Reckoning with comparison in the quest for a "better life": Insights from Cuban and Ecuadorian migration

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Abstract

Looking at the trajectories, experiences, and aspirations of Cuban and Ecuadorian migrants living in Spain or who returned to their homeland following the 2008 economic crisis, this article focuses on the quandaries of comparison involved in the appraisal of different places, values, and visions of a "better life". Our study leads us to move beyond comparison as a method and heuristic commonly based on the juxtaposition of community-based case studies, toward an analysis of how migrants with different backgrounds and trajectories themselves deploy comparison, which helps shed new light on the motives, stakes, and effects of their endeavors. The approach we propose contributes to advancing our understanding of how migrants cope with the dominant comparative scripts and hierarchies that migration activates, notably by either conforming, subverting, or unravelling them. It also draws attention to comparison's entanglements with issues of choice, belonging, and its experiential and emotional effects, including the suffering it may elicit. A multi-dimensional exploration of the different ways in which comparison plays out among migrant populations opens promising research avenues to understand the ways it informs transnational living and shapes daily experiences and pursuits of a "better life", while also raising ethical and epistemological questions for comparative field research on migration.

Introduction: migration, the pursuit of a "better life", and comparison

That transnational journeys are undertaken in pursuit of a "better life" seems undisputed across otherwise diverse studies of migration (see Benson and O'Reilly 2009; Boccagni 2017; Della Puppa and King 2019). Chasing imaginaries of "greener pastures" (Salazar (2014:124) and despite vast differences in migration trajectories, directions, projects, and the distribution of possible mobilities due to structural and material inequalities, scholars agree that people from all walks of life, geographies, and social classes are moving in search of "more meaningful lives" (ibid:125). Whereas many people locate such meaning "elsewhere", at times migration is undertaken with the intention of returning "home" and re/building a "better life" there (Åkesson, Carling, and Drotbohm 2012; Graw and Schielke 2012). Whether designated as "love" (Riaño 2015), "lifestyle" (Benson and O'Reilly 2009), or economic (Takenaka and Pren 2010) – almost irrespective of how it is categorized – migration has come to be synonymous with the belief that "leaving would be better than staying" (Carling and Collins 2018:915). Part of the appeal of such depictions is no doubt their wide applicability to the diverse situations of people-on-the-move.

Reflected in the above analysis of migrants' pursuit of a "better life" and what kindles our interest for the purposes of this article is the stated yet often overlooked comparative dimension of migration aspirations, decision-making, and experiences. Our aim is to initiate a more explicit and systematic reflection on "comparison" in studies of migration, highlighting its manifold functions, values, and effects in a range of migratory situations.

The comparisons engendered in initial migrations and some onward journeys are typically animated by a known "here" and a lesser- or little-known "there", ideas about which are enlivened by friends' or family

members' descriptions, images in popular and social media, government campaigns encouraging migration, and advertisements by travel agencies, all part of the flows that characterize contemporary globalization (Appadurai 1996). In the cases of circular or return journeys, people with mobility experience have their own lived experiences to draw upon which, in turn, contribute to informing their notions of precisely where a subjectively better life might be located and their considerations about future migrations. Their imaginaries are thus modified through the actual migratory experience (Schielke 2020:94).

It is principally these comparisons with which we are concerned in this article: namely, those generated by having lived in multiple places, tied to migrants' transnational subjectivities and experiences. In Guarnizo's (1997) classic exploration of transnational living between Puerto Rico and the continental United States, he articulates the "Janus-effect of transnational migration" to explain how people with mobility experience borrow and apply the subjective "standard" from the society they have just left to evaluate the society in which they have arrived (310). Guarnizo (1997:310) refers to this as "translocal inertia", or what he describes as migrants' "dual visage regardless of the shores they are on". Hage (2021) has recently suggested that migration engenders a "permanent state of comparative existence" (50) which comes to envelop not only diasporic groups living far from their homelands but also takes hold of those who remain behind. His work highlights that the value-laden comparison of objects, experiences, and cultures is not a matter of equal exchange. Instead, transnational migrants more often find themselves in relationships of unequal status with their destination country and its citizenry. After all, transnational migration is not mere "travel": it is distinguished from other forms international mobility (e.g. tourism) by the frequently disadvantaged status of the migrant on the world stage due to globalized hierarchies that predetermine the relative value of one's passport, class, race, culture, and language, for example. The comparative exchange that migration engenders, then, although reciprocal, is inherently unequal. It is not "this for that" or "here for there". Rather, and like migration itself, it is imbued with power relations.

