozmin one night. Accusing him of wasting a once in a lifetime opportunity, he insinuated that Ozmin's return was most likely the result of his own misbehaviour, of him having been lazy all these years in Japan. He hinted at the possibility that, even if Ozmin would never admit it, he had most likely been kicked out of the country via some form of deportation. In migration, Isaac told us, 'some land standing, and some land on their ass!' – the latter being a clear jab at Ozmin<sup>5</sup>.

Countering Isaac's accusations, Ozmin insisted on the hardships of life in Japan – hardships not for him, he clarified, who had done rather well and had 'freely chosen' to return to Cuba – but for any foreigner. Ozmin was adamant that foreigners in Japan, all the more so if they were not Asian or white, as was his case, suffered from systematic racism, the cold-heartedness and insensitivity of the country's inhabitants, the poverty of social relationships, loneliness, and the lack of 'a life' that could be called such. Even if Ozmin's Japan came out as an exemplification of 'hell on earth', he did little to convince his audience that night. They seemed uninterested in the socio-cultural challenges facing foreigners in Japan. The bottom line, for Isaac and the others present, was that Ozmin's migration had produced nothing worthy of note – made no difference whatsoever. He had nothing to show for it, except perhaps for his eccentricity, and what some saw as his downright 'out of placeness'. In their eyes, Ozmin was a lunatic: *se fundió* – 'had melted', meaning he had lost his mind – some said most pityingly. According to other rumors, he was now a crack-cocaine addict. If Ozmin had not made it, the accusation implied, it was his own fault, something I read as a way, for Isaac – who had himself spent years devising plans to leave Cuba, including an ill-fated escape by *bote* (boat) crossing the Florida strait – to keep his migration dreams alive.

In the three months I have been in Cuba since first meeting Walt, we have spent much time together, running errands and going out at night. As time went on, I realized that – despite the 'couple of businesses I run' success-story he liked to recount – far from leading a life of plenty,

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<sup>5</sup> While none of my research participants had been deported to Cuba, this did not dispel the doubt, among their interlocutors, that deportation could be the cause of their return, something that reveals the profound contentiousness of their 'being back'. In returns seen as dubious and stigmatised as *fracasos*, 'non-deportation', more than a legal, clear-cut status, thus became something to be socially achieved. This is an aspect that, in dialogue with recent research on what Shahram Khosravi pens as 'post-deportations' conditions marked by 'anxiety, uncertainty, and insecurity' (2018:4), would merit more attention than I can devote to it here.

he was getting by on a tight budget. The tourist rental turned out to belong to his family and was unrelated to any migration-resulting economic resources. While displaying a certain largesse and willing to share expenses whenever we bought food and drinks, purchased concert tickets, or paid for a taxi, Walt was constantly calculating what he could afford based on his earnings and often more than willing to let me pay the lion's share. As I engaged with other returnees, it became clear that beyond an initial 'economy of appearance' (Cole 2014) promoting the image of a 'successful' return, their stories of smooth transitions and virtuous re-incorporations into Cuban life, notably as well-off *dueños* (owners) of some business, were punctured by examples of more precarious day-to-day livelihoods<sup>6</sup>. All of the returnees I have met so far, even the most fortunate in terms of savings brought back to Cuba – such as in the case of Lily mentioned above - had seen these quickly dwindle in a socio-economic context that made forceful demands for a share of the hard-currency coming from abroad. Even Roberto, who in the space of a couple of years had channelled over 100'000 euros into Cuba, had seen his fortune 'almost magically' vanish: *se fué* ('it's gone'), 'eaten up' (*se lo comieron*), he told me, listing his partner, relatives, close friends and acquaintances in need among the people pressing 'distributive claims' (Ferguson 2015) he could hardly eschew. His most demanding investment by far, was the construction of a huge house, planned to function as tourism rental (*casa particular*), which Roberto now lacked funds to complete and had recently put on sale<sup>7</sup>.

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<sup>6</sup> Based on her work among returnee migrant women to the Caribbean Island of Nevis, Karen Olwig uncovers 'gendered narratives reflecting dominant social and moral values', noting that '[i]n the "masculine" narrative the display in the public sphere of individual social and economic achievements is predominant, whereas in the "feminine" narrative the sustaining and maintaining of social and economic obligations towards the family predominates' (2012:831). While this may resonate with the situation in Cuba, my focus here is predominantly on the experiences of male returnees (cf. Osella & Osella 2000), but I lack both space and more substantial ethnographic material to elaborate a subtler comparison along gendered lines.