Beyond studies of migration, interest in the subject of comparison has recently been revived in the social sciences, particularly in anthropology (see van der Veer 2016; Meyer 2017; Candea 2019a; Trémon 2019; Schnegg and Lowe 2020; Bayart 2022; Pelkmans and Walker 2023). Comparison as a scientific method has been essential in grounding and legitimizing the social sciences and their universalist pretension (see Foucault 1966; Holý 1987; Fox and Gingrich 2002; Bayart 2022; Pelkmans 2023). As studies of migration clearly reveal, comparison is not limited to the methods and epistemologies of social scientists. More fundamentally, comparison is a human cognitive ability – "humans always compare, whether we intend to or not" (Fox and Gingrich 2002: 6; see also Pelkmans 2023) – and comprises "a range of epistemic techniques", such as "generalizing, contrasting, juxtaposing, ranking, translating" (Pelkmans 2023:2). While debates on comparison as a method and heuristic have been "inherent to the *episteme* of social sciences" (Bayart 2022:23, after Durkheim 1895) for over a century, there are still important gaps in knowledge of how "ordinary people" compare (Meyer 2017; Pelkmans and Walker 2023). In dialogue with broader reflections on comparison and the value regimes it activates in social life, we contend that migration is a particularly fruitful research field to advance reflections on the stakes and effects of the

comparative endeavor. This will contribute not only to our understanding of how comparison informs and justifies migration choices and decisions, but also how it experientially affects the lives of those who move.

In the following sections, we start by contextualizing our study and its methods. After considering the pervasive character of comparison, we then focus on how prevailing expectations of migration challenge our interlocutors to conform, subvert, and unravel dominant comparative scripts and hierarchies. We subsequently address comparison's entanglements with issues of belonging and its more experiential effects, including the existential fractures and the suffering it may elicit. This multi-dimensional exploration of how comparison plays out in migration is not meant to be exhaustive, but aims to open new research avenues to inspire future work on how comparison functions and becomes entangled in the transnational lives of people on the move, shaping, constraining, and transforming their pursuit of a "better life".

Contextualizing the study of Ecuadorian and Cuban migration to/from Spain

Our contribution stems from a multi-sited, collaborative, and empirically grounded research project on the imaginaries and experiences of "return" of Ecuadorian and Cuban men and women who migrated to Spain, were dissatisfied with their lives there, and envisaged or carried out the project of going back to their countries of origin. Since the start of our study in February 2018, we have collectively undertaken a total of twenty-seven months of field research, including recruitment of over ninety research participants, in different towns and cities of Spain (Valerio, Jérémie and Elise), Ecuador (Jérémie), and Cuba (Valerio and Elise). Each of us was able to establish close ties with participants and spend time with them repeatedly over the last five years, keeping contact also via social media. As preconized by ethnographic methods deployed in qualitative social science research, and more particularly in anthropology, we thus became embedded in their social lives, notably via participant observation and interviews, gathering field notes and recorded testimonies and focusing on the experiences and aspirations linked to their transnational migratory trajectories.

Between 2000 and 2009, the foreign-born population in Spain rose from 1.5 million to 6 million, making it second only to the United States in terms of migrant arrivals (Arango 2013). Latin Americans contributed in great measure to such increase, and in 2008, they represented almost 40% of the foreign-born population residing in Spain (Ballesteros et al. 2009). In the years that followed the 2008 global economic crisis and the related downturn of the Spanish economy, Spain's migratory balance shifted dramatically – a shift to which returns to people's country of origin contributed significantly (Rosas and Gay 2015). These return journeys have been attributed to the worsening economic conditions for migrants, who suffered disproportionately during Spain's crisis: whereas unemployment across Spain jumped from 11–26% between 2008 and 2013, for example, among immigrants it reached 36.5% (Valero-Matas et al. 2014).

In the years leading up to the crisis, the spectacular growth of Ecuadorian migration to Spain – from 4000 registered Ecuadorians in 1997 to almost 500,000 in 2005 (Colectivo Ioé 2007), led scholars to view it as one of the most surprising migratory phenomena of the early twenty-first century which was prompted neither by war nor natural disasters (Herrera 2008). In 2008, Ecuadorians were still the largest Latin American collective in Spain, constituting almost 20% of the total Latin American population (Ballesteros et al. 2008). From this date onwards, however, the number of Ecuadorians living in Spain declined, and it is among Ecuadorians that the greatest rate of return has been recorded amongst migrants since the onset of the economic downturn (Rosas and Gay 2015).

By contrast to the Ecuadorian case, Cubans in Spain number far fewer (UN, DESA, 2015). Nevertheless, between 1990 and 2009, the Cuban population in Spain also increased sharply from 2,637 to more than 100,000 (Garcia-Moreno 2011:192). By the mid-2000s, and not unlike the Ecuadorian case a few years earlier, Spain had become the most important destination for Cubans seeking to "better" their lives (Martin 2008). In contrast to the Ecuadorian case, there were, at this time, far fewer reports of Cuban migrants considering a potential return to Cuba (but see Aja Díaz et al. 2017). And yet, Valerio's field research in Spain among Cubans – four months since 2012 – suggested that the question of return was steadily gaining traction, becoming a topic of heated debate among some of those suffering the consequences of the economic crisis in which comparison played a salient role (Simoni 2016).

Taken together, these two cases initially framed the "comparative" dimension of our multi-sited research in Spain, Ecuador, and Cuba, as they appeared ideally situated to advance understandings of what, precisely, people were pursuing in their journeys towards "better lives" – be these in whichever of these three locales or some other place. Somewhat ironically in hindsight, we may argue that our comparative design grew partly as the result of the "changing funding landscape – at least in Europe" that has seen social scientists increasingly obtaining "large grants that involve the collaboration of multiple scholars in collaborative projects" (Candea 2019b:179). According to Candea such "institutional context gives new urgency to the long-standing agenda of rethinking the classic model of lone work in anthropology", and in the process, provides new opportunities to reflect on the comparative endeavor (ibid.). Our findings progressively led us to move beyond the comparison of national migrant "groups", "societies", "cultures", or "case studies" (cf. Glick Schiller, Çağlar and Guldbrandsen 2006) – as our initial research design invited to – towards an appreciation of how different entanglements of comparison and the pursuit of a "better life" informed and affected our interlocutors' migratory choices, trajectories, and experiences across different field sites. Such entanglements are at the centre of our article's contribution, shifting the focus from the scholarly comparative endeavor, to that – not entirely unrelated, as we shall argue – of our research participants.

The Pervasiveness of Comparison

It would be difficult for us to overstate the importance of comparison to our interlocutors' ways of creating meaning, value, and order in their social worlds. Across all three field sites, and central to our project's line of enquiry, comparisons emerged independently, frequently, and without any prompting by

the field researcher, but also in response to invitations we issued for them to juxtapose, contrast, or reflect upon the differences between their lives "here" versus "there". At first glance, far from revealing any fixed order, stable hierarchy, or static value system, the only generalization that can be made from such comparisons is their ubiquity. Cubans and Ecuadorians, both those living in Spain as well as those who had returned to their "homelands", drew comparisons between peoples, places, and cultures; between cities, societies, living standards, and ways of life. They compared public transportation and education systems; political regimes, climates, and food; men, women, fidelity, and friendships, as well as personal liberties, freedoms, and the opportunities they perceived as being available to them in each place.

Indeed, comparisons seemed to animate, inform, and justify our interlocutors' perspectives on just about everything, including but certainly not limited to where a "better life" may be found and, likewise, their decisions about where to move, and whether to stay, go, or return. Casual comparisons between European countries and the lifestyles they afforded were commonplace. "Germany is better," Elise was told by a Cuban woman in Tarragona (Spain); or, to the contrary, "It's so much better here than in Germany." As Yolanda[1], a Cuban dancer in her mid-forties who had lived in Spain for more than twenty years, explained to Elise, "I was fine in Cuba. Happy." When she was fifteen, she fell in love with salsa cabaret. Shortly after, she began to travel internationally with her dance troupe. "Only once I left did I realize that Cuba is shit, that we don't have anything," she recalled. When asked where she imagined now that one might live better, she paused for a moment, and then answered decisively: "Norway".

Coincidentally, Norway was also Jacob's preferred destination. A Cuban man in his forties, Jacob lives in Viñales, a town in Cuba's westernmost province, and Valerio has been engaging regularly with him for over fifteen years. Since their first encounter, year after year and every time they met in Cuba, Jacob spoke of Norway and of the love of his life, Anne, a Norwegian woman he had very nearly married. Anne had traveled repeatedly to Cuba and Jacob visited her briefly in Norway in 2007. Although their relationship did not last, Jacob's obsession with Norway continued and included listening to Norwegian rock music or sporting Norwegian clothing brands. The Nordic country served as a constant benchmark by which Jacob passed judgment on comparatively "underdeveloped" Cuba.

Modesto, an Ecuadorian man in his forties, lived for more than ten years in Spain. His goal was always to come back to his homeland, which he did in 2017. In an interview with Jérémie, he qualified Spain as an "underdeveloped" country, marred by corruption, politicians' lies and dishonest people, much like Ecuador in his view. While Modesto saw nothing to gain from living in Spain and had no plan to return there, he would have loved to live and work in the Netherlands, which he saw as "developed" and inhabited by honest people.

Over time, quotidian comparisons were thus revealed as central to our interlocutors' way of being in, moving through and making sense of the world – ontologically, figuratively, and geographically speaking (see Pelkmans 2023).

Coping with dominant comparative scripts: between conformity and subversion

As Schielke (2020) shows, "imagination", particularly of places, is central to projects and experiences of migration (see also e.g. Salazar 2014). Powerful narratives leading people to "collectively envision the world and their own positionalities and mobilities within it (Morley, 2000)" (Salazar 2011:577) fuel such imagination. Such narratives often activate a dominant ideology of "development"/"progress" (see e.g. Pajo 2008; Raffaetà and Duff 2015) that gives prominence and value to the economic domain and results in ratings and rankings of places according to a shared criteria, the places themselves becoming metonymies of what is valued. These processes tend to display a reductive understanding of places – emerging as bounded entities, most often countries (see Malkki 1992; Pajo 2008; Wendland 2012; Merry 2016) – and to (re)produce national and cultural stereotypes. They allow social actors, however, to construct a "geographic imagination" (Gregory 1994), as imaginaries of a "better life" come to be associated with a given region, country, and social, cultural, economic, and political context.

In Spain, Elise made a habit of asking new Ecuadorian and Cuban research participants if they ever considered going back to live in their home countries. Much to her surprise, her questions were consistently met with a single, uniform response, animated in distinct ways. As she braided Elise's hair in the living room of her apartment, Lucinda, a Cuban woman in her twenties who had been in Spain for just two years, remarked, "There's nothing in Cuba. There is only tremendous hunger and tremendous need. Nothing else. I would never want to go back – what for?" Lucinda's friend Yusy, whom she knew from Cuba, had been listening from the opposite couch. She scoffed. "Go back to Cuba? What for? To go hungry again?"