<sup>7</sup> The most popular business ventures among the returnees I met were setting up a *casa particular* (private tourism rental, mostly for an international but also domestic clientele), and *paladares* (private restaurants). Peaking at over 4.5 million in 2018 (ONEI 2020), international tourism arrivals in Cuba more than doubled in ten years, thanks also to the growth in U.S. visitors facilitated by President Obama's administration, which had prompted what Roberto saw as a moment of 'optimism' in Cuba's economic future, and had also motivated his return and investment in the tourism sector. The recrudescence of travel restrictions for U.S. citizens under President Trump, from 2017 onwards, quickly saw these numbers and Roberto's optimism dwindle (arrivals had decreased to just over one million for 2020, something further aggravated by the current Covid-19 pandemic [ibid.]). In the last decade, scholars have pertinently highlighted the entanglements between the Cuban government's relative openings to private enterprise and shifts in mobility patterns facilitated by changes in Cuba's migratory law - resulting in an increase and diversification of Cuban migrants' returns and circulations (cf. Aja Díaz et al. 2017; Bastian 2018; Chapon 2019; Jolivet 2017; Krull & Stubbs 2018; Martín Fernandez & Barcenas Alfonso 2015).



George, whom I briefly mentioned above, had been back in Viñales for five years, after having spent twenty in France. Thanks to a French friend who helped with ideas and capital, he had also built a rather big house in town, where he lived with his Cuban wife and daughter. In August 2019, he had finally obtained the license to start renting for tourists, but business was low, with much competition in town and few visitors around. ‘I have nothing, not even five *fulas* [convertible pesos, Cuba’s hard currency and a U.S. dollar equivalent at the time]’, George told me, ‘but people think I am a millionaire, and this suits me (*me conviene*)’. When I asked him what was so good about people thinking him a millionaire when he was actually broke, his answer was straightforward: ‘Better that people envy you than pity you’. *¡Que no se note la miseria!*, ‘Don’t let poverty show!’ was another frequent expression when inviting us guests for something to eat or a cup of coffee, playing the generous host while alluding with complicity to such cultivation of appearances.

George oscillated between humorous self-deprecation and the pride of being somewhat different thanks to his migratory experience. He repeatedly told his Cuban friends and me that he had learned how business worked ‘out there’, *en el capitalismo*, and that this gave him an indisputable advantage when dealing with tourists. He often referred to his special status, his being French, but also Cuban, and a member of *las grandes ligas*, ‘the big leagues’, thus drawing a parallel with the realm of sports and the top-ranking crowd. The imaginative horizons and virtual scenarios George activated were of a bright future, in which the efforts of his migration would finally bear fruit. But his claims of being *el grande* (‘the big one’) and on the brink of success were eyed with skepticisms by many of his peers in Viñales. Stan, a mutual friend, maintained that George was actually a ‘lazy guy’, who had been lucky with a French patron to sponsor his new house, but would most likely mismanage and waste his chance. Stan’s critique took away George’s merit and questioned the overall success of his migration and return. ‘He’s just showing off’ (*está inflando*), argued others.

### Diversifying migration’s value: Towards ethical exhaustion?

Reflecting on George’s prefigurations of success and his projections of a prosperous future, I am mindful of the questions Jarrett Zigon recently called anthropologists to address in his proposal for an anthropology of potentiality, moving ‘beyond the actual’ and towards ‘the incipient not-

yet' (2019: 14), and asking: 'What potential for becoming is trying to be enacted?' (2019: 15). What potential for becoming were people like George and Walt trying, and being called to enact? And, related to this question, what were their margins of maneuver in choosing the terms of such becoming? Revealing of the overdetermined and trapping qualities of these prefigurations of economic success, here I wish to draw attention to their experiential effects and the responses they could engender. Facing the pressure and difficulty of displaying signs of a 'successful' migration, George and Walt, among other returnees I encountered, also sought other avenues to carve out meaning and value from their stays abroad.