Elise first met Nicolás, who had arrived in Spain two years earlier from Havana, at the apartment he shares with his wife Bianca and her son in Tarragona. Elise and Bianca were in the middle of breakfast on Bianca's terrace overlooking the Mediterranean, when Nicolás arrived home from a morning of construction work. After introductions, Elise tried to include him in their conversation, explaining that she and his wife were just discussing where one lives better: in Spain or in Cuba. Without skipping a beat, Nicolás exclaimed "In Cuba!". From the other side of her flat, Bianca erupted in protest. "Noooo," she scolded. "Stop messing around! This is for a project she's doing." Elise asked if Nicolás was joking and he replied, "Of course, I'm kidding! Life is better here, obviously." For the next half hour, Nicolás would explain the "obvious", paradoxically recounting how well he had lived in Cuba, with his car, and his air conditioning. What he took issue with was the political system there. If he were to go back now, he explained, it would only be to visit. Five days should be enough. And it would be expensive – he would have to bring gifts and be ready to spend.

Nicolás's explanation signals both the oppression he felt in Cuba, for which he mostly blamed government corruption, but also an unmistakable fondness for his homeland. His initial tongue-in-cheek response, followed by his detailed elaboration of why he preferred life in Spain, alludes to an ambivalence that, like a red thread, ran through numerous otherwise cursory conversations each of us had over the course of our fieldwork. Moreover, in highlighting how well he lived, with access to comforts not every Cuban enjoyed, Nicolás distinguished himself from so-called "economic migrants" and portrayed his journey as an act of *agency* and *choice*, something his comparisons made plain.

Time and time again, Elise's line of questioning was met in a similar way to that of Nicolás: with incredulity, sarcasm, and guffaws. People consistently reacted as though the very idea that there was a comparison to be made was laughable. But while interlocutors across our field sites served up quick, perfunctory evaluations of global geography, contrasting the living standards of nation-states and animating their assessments with personal anecdotes, their ease concealed more nuanced, profound, and affective dimensions of comparison. If Elise's interlocutors ultimately seemed to conform to a dominant comparative script, our next two examples shed light on efforts to subvert and disrupt prevailing expectations of migration and where a "better life" may be found.

Ozmin was a Cuban man in his forties who had lived for over a decade in Japan. As he roamed the streets of Old Havana with no apparent purpose, his peers, who knew him well before his first marriage with a Japanese woman, gossiped about his trajectory. What was Ozmin doing back in Cuba? Had he returned with some business plan in mind? No, argued most of Valerio's interlocutors. Late one evening, sharing some rum in a park in Old Havana, Yaniel, who was familiar with Ozmin's story, openly challenged him, arguing that he had simply wasted a once in a lifetime opportunity to live abroad and make something good – notably, money – out of it. He hinted at the fact that, even if Ozmin would never admit it, he had most likely been deported.

Countering these accusations, Ozmin insisted on the hardships of life in Japan – not for him, he specified at one point, insisting on the fact that he had done well and had freely *chosen* to return to Cuba – but for any foreigner. Ozmin explained that foreigners in Japan – all the more so when they were neither Asian nor White, as was his case – suffered from systematic racism, the cold-heartedness of its inhabitants, the poverty of social relationships, loneliness, and, put simply, the lack of "a life" that could be called such. He used our surroundings to illustrate his point: there we were, hanging out in the street, at one in the morning, listening to music and sipping rum, with beautiful Cuban women passing by. "This is life", Ozmin exclaimed, becoming excited and trying to make others see his point. But for his audience that night, the bottom line was that his migration had produced nothing worthy of note.

Apart from aptly highlighting the "viral environment" of migration (Hage 2021:23), which envelops not only those with migration experience but also those who have never left their homelands, this ethnographic situation reveals the different criteria from which Ozmin and his peers drew to compare Japan and Cuba. These criteria belonged to different regimes of value and appealed to a different "higher principle", to build on Boltanski and Thévenot's (2006) formulation, or "meta-value", borrowing from

Lambek (2008) and Robbins (2012), making possible the commensuration, comparison and ranking of values, places, and people. On the one hand, Ozmin's peers prioritized the economic domain and, consequently, the overarching importance of economic success, reproducing the global geopolitical and economic order. Where, they seemed to wonder, was the material evidence of Ozmin's time abroad: a newly constructed house for instance, a universal symbol of one's migratory success (Graw and Schielke 2012)? In its absence, Ozmin's friends attempted to provoke an answer from him with the very same tropes of "failure", which loomed large over all returnees, and signaled his peers' continued allegiance to migration's promise of a "better life" (ibid).

Ozmin, on the other hand, like other returnees Valerio met in Cuba, was trying to subvert the geopolitical and economic hierarchy put forth by his peers' critique. Migration had led him to understand that aspects such as sociality, warmth, and "life itself" as he put it, were to be valued above all else, and must constitute the key principles according to which places are assessed and ranked. Ozmin was reproducing well established stereotypes about Japan and Cuba, but rather than consider economic development and success as the "meta-value" that encompassed others (Lambek 2008; Robbins 2012), he criticized his peers' exclusion of what was, really, most important in life. The social conditions of return seemed to call for this: an explanation of why he had returned, and a defense of his decision as a free, reasoned, and reasonable *choice*.

In line with Schielke's (2020) insight that imaginaries of migration are shaped by experiences of migration, Ozmin argued that what his experience had ultimately offered him was *perspective* – an empirically grounded and authoritative position from which to define the principle and values one ought to prioritize when comparing. He was pushing back against dominant comparative scripts of migration – with their taken for granted hierarchies and related drivers and expected results – proposing an alternative comparative reading and mode of evaluation.

A similar effort was made by Julio, a sixty-year-old Ecuadorian returnee, who had experienced a series of setbacks in Spain that pushed him to return in 2013. In Spain, he had lost his job, his flat, and his savings as a consequence of the 2008 crisis. Not only did he come back to Ecuador alone as he had separated from his wife, but upon his return, he did not find a job in his homeland. After joining a Catholic group, attending Mass and other activities, Julio began reassessing his priorities, moral values, and social relationships. He refocused on close relatives, like his parents, and on friends with similar spiritual concerns rather than material pleasures, like partying and drinking, which he told Jérémie had marked his life in Spain. In Quito, he lived in a small house and had set up a carpentry workshop where he worked alone, getting by with little money.

And yet, Julio told Jérémie that he was at peace. "I have just what I need". He claimed that his current life in Ecuador was better than the life he had had in Spain: "I realized that one lives better like this... with little resources", he said. "Here, with little money, I live peacefully, there with lots of money, I had troubles". Julio still assessed his experience in Spain as very good: "We thought we were in paradise. We ate, we

drank", he explained. However, he was now inverting the conventional hierarchy of places, prioritizing an alternative sphere of value than the one he prioritized when he first left for Spain.

Julio's example shows how "heterarchies", referring to "multiple hierarchies of worth or systems of evaluation" (Lamont 2012:202) may work in practice. For him, Spain and Ecuador were better (or worse) situated in a hierarchy depending on the criteria and the principle of equivalence made relevant (Spain was better, and worse, for some aspects, Ecuador for others). In his current stage of life, he prioritized a "simple life", for which Ecuador was a better place. His prioritization could also, however, be read as a retrospective justification of his return – much like Ozmin's peers contended in the Cuban example analyzed above – and of the fact that he had decided to stay in Ecuador despite not having met prevailing expectations on economic improvement via migration.

Unraveling comparison: levelling differences, enduring inequalities

As much in Ecuador as in Cuba, one way to address challenging situations of return that did not align with prevailing migration scripts was for returnees to minimize differences between the countries in which they had lived. Comparison was hereby resolved not by separating and hierarchizing places, people, and modes of being, but by emphasizing their similarities and potential convergences, 'flatten[ing] particularities and foreground[ing] generalities' (Pelkmans 2023:10).

One of Jérémie's key interlocutors, Agustín longed to go back to Spain. When he returned to Ecuador in 2013, his homeland was flourishing politically and economically, while Spain was still suffering the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis. What Agustín valued had previously found in Spain was unfolding before his eyes in a fascinating way in Ecuador. The Correa government was investing heavily in the public sector (particularly in healthcare, infrastructure such as roads, and education), thanks to the high price of oil and its "socialist" approach. With the regime change – which for Agustín meant passing to "capitalist" politics – and the drop in oil prices, the situation in Ecuador had degraded sharply. For Agustín, a "good" life could emerge in a context of economic opportunities and free access to public services – it was not a matter of specific countries – and everyone deserved to live in a society in which one could flourish. In his view, Ecuador had been taking the right path towards his ideal before changing course. Agustín was so convinced that in 2022, he left Ecuador for Palma de Mallorca, Spain. There, he was only able to work as a dishwasher in a restaurant, and he returned to his homeland only four months after. It was hard –because of his age, he clarified to Jérémie – and the salary was not worth staying in Spain.

While Agustín highlighted the potential convergences between conditions and opportunities in Ecuador and Spain, Jorge emphasized his positionality and global subalternity moving between Spain and Cuba. Now in his forties, Jorge returned from France to Viñales in 2014. When Valerio visited him one afternoon in 2019, he was following up on a complaint about a clogged toilet from the tourists to whom he rented rooms in his home. Although he was waiting for a friend to arrive with the right tools to help him with the task, he had already started draining the sewage installation. As he was doing this, at the risk of spilling

human waste all over, Jorge made the tragi-comic and self-mocking observation that, in the end, not much had changed with his move from France to Cuba. Over there in France, where he had lived for twenty years working mainly in construction, he had been exploited, toiling for French people. Back in Cuba, he continued to be exploited and serve French tourists, literally "cleaning up their shit". There was a certain fatalism to Jorge's assessment, which seemed to indicate that for people like him – indeed, for all Cubans perhaps – there was no easy way out of a broader condition of subalternity. His time in France thus served to reaffirm his lowly, precarious position in a global hierarchy which, now that he was back in Cuba, his migration had left unaltered.