On several occasions, in the presence of his mother and his partner, Walt raised the topic of life in Italy, underscoring the interest, value and superiority of certain aspects of it: from ways of cooking and seasoning a meal, to modes of sociability and relating, to the sheer pleasure of partying 'the Italian way'. 'Italy is the place to have fun and enjoy, no comparison with Cuba', he told us once as we were about to have dinner at his place. The tension in the room became palpable and a reaction from his partner was quick to ensue. 'If you liked Italy so much, if it was so much fun, what are you doing here, you could have stayed there!', she retorted. 'In Italy this... in Italy that', she added derisively, 'Can you please stop talking about Italy!?' Walt found in me a sympathetic ear; I had the impression of being the affordance that enabled and perhaps even stimulated him to express such views, in his mix of Spanish and Italian. But his partner and mother showed little interest in such experiential dimensions and the resulting perceptions Walt had brought back. They also resented the boastful attitude and the tone with which he laid such aspects on the table<sup>8</sup>, casting 'foreign' qualities as superior and contrasting them with an inferior Cuban reality, as the only one his partner and mother would know.

I witnessed similar situations at George's place. His wife once told us that she had been attracted to him because his migration made him 'interesting', unlike others who had never left Cuba. But such interest had better be channeled into an inclusive distinction, one that could reflect nicely on her and not, as occurred regularly, to highlight her comparative lack of cosmopolitanism and experience of the world. George's migration and the value he sought to carve out from it acted as a double-edged sword, shining a light or casting a shadow on those who shared life with him. It

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<sup>8</sup> I am grateful to Marco Motta for drawing my attention to this point, and for his encouragement, more broadly, to be more sensitive to the expressive texture of 'voice' and its ethical dimension (see Motta 2021).

was an expansive and inclusive source of collective pride and value in one moment, and a sign of alienation and reciprocal estrangement in another. Migration-related difference-making required careful deploying to be recognized as valuable and virtuous. The challenge was to be able to enroll people into a certain value creation project, to conjure, persuade, and include an audience to recognize and validate its worth (Graeber 2013)<sup>9</sup>.

But to find a sympathetic audience – one willing to give credit to the different delineations of migration-related value expressed by the returnees – was hardly an easy affair. Attempts to find such recognition and validation could fail miserably, prompting frustration and sometimes leading to heated disagreement. At the end of the lively contention between Ozmin and Isaac, with Ozim accused of having failed in his migration and of hiding his personal shortcomings behind a critique of Japan, he baffled everyone by declaring there was no point trying to explain things to Cubans who had never left the island. In his view, they simply lacked the capacity to understand, and he would waste no further time trying to enlighten them about what ‘real life’ *allá*, out there, was all about. Ozmin thus responded by signaling the in-commensuration of his experience and its value, ultimately taking the superior stance of the person who had been there and had the authority to speak. Angrily but proudly, he left the scene, leaving his audience hurt and offended, and Isaac boiling with anger. In this case and others, I sensed returnees’ efforts to carve out migration-related realms of meaning, recognition, distinction, and value creation beyond the more widely expected economic signs of ‘success’. Drawing on Ghassan Hage (2009), we may argue that my interlocutors were striving to preserve a sense of ‘existential mobility’: the notion that, in spite of being back in Cuba, they were moving forward in life and ‘going somewhere’ (cf. Jackson 2013; Lems & Tošić 2019; Lucht 2019; Schielke 2019) as opposed to ‘being stuck’ or ‘back to zero’ (Hernández-Carretero 2016: 123).

In their efforts to articulate resourcefulness, potentiality, and vision for the future, my returnee research participants found in me a complicit ear, someone whom they assumed would understand and appreciate the broader gains and personal enrichment of their migration, beyond the strictly material dimension. Considering my role as a sympathetic listener in validating such migration-related ‘existential empowerment’ (Lucht 2019: 56), in contrast to the tepid,

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<sup>9</sup> Rodolfo Maggio helped me develop this point, and I refer to his insightful critique and development of David Graeber’s reflections on value, based on his research in a migratory context in the Solomon Islands (Maggio 2019).