At other moments, Jorge minimized the importance of material conditions and wealth for a happy life, not unlike in the case of Julio's return to Ecuador addressed earlier. "I don't need much [to live well]. My wife, my daughter, my peace of mind, that's what's important for me, and to be happy…". He and Valerio were sitting on his porch watching the sunset and Jorge called attention to their surroundings: the magnificent landscape, the freshly caught fish on the grill – a simple but genuine meal. No doubt he knew that, as a foreigner in Cuba, Valerio would second his assessment, which he unfailingly did. It is less likely he would have said the same had Valerio not been there. Valerio's role of the sympathetic audience that fostered and validated a certain value creation and "existential empowerment" (see Lucht 2019) contrasted starkly with the tepid, dismissive, or downright hostile reactions that Jorge sometimes received from family and peers in response to his assertion of having found meaning and value in a "simple life" at home.

Valerio's conversations with Jorge were helping disclose "the normalizing limits" of the expectations placed upon him as a returnee in Viñales, while at the same time participating "in the opening of new possibilities for thinking, saying, doing, or being" (Zigon 2019:15). What remains debatable is whether this was doing Jorge any good, especially once his reversal of dominant scripts and expectations threatened to further estrange and alienate him from local lifeworlds – worlds in which Jorge also desired to belong. What role did Valerio occupy in such terrain? Did he help to bring about alternative aspirations and optimistic openings, or to nourish further disaffection, dis-attunement, and frustration? It was not that people could not share in our interlocutors' nonconformist assessments of what was good about life in Cuba and Ecuador. Rather, their praises of such a life – their being satisfied with *just this* – raised the issue of what their migration had been for in the first place. Thus, their commentaries highlighted "the often tragic nature of migratory expectations" (Graw and Schielke 2012:20) – what Berlant (2011) calls "cruel optimism" – namely, that the high hopes generated by prospective migration are frequently met with "feelings of failure" (ibid.) when dashed or unrealized.

People like Ozmin, Jorge, and Julio were expected to aspire for more, notably in terms of economic prosperity, and to make their experiences abroad count for something. Placing value in joyful Cuban sociality or "life itself" for Ozmin, in the virtuous simplicity of a humble spiritual existence for Julio, or in peaceful family happiness in Jorge's case, could too easily be misinterpreted as a retrospective excuse. It could be seen as a disingenuous digression from the key "meta-value" of economic prosperity, mobilized by the returnees to make up for a failed migration from which other comparative advantages and results

were expected. It was also their inability to clearly fulfill such expectations and to insist on the importance and primacy of other values that strained their sense of belonging to a national community and project.

The challenges of belonging: lost in comparison?

Discussing anthropological comparison, Candea (2019a) notes that the comparative "unit" of analysis is always necessarily a fiction: just as one cannot freeze-frame a society, lifeworld, or group identity, neither can such units be taken as "stable" distinguishable wholes. In the context of migration, dual – not to mention, liminal – citizenship and time spent abroad complicate the clear-cut demarcation of national membership and belonging. Permeable and diffused borders and the people, goods, capital, and ideas that cross them expose the hollow binary that underlays hardline "us and them" rhetoric. The fostering of transnational relationships, whether romantic, social, or otherwise – getting to know "the other" – further blurs and challenges easy distinctions and exclusive affiliations with any one nation, culture, or way of being in the world. Even so, for some, it remains cut-and-dry, showing that the comparative endeavor, with the distinctions it draws between "here" and "there", "us" and "them", can become integral to determining where and to what degree we belong. Dancing salsa with a young Ecuadorian man in Madrid one evening in early 2020, Elise ventured to ask if he ever thought of returning to Ecuador. After answering definitively that, no, he did not think of going back, she responded optimistically, "So you feel at home [in Spain]." To this, he shook his head and clarified, "I will always be a visitor here."

Be it among Cuban migrants in Barcelona or returnees in Cuba, Valerio frequently heard similar references to the difficulty of "fitting in". Pondering whether he was French or Cuban – unsolicited by him – Yordanis concluded that his "soul" – *el alma* – had, by now, become French. A Cuban man in his early forties, he had been back in Viñales for about one year when he and Valerio first met, after having spent twenty years in France. "I am from France. You know how it is, identity: it's complex. You live there for twenty years and many things stick to you," he explained. Tempering this admission of "foreignness", Yordanis also said he could not avoid also being Cuban, but that he had lost the kind of cunningness – *la malice* (which he said in French) – that so characterized current social relations in Cuba, including the ways foreigners were squeezed for money in Viñales. Trying to comfort him, Valerio suggested that perhaps losing such malice was a good thing. After all, as a foreigner frequently on its receiving end, such malice hardly seems virtuous – but with a sarcastic smile Yordanis retorted that no, "it was terrible". For that is how things worked, and if you were no longer cunning, you were bound to be cheated and "eaten" by other Cubans, much like tourists were.