dismissive, or downright hostile reactions that people like Walt, George, or Ozmin received from fellow Cubans, I cannot help but wonder if I was not inadvertently nourishing a form of ‘cruel optimism’ (Berlant 2011; Coates 2019; Pettit and Ruijtenberg 2019)<sup>10</sup>, one that could ultimately work against them, causing further frustration and estrangement in their everyday lives and relationships with other Cubans. In the light of Zigon’s (2019, 2021) anthropology of potentiality and relational ethics approach, the ties forged through my research did seem to encourage the disclosure of ‘the normalizing limits’ of my interlocutors’ ‘everyday existence’ back in Cuba, thus participating in ‘the opening of new possibilities for thinking, saying, doing, or being’ (2019:15) and in the cultivation of a ‘relational ethics’ of ‘attuned letting-be’ (2021:8). What I am less sure of is the value such attunement and opening could acquire, especially when it also seemed to encourage rather clumsy (if not arrogant) recollections and re-enactments of other lives and lifestyles that threatened to further distance my returnees research participants from peers, families, and the local lifeworlds in which they were also struggling to find recognition and a sense belonging. What role was I taking on and with what effects? While I am perhaps giving my research and myself too much importance in such dynamics, I think these are questions worth asking. Charged with significant ethical and epistemological implications, they ought to encourage further reflection on the nature of our fieldwork engagements, the kind of relations and forms of understanding we co-produce and encourage, and their potential ramifications in our research participants’ multi-aspectual lives.

Faced with the interrogation of their return to Cuba (in which I played a part) and the nature of its value, my returnee interlocutors seemed to live under the burden of, and feel compelled to mark and think through some kind of difference. The pressure was upon them to show that something important and significant had changed, and for the better, thanks to migration. Such drive toward difference-making seemed to inform many of their public behaviors and attitudes and, most of all, the meaning and value they themselves or their audiences ascribed to them. The actions and discourses of Walt, George, and Ozmin could thus be read in the light of their migratory experience, the latter becoming an overdetermining frame that could, potentially,

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<sup>10</sup> Lauren Berlant (2011: 1) argues that ‘[a] relation of cruel optimism exists when something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing’, citing among the most obvious examples ‘a new habit that promises to induce in you an improved way of being’ - something that resonates with the situations and the desires to be (recognized as) ‘different’ and ‘improved’ I describe here.

illuminate and explain their ways of being and relating back in Cuba<sup>11</sup>. What we may call the ‘migration explanation’ and the difference-making drive intrinsic to it threatened in this sense to thematize and overdetermine interpretations of what my research participants did and thought, functioning as a ubiquitous call to act and think in response to it, and resulting in high levels of self-awareness and reflectivity on their part<sup>12</sup>. It was generative, in this sense, of an ‘ethical demand’ and what Zigon characterizes as ‘ethical moments’ (2007; 2018), referring to moments in peoples’ lives that ‘are more “problematic” than others and need to be “worked out” in more explicit ways than does most everyday life’ (2018: 147). For Zigon (2007:138), ‘[t]he ethical subject’ is one that, as a result of what he calls a ‘moral breakdown’, ‘no longer dwells in the comfort of the familiar, unreflective being-in-the-world, but rather stands uncomfortably and uncannily *in* the situation-at-hand.’ Ethics is then fundamentally geared at moving ‘back *into* the world’, and ‘once again dwell in the unreflective comfort of the familiar’ (ibid.), attuning ‘once again with others in the world between us’ (2021: 390). The problem for my interlocutors was that, much as for the ‘homecomer’ described by Alfred Schütz (1945), such familiarity and relational attunement with others could become hard to reach. More often than not, it seemed to me, they were instead left in a state of dis-attunement and estrangement from the situations in which they were participating.

The status and value of ethical moments of reflectivity are issues of contention in current debates on ethics and morality in anthropology (see Mattingly & Throop 2018 for an overview), and have seen James Laidlaw countering Zigon’s stance that the aim of ethics is to cultivate ‘existential comfort’ (Laidlaw 2014: 124-28). For the Jains studied by Laidlaw in India, ‘the normal, routine, everyday way of being a lay Jain’ (2014: 127) is to be ‘reflectively, questioningly, and uncomfortably conscious that one is not living’ comfortably in one’s world, ‘a sign of moral maturity’ being the cultivation of a ‘serious sense of inadequacy’ (2014: 128). The situations in which my returnee research participants found themselves in their day-to-day relations with fellow Cubans appear to be illustrative of a life similarly permeated by particularly

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<sup>11</sup> Migration scholars have drawn attention to the stickiness of the migrant identification (see Hage 2005), a striking parallel being here Heike Drotbhom’s research with Cape Verdean deportees, and the way they could be constantly reminded of their migrant roles and still face ‘the pressure of migration-related expectations’ (2015: 556).

<sup>12</sup> Anthropologists exploring the formation of an identity of ‘returnee’ have shown how it can stem from heightened reflexivity as to who they were and have become (Oxfeld & Long 2004: 14).

frequent and intense moments of ethical questioning and reflective distancing. The forms of dwelling they were pushed to inhabit, as somewhat ‘different’ from other Cubans who had not migrated, were paradoxically characterized, we may argue, by a form of un-dwelling and dis-attunement. If a sense of inadequacy has been shown to be routine and normal, in certain ethnographic contexts (Laidlaw 2014), and a source of discomfort to be resolved by working towards moving back into the world, in others (Zigon 2007), the situations of return explored here suggest that the status, direction, and value of reflective questioning can also remain unresolvable and hard to unambiguously ascertain. A potential source of valuable distinction, my interlocutors’ uncanny difference, distancing, and originality could simultaneously contain the seeds of estrangement, alienation, and exclusion.

An expression of the latter was Walt’s dismal assertion that ‘migration is a bad thing’ (*é una cosa bruta*) which he came up with late one night as we were roaming the streets of Havana looking for something to eat after a party. A bit drunk and entering a sort of confessional mode, as if wanting to let something heavy out, he told me that he was, all things considered, *un comemierda*, a Cuban expression (literally ‘shit-eater’) commonly used to evoke a foolish person or an asshole. I felt bad for Walt, whose eyes began to well with tears. I took his words to mean that he felt he was a mess – that his life was a mess – and that migration was to blame. He was pointing to the challenge of living in a world that treated, valued, and compelled him to be somewhat different, an original and weird character. The tragic irony in all this - when compared, for instance, to the range of situations in which migrants are made to feel different in the new settings they emigrate to - was that this was the world he was supposed to be calling ‘home’, the world to which he allegedly ‘belonged’ and ought to feel attuned to. A way of dealing with such disjuncture, and Walt regularly did this, could be to minimize the significance of migration as a difference-maker, and try to level the contrast between life ‘here’ and ‘there’.

### Levelling difference, externalizing responsibility, and obstinate inequalities

Reflecting on how anti-drug war agonists criticize the global war on drugs, Zigon tells us that a great deal of their efforts went into shattering the ‘fantasy world’ of what they called the drug war ‘*culture*, or *ideology*, or *mind-set*’ (2019: 52), a fantasy world that had the very concrete effect of ‘setting the range of possibilities’ in which people could live (2019:53). The situation of

the war on drugs is markedly different from the one of return I am exploring here. What is not so, however, and what makes Zigon's reflections good to think with in my case, is the way the fantasy of migration as a dominant 'horizon of expectation' (Graw & Schielke 2012) also conditioned the lives of my returnee interlocutors, including their occasional efforts 'to disrupt – or initiate a breakdown – of the “mind-sets” of those who inhabit and perpetuate the “fantasy world”' (Zigon 2019:56).

Let me provide some concrete examples of such 'disruptive politics' (Zigon 2019), intended to shatter what we may call migration's 'fantasy world'. Walt's ironic allusions to 'the American dream' and his assertion that migration was ultimately 'a bad thing', 'finishing a person off' and messing up people like him. The insistence of Lola and Roby – a Cuban woman and her Spanish husband, who had come to live in Cuba from Spain and whose story I lack space to detail here – that Cubans had no clue of what life in Spain was all about. They criticized the way so many so blindly put all their hopes, and were ready to sacrifice all they had, just to be able to make it to Spain, only to find out, too late, that what awaited them was strenuous or demeaning labor – work that would barely enable you to survive, let alone save some money for Cuba. Or we can think of George, when, intent on draining the clogged sewage installation of his tourist rental house and at the risk of spilling human waste all over, he made the tragi-comic and self-mocking assessment that, in the end, not much had changed with his move from France to Cuba. Over there he had been exploited and served French people, while back in Cuba he continued to be exploited and serve French tourists, 'cleaning up their shit'<sup>13</sup>. Equally disruptive of prevailing fantasies of migration was Ozmin's portrayal of Japan as 'hell on earth'. In the wake of their criticisms, Walt, Lola and Ruby, George, and Ozmin were tearing apart their Cuban interlocutors' views of migration as the main avenue for a better future. No wonder, we may argue, that their narratives encountered resistance or led to the conclusion that it was they themselves who had failed, as Isaac adamantly retorted to Ozmin. Such an 'individualization of failure' (cf. Hernández-Carretero 2016; Kleist 2016) could help keep the migration dream alive by suggesting that, in their place, one would certainly fare better.

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<sup>13</sup> Striking is the parallel with the assessment of one of Vigh's interlocutors, a young man from Bissau describing his new life in Lisbon: '*Memo merda, utro continenti*, "same shit, different continent"' (2009: 104).