Yordanis's assessments of his life back in Viñales exemplified several of the elements that scholars of migration associate with the return experience, notably its more disappointing features. Among these, the way returnees may face material, practical, and social difficulties (Gmelch 1980; Stefansson 2004; Conway et al. 2012), or the jealousy and envy expressed by those who stayed behind (Gmelch 1980; Oxfeld and Long 2004:10). Research in other areas of the world shows how some returnees come to comparatively assess their non-migrant compatriots as "narrow and old-fashioned" (Oxfeld and Long 2004:10). Accordingly, they develop an identity of "returnee" that emerges from the perception of a

"cultural difference" (cf. Tsuda 2009) and heightened reflexivity about how they have changed (Oxfeld and Long 2004:14) – a reflexivity and perception informed, we might add, by comparison.

Yordanis's day-to-day encounters with people in Viñales often called for explicit reflection and recalibration of his belonging – his relative Cuban-ness or French-ness hanging in the balance. Yordanis felt people were taking advantage of his lost familiarity with local ways of doing business, becoming for instance the victim of frequent scams, such as in his latest purchase of two wooden doors for the house he was building, on which he had been badly overcharged. Faced with widespread misrecognition and lack of interest for the nuances and complexities of their ways of being and feeling upon return, people like Yordanis retreated into a rather solitary life. He spent a lot of time watching TV and fishing or socializing with people "more like him" – other returnees such as Jorge, or Valerio, who he regularly invited home for a chat or to practice his French. We were people, he argued, more likely to empathize with his cosmopolitan sense of self.

Suffering comparison

One Sunday afternoon in the autumn of 2021, as pandemic restrictions were relaxing across Spain, Elise cooked lunch for an intimate group of Cuban friends in her apartment in Tarragona. Lareina was the first to arrive, on the dot and elegantly dressed. From Havana, she had been living in Spain for more than twenty years, still making frequent trips to Cuba in "normal" times. As Elise poured her a glass of wine, she confessed that she had already had an entire bottle of rosé. "Today is my mother's birthday," she shared with a smile. And later, "I'd like to visit her as soon as the airports open. But I don't know when I'll have the money to make the trip." As the afternoon progressed, Elise noticed Lareina withdrawing, her energy diminishing, her face downcast, and wondered whether it was more than just the wine that was wearing on her. A few weeks earlier, in the late evening hours on a terrace in one of Tarragona's central plazas, Elise, Lareina, and Bianca had discussed where one lives better, in Spain or in Cuba. "Here there are possibilities," they explained, before clarifying together, "We are not happy here, but we have possibilities. We live better, but we pay a price."

In her critical interrogation of "the promise of happiness", Ahmed (2010) insightfully distinguishes between our desire for happiness and what we actually desire, noting that "happiness" becomes a stand-in not for what matters, but for what matters to us. Drawing on her insights, we may argue that the question of "to what" exactly one aspires and especially how comparison informs the desire for a subjectively "better" life is frequently left pending by scholars. Expanding on Ahmed (2010), our findings suggest that a "better life" abroad becomes a container within which one encounters disparate desires, incommensurable values, conflicting individual and collective aims, predetermined hierarchies, and societal norms, among other scattered elements which ought not be presupposed. "Where we find happiness teaches us *what we value* rather than simply what is of value" (Ahmed 2010:13, emphasis added). The journey to discovering what it is that makes us happy, according to Ahmed, requires "opening up the world" (70). Migration does just this – but what kind of world awaits those who move, beyond the streets of their neighborhoods, their hometowns, their homelands? Often the pursuit of a "better" life vis-à-

vis migration also brings into view much to be unhappy about, including what those who migrate must sacrifice – emotionally and existentially – to undertake the journey.

As Walker (2022) recently noted, "comparison does more than produce knowledge: it produces emotions" (194) and "affective dispositions" (192), which "not only push people to compare in the first place, as a motivating factor, but also are an important part of its effects" (194–195). The emotions and affective dispositions comparison engenders can lead to suffering, as our research among returnees confirms. "Migration finishes a person off", Alberto told Valerio during their first encounter in January 2019. The close relationship Valerio developed with this Cuban man in his early forties, who had returned to live on the island in 2014 after ten years in Rome, gave him many occasions to grasp Alberto's stance and feeling. "Migration is a bad thing", was another phrase that stood out. It came late one night, as Valerio and Alberto were roaming the streets of Havana looking for some food, after a party. A bit drunk and entering a confessional mode, Alberto told Valerio that he was, all things considered, a *comemierda*, a Cuban expression commonly used to evoke a foolish person. Alberto's eyes welled up with tears, and Valerio took his words to mean that he felt he was a mess, and that migration was responsible.

Alberto was pointing at a sense of being unable to dwell, comfortably, in a world that pushed him to constantly think through and compare Italy and Cuba. The urge to compare emerged abruptly at times, disrupting his daily life and affecting his mood, outlook, and evaluation of the life he was leading. In February 2020, he and Valerio were walking across a rundown square in Old Havana, readying themselves to queue for a public bus that would take them to the house of another returnee friend they were to visit, when Alberto made the following remark. "Sometimes, you know, out of the blue, I am here, I am seeing this, and I cannot help thinking of Italy. I can't keep my mind still… My head flies away, to Italy, to life in Italy. It's tough…" Alberto looked pensive, pointing vaguely at everything around us and at nothing in particular. Hinting at the dereliction of the place and its many dysfunctions, he was calling on Valerio to empathize with a feeling of estrangement he was struggling to put into words. Such ruptures stemmed from an eminently comparative gaze and assessment that he wished he could avoid at times but could simply not control.