Another important way to temper expectations of a ‘successful’ return was for returnees to downplay the measure of ‘choice’, ‘agency’, and ‘freedom’ they had in Cuba to realize and express the gains of their migration. Such narratives worked to distribute or altogether externalize ‘responsibility’ (Laidlaw 2014)<sup>14</sup> for the returnee’s relatively unremarkable, not-so-different conditions in which they could be judged to find themselves back home. Responsibility for the lack of a singular success story could thus be attributed not to a supposedly ‘failed’ migration but to the oppressive and dysfunctional structural conditions of life in Cuba. Such a context and its ongoing shortcomings were mobilized to explain why the returnees’ potential was not (yet) realized. This also became a way to tap into well-established narrative repertoires highlighting the ever-present *lucha* (struggle) to get by in Cuba, seeking the understanding and complicity of Cubans who had not migrated but could empathize with the hardships of making a living in such adverse circumstances. In this context, scarcity, lack of opportunities, and provisioning obstacles were said to make life tough for everyone – *no es facil* (‘it ain’t easy’) as went the closing refrain of so many conversations in Cuba - and even money was often not enough to *resolver* (resolve), meaning to find what was needed (Wainreb 2009). Drawing on a repertoire of critique and irony that is well documented in Cuba (see Tanuma 2007; Weinreb 2009), returnees could thus seek to (re)attune to and (re)establish ‘cultural intimacy’ (Herzfeld 2004) with their non-migrant interlocutors’ lives, showing the kind of ‘creative irreverence’ and ‘familiarity with the bases of power’ that, as shown by Michael Herzfeld, can help ‘provide insiders with their assurance of common sociality’ (2004: 3).

The local idiom of *la lucha* may be read as a peculiarly Cuban form of what Hage (2009) sees as a ‘timeless and universal ... celebration of the human spirit to endure’ (2009: 102), visible in modes of confronting crises that emphasize ‘one’s capacity to stick it out’ (2009: 97). Hage draws attention to instances ‘whereby “stuckedness in crisis” is transformed into an endurance test’ (ibid.), prompting a certain ‘sense of community among those who “wait out” the crisis’

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<sup>14</sup> In his compelling critique of Actor-Network Theory’s and practice theory’s assumptions on ‘agency’, James Laidlaw (2014) shows the interest of paying closer attention to how matters of blame and responsibility are resolved in order to address ‘the question of what are and are not, and in what sense and measure, “our” actions’ (197). Matters of blame and responsibility are then an aspect of ‘the relational processes whereby stretches, phases, or stages of people’s ongoing conduct are interpreted as acts for which distinct agents (of varying shape and size) are accountable’ (2014: 197). In the process considered here, it was the Cuban authorities, often objectified and externalized via the vague term *ellos* (‘them’), that were assigned responsibility for trapping and truncating the returnees’ potential.



(2009: 101). This is also where resentments may be experienced in a ‘communal sense’ (ibid.), and Hage tellingly takes the example of ‘the migrant who is achieving mobility’ and causes irritation by ‘standing out as different from the “community”’, ‘exhibiting an unwillingness to be part of the community of the stuck’ (ibid.). In dialogue with Hage, we may better sense the predicament in which my returnee interlocutors could find themselves, called upon to stand out and ‘make a difference’ as (ex)migrants, but potentially resented for not ‘waiting out the crisis’ like ‘everybody else’.

George liked to ironize about the incongruities of everyday life in Cuba and the government’s inaptitude at letting people ‘grow’, and was fond of the *lucha* metaphor to describe his everyday struggles to get by. Cases could be multiplied here. The idea I want to evoke is that by externalizing responsibility and diminishing the measure of their autonomy and agentic capacity to affect their lives and living conditions, returnees were also lowering the pressure on them to make and show a difference, re-embedding themselves in a more levelled socio-economic realm in which everybody had to live and make do within very limited possibilities. Moving beyond the assessment of material conditions, George went so far as to say that, in Cuba, one was simply not allowed to *pensar diferente* (‘think differently’), and so there was ultimately no point in thinking differently. ‘I could do much more’, was the gist of his reasoning, but the country we all live in forces me to live a pared-down, less ambitious life, and it is better to live this way to avoid too much frustration. In his day to day, George seemed to find satisfaction in simple routines, such as going fishing in the little pond near his house, or playing dominoes with his uncle, or – a high moment in his day, he told me – going to pick up his daughter from school with his electric scooter. Interestingly, and countering the prefigurations of economic success and business genius he so often liked to brag about, he once confided to me that he was simply not made for *negocios* (business), and was more than happy to let his wife take care of their tourism trade<sup>15</sup>.

By shattering the ‘fantasy world’ of migration and the pressing expectations and demands it engendered, people like Walt, George, Ozmin, Lily, and Lola and Roby were reclaiming the possibility of being seen and treated as other than (ex)migrants. Spending time with them, there

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<sup>15</sup> George’s incidental praises of a ‘simple life’ find echoes in the aspects of the lives of the Egyptian men Schielke worked with, whose ‘loops of migration’ motivate ‘to strive for an uneventful, static life of successful stability in their home villages’ (Lems & Tošić 2019: 14, commenting on Schielke 2019).

were moments in which I sensed a strong urge to just ‘get on with things’, an exhaustion with the need to make or to show a migration-related difference. We may argue that my research participants were trying to bring about possibilities to be and ‘let-be’, much along the lines of the ‘disclosive freedom’ theorized by Zigon (2019). It could be as ‘ordinary’ Cubans engaged in their ever-present *lucha*, ‘waiting out the crisis’ (Hage 2009) just like ‘everybody else’. Or it could be as ‘different’ but on terms and ways of their making, breaking the bounds of the normative expectations and projective thematizations (Zigon 2021) associated with migration. But my interlocutors’ attempts to carve out alternative spaces of value, self-fashioning, and open-ended potentiality for being otherwise could be resented as arrogant and selfish, read as exclusionary assertions of superiority, or as illustrating a lack of sensitivity and loyalty towards the socio-economic concerns, dependencies, and predicaments of the people one had left behind when migrating - what Paolo Gaibazzi (2019) calls an unwillingness to ‘move-with-them’. The demands of the situations of return in which my interlocutors found themselves were eminently relational, but the forms of ‘care’ and ‘concern’ called forth could hardly be described as forming an open-ended ‘clearing’ and ‘site of potentiality’ (Zigon 2021), and had to respond instead to more prescriptive and normative notions of community, interdependency, and belonging.

This is not surprising when recognizing Cuba as a place where migration means so much and where so much is expected from it. A place where, additionally, the preoccupations with issues of national community and self-identification, loyalty and allegiance, and the function of migration in communal politics and economics have been longstanding, not only in the field of governance and public discourse, but also among intellectuals and more particularly anthropologists. Illustrious Cuban anthropologist Fernando Ortiz devoted significant effort to characterize the distinctive quality, condition, and way of being of ‘the Cuban’, or what he called ‘Cubanidad’ (Ortiz 2014), a ‘relationship of belonging to Cuba’ (2014:461), which in its ‘fullness’ ought to include a ‘conscious and ethical self-identification with the Cuban condition’ (2014: 460). Matters of national cohesion and self-identity continued to preoccupy Cuba’s revolutionary government and gained renewed salience in the 1990s (see Bolivar et al. 1995; Hernandez-Reguant 2008), prompting a shift from a political to a more cultural form of nationalism that was more apt at including the Cuban diaspora in the cultivation of a common national sentiment. Some of the forms, possibilities, and challenges of such inclusion, in the case of returnees, have been addressed in this article. They suggest that in the Cuban *ajiaco* - the

typical stew mixing several elements that Ortiz (2014) used as metaphor to describe the processual, historical formation of Cuba and Cubanness, featuring number of migratory flows among its constituents (Gonçalves 2014; Palmié 2021) - Cuban migrants returning from abroad still remain a rather 'raw' and ambivalent ingredient, whose cooking into a national 'pot' of belonging is fraught with potential estrangement and recalcitrant separation, and conditioned by their responses to migration's demands.