Conclusion

In our last example, Alberto referred to how comparison could erupt within him unsolicited, creating discomfort and becoming a source of frustration. Comparison was also demanded of him every time he had to explain his migration to Italy and justify his decision to return to Cuba, something he presented – as did all our interlocutors – as his *choice*. It was on the premise of comparison and the commensuration of pros and cons between "here" and "there" that migratory decisions could be presented as *choices*. Discussing differences between "value" and "virtue", Lambek (2008) helpfully contrasts "choice" to "practical judgment". The former implies dealing with a set of commensurable items, in which "the alternatives are discrete and measurable" (145). Judgement, on the other hand, "applies to incommensurables" and "alternatives [which] cannot be clearly compared along a single axis" (145). We may argue that the predicament of the migrants we engaged with, torn between being "here" or "there" –

and notwithstanding their personal vicissitudes, backgrounds, or nationalities – was that they *had to* make and stand by what were oftentimes difficult decisions – decisions that were subject to the scrutiny and evaluation of families, peers, and to us as researchers. Presenting such decisions as "good choices" was important for our interlocutors, but it often came at the price of reducing heterogeneous realities, meanings, and affects into clearly delineated and commensurable entities.

Powerful narratives and imaginaries animate migration (cf. Graw and Shielke 2012) as a way to improve one's life and that of one's family, to achieve a "better life". Such narratives tend to rely on dominant standards and critiera as the benchmark, the "higher principle", "meta-value" (Lambek 2008, Robbins 2012), and external vantage point of comparison – Meyer's "*tertium comparationes*", "through which similarities and differences can be assessed" (Meyer 2017:513). Comparing Cuba or Ecuador with Spain – or, for that matter, Germany, Norway, the Netherlands, and Japan – along a linear evaluative axis of "economic development" made for a strong and convincing rationale to account for the migrant's decision-making and choice. Such comparison was easily relatable and justifiable. It was clearly audible. It downplayed hesitation, doubt, compromise, ambivalence and the careful practical judgment (Lambek 2008) of weighing values and alternatives, including, for instance, notions of freedom, love, familiarity, peace of mind, simplicity, and "life itself" (see Ozmin), as what mattered the most.

In the worst-case scenario, lack of clarity as to the comparative criteria motivating one's journey could be deemed a sign of weakness and confusion, a mystifying excuse from someone who had lost sight of what was important in life. This seems all the more likely in contexts, such as those of Cuba and Ecuador, where there is widespread consensus on what matters when migration is at stake, namely economic development and success. Ozmin's combative reaction, like that of others in this article, reveals a field of struggle: one where the criteria, principles, and values which lend meaning to migration are also challenged and subverted. In ethnographically following such struggles, including the suffering they cause, we are reminded of the force and effect that hegemonic frames of migration and comparison exercise upon those who have to cope with them.

This brings us to the emotional and affective drives and effects of comparison, an aspect often neglected in social science reflections on the topic (cf. Walker 2022) but which our article clearly highlights, and on which we encourage more comparative studies of migration to focus. With their pervasive comparisons, our interlocutors tended to rely on ready-made evaluations of global geography, contrasting the living standards of nation-states and animating their assessments with personal anecdotes, but their ease often concealed profound and affective dimensions of such juxtapositions. Could it be that the vantage point from which to draw comparisons came with a cost, and what could that cost be? If migration choices and justifications called for comparison, including those prompted by our research design, what did such comparisons demand of our interlocutors?

By empathetically engaging with our interlocutors, our hope was also to open up the realm of possibilities for thinking and comparing beyond prevailing societal pressures and expectations. Witnessing their comparisons – notably their most provocative, discordant, and counterhegemonic ones – could thus

function to validate and *support* how and where our research participants wished to position themselves, letting them unfold a diversity of visions of what a "better life" could look like. It could support a form of "existential empowerment" (Lucht 2019:56): "the extent to which people... succeed in striking 'a balance between what is given and what is chosen...' (Jackson 1998:21)" (ibid.). On the other hand, our lines of questioning could also work *against* our research participants, forcing them to reluctantly dwell in uncomfortable comparison, amplifying frustrations with their present conditions, as well as the lack of understanding they felt from others. If such questions absorbed our field research and analysis, we think they merit further scrutiny in studies of migration, notably as we reflect on the generative potential and ethical dimensions of comparative lines of enquiry, and the entanglements, resonances, and frictions between how we deploy comparison in research, and why, how, and to what effect people-on-the-move compare.

Declarations

Authors' contribution:

All authors contributed to the conception and design of the article; the production, analysis, and interpretation of data; as well as the article writing process. All authors have approved the submitted version.

Availability of data and materials

The article is based on ethnographic fieldwork data consisting of field notes and interview audio recordings and transcripts. The authors adhere to principles of ethical treatment, integrity, and respect for all research collaborators that consented to participate in the research, and have 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 authors 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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