The 'community' my interlocutors were called to inhabit and duly contribute to was in this sense markedly different from the community 'of whoever arrives' as explored by Zigon (2019: 75-99). Returnees were seldom given the latitude for 'being their singularity' and deploying the open-ended forms of 'attuned care' that Zigon (2019, 2021) convincingly illustrates. While care and concern were certainly among the relational expectations weighing on them, their allocation and the forms they ought to take were frequently the object of normative and forceful, if contentious, distributive claims and demands (Wig 2020). Satisfactory responses to such claims could then condition the very possibility of finding, and the feeling of, a 'home' to which one's return would be welcome (see Ferguson 2015: 103). The 'moral language' activated by those receiving the returnees, could in this sense be fruitfully analysed as being more akin to one of 'obligations and dependencies' (Englund 2008: 45), of 'ownership and rightful shares' (Ferguson 2015: 116). This seemed justified, in the situations of return explored here, by the extreme inequalities perceived between socio-economic conditions and possibilities in Cuba and *afuera* (abroad), and the related sense of loyalty that migrants were called to feel towards 'their own' (*los mios* being a frequent expression to refer to one's intimates) be these kin, partners, friends, or other (would-be) dependants.

The form of belonging afforded to returnees, to pursue the productive contrast with the situations analysed by Zigon, did in this sense not so much emphasize the possibility to 'dwell in openness' (2019:96), but acquired instead a more conditional and possessive connotation, one prescribing due response to dependencies such as those that Walt criticized in our first encounter, further amplified by the privilege of having been a migrant. We can welcome and embrace you back, would be the rationale, but you must make good by the promise of migration. Put differently, and taking a more normative stance, we may argue that if projective thematization and overdetermination of the '(returned) migrant' was at stake, and despite the aversion we may harbor towards such reductionism, its totalizing closure, and disciplining effect, there were

understandable concerns for such identification to be constantly foregrounded, reasons tied to a widespread desire to even inequalities between *aquí* (here) and *allá* (there), and to do so via the mediation of a ‘proper’, ‘successful’ migration.

In the lives of my returnee interlocutors, making a difference and responding to migration may be viewed as constituting a sort of Sisyphean predicament, an ongoing, hard to resolve, and always pending struggle, made up of exhausting economic and ethical demands, and one that my research endeavour was perhaps complicit in constantly reviving. Wanting to account for such experiences in a way that also recognizes how they are always already anchored in specific socio-economic conditions, I was led to deploy and expand on a range of approaches to ethics and morality – notably those of Zigon, Laidlaw, and Englund and Ferguson – that build on different epistemological traditions and are more commonly contrasted with one another. As I worked through my interlocutors’ responses, however, I felt these resisted being illuminated by one of these approaches only. Instead, they pointed both to their complementary analytical pertinence, as well as to their limits for single-handedly encompassing and grasping the realities at stake. This is what I gained, I believe, by letting the pressure ‘to make a difference’ – in all its polysemy and the diverse manifestations I chronicle in this article - and the responses it engendered, work as my guiding thread. This is what enabled me to stay attuned to situations of return in Cuba that saw economic and ethical demands weight together and in tension, informed as they were by conspicuous idioms of belonging, difference, and inequality between ‘home’ and ‘abroad’, ‘here’ and ‘there’, and by similarly resilient (if disputed and continuously worked over) expectations regarding migration and its possibilities. Rather than having to arbitrate, in the light of my findings, which of these approaches to ethics and morality may be sounder, more insightful, or have conclusive epistemological primacy, let my final emphasis be on the risks of overly dissociating such analytics from the peculiar ethnographic situations that inform and inspire them in the first place. Following the clues of my ethnographic material, they may work best as partial lenses that jointly illuminate the multi-aspectual demands our research participants are struggling to respond to, and the resulting predicaments they are calling on us to understand.

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### Ethics statement

The research on which the manuscript is based fully adheres to the principles of ethical treatment, integrity, and respect for all research participants, which included obtaining their informed consent for field research, data collection, data storage, and data publishing. Ethics Reviews - the latest one in July 2023 - carried out by the founders of the research, the European Research Council (ERC), periodically certified the research compliance with such ethical standards, protocols and procedures. The research was approved both by ERC Ethics Officers and by at the Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies Ethics Committee (<https://www.graduateinstitute.ch/research-support/research-ethics>).

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The author declares no competing interest.

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author, and sponsoring agencies are not responsible for any use that may be made of the information presented here.

### Availability of data and materials

The article is based on ethnographic fieldwork data consisting of field notes and interview material. The author adheres to principles of ethical treatment, integrity, and respect for all research collaborators that consented to participate in the research, and has adopted strict anonymization procedures. All the data gathered and employed for the research are stored on secured shared drives at Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies. The presence of sensitive information that may lead to the research participants' identification, despite anonymization, explains why research data and materials are not available for sharing. The author can be contacted privately for further information that may aid the reader's interpretation of the data presented and analyzed in article.

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