To make a difference: responding to migration's demands in returns to Cuba

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The article focuses on the predicaments faced by return migrants to Cuba and how they respond to societal pressures to make a valuable difference 'back home', opening analytical avenues at the juncture of the anthropology of ethics and morality and migration. It does so by uncovering five distinct but complementary ways in which returnees respond to migration-related demands. Conceptualized as efforts to 'make a difference', it first considers the importance for returnees to exemplify and share the economic gains that are widely expected from a successful migration, before addressing alternative attempts to carve out other sources of prized difference from experiences abroad. To deflect the pressure that weighs on them as (ex)migrants and generates feelings of exhaustion and estrangement, returnees also endeavour to 'unmake' migration-related differences. They do so by deconstructing migration promises, reframing notions and forms of belonging, and downplaying the possibilities afforded by life in Cuba. While the combination of different anthropological approaches to ethics and morality befits the analysis, the returnees' resistance to scrutiny of their moral lives questions the limitless reach and suitability of such interpretative lenses. Ultimately, this helps assess their relevance and pitfalls in research on migration and beyond.

Introduction

The pressure of moral obligations is a widespread feature of migrant experiences, underscoring their embeddedness in fields of social expectations (Gardner 2015; Graw & Shielke 2012). Anthropologists paying attention to notions of migratory 'success' uncover tensions between competing moral and ethical frameworks, with normative prescriptions on how to be a 'responsible' migrant pitted against individual aspirations and the possibilities for crafting a new self that migration affords (Meloni 2020; Scalettaris, Monsutti & Donini 2021). Tensions between collective moral obligations and an ethics of self-accomplishment are also identified in literature on return migration (Gmelch 1980; Olwig 2012), which underscores 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 (e.g., Hernández-Carretero 2016; Lucht 2019; Schielke 2019). In the Caribbean, from early work by Philpott (1968) to recent studies by Byron (2005), Horst (2006), and Olwig (2012), the importance of 'success' and 'failure' in gauging returns, and the pressure not to disappoint social expectations, are particularly salient. This article expands on these analyses by advocating a more sustained engagement of migration scholarship with different approaches in the anthropology of ethics and morality, showing how this generates novel insights for these two areas of anthropological research.[1] To do so, I consider neglected experiences of first-generation Cuban migrants whose return to the island serve as privileged entry points to understand the demands that migration engenders, and the predicaments and responses that result from it.

In his review of anthropological research on 'return migration', Gmelch (1980) affirms that returnees are often unsatisfied back in their homeland, facing material, practical, and social difficulties, including the envy of those who stayed behind, their narrow mind-set and excessive claims on returnees' resources (Byron 2005; Gmelch 1980; Oxfeld & Long 2004). Situations of return in Cuba bear both similarities and differences to those explored in other contexts, revealing specific idioms of belonging and exclusion that are informed by, and in turn problematize, notions of 'Cubanness' and the island's relation with migration. In Cuba, compared to other Latin American and Caribbean contexts, returns are a recent and mostly unexamined phenomenon in public spheres and scholarly circles, where the prevailing focus has been on emigration. That returnees were newly arrived, few in numbers, geographically dispersed, and did not form any distinct 'community' (Kasbarian 2009: 371) explains the unconsolidated features of such migratory patterns. This particular trait affords insightful perspectives on how returnees tentatively responded to the demands placed on them upon their return, lacking established repertoires of 'moral exemplars' (Humphrey 1997; Robbins 2018) and ideal role models to emulate (Osella & Osella 2000). As a reviewer of this article eloquently put it, 'returning to their home island, Cuban migrants encounter a population who themselves harbour dreams of migrating', and their trajectory 'against the grain of migration' may be seen as a 'counter-current move that becomes a source of much friction'. Such frictions may not be unique to the Cuban case, and studies of 'post-deportation' conditions marked by 'anxiety, uncertainty, and insecurity' resonate fruitfully (Drotbohm 2015; Khosravi 2018: 4; Sørensen 2022). Not being the result of deportations, however, my research participants' 'choice' to return generated a strong pressure to elaborate on their being back in Cuba. What was the point of their return? At stake here are two key subjects of anthropological interest, namely how people strive to fulfil, or to deflect, compelling but at the same time challenging, expectations that weigh on them – how they cope with, trying to satisfy or circumvent, powerful societal pressures. How returnees responded to such demands is the guiding thread of this article and enables the development of new insights at the juncture of approaches to ethics and morality, and migration research, ultimately contributing to both fields of anthropological scholarship.

My analysis draws on twenty-two months of fieldwork conducted between 2005 and 2022 in Cuba, mainly in Havana and the rural town of Viñales (located 200 kilometres west of the capital), and on four months of fieldwork, since 2012, with Cuban migrants in Barcelona, Spain. Most examples I present come from the past six years, during which I established close relationships with about twenty Cubans, mostly men who migrated to Europe in the last two decades, and went back to Cuba within the last ten years.

While in Europe, most toiled in the construction or hospitality sector, in positions as varied as owning a well-established Cuban restaurant in Barcelona, to on-demand work on building sites in Marseille. Despite similarities in their migratory trajectories, their personal stories, vicissitudes as migrants, and family situations differed, as did their self-identifications in terms of gender and race. While in this article I introduce some specificities of my interlocutors' lives and socio-demographics, what interests me most are the common pressures and challenges generated by the situation of return. Such challenges, and the responses I address, appeared markedly similar, overshadowing other intersectional aspects of differentiation. Striking was how the importance of socio-demographic disparities receded when compared with the fact of having been 'there' (*allá*), abroad. This tells us something important about the force of the 'migrant' categorization and bottom-up processes of 'migranticization' (Dahinden 2016). Having been a migrant similarly informed returnees' responses and ways of being in spite of their differences: in terms of the place in which they lived (the capital or a rural town), family situation, gender and racial identification, and less so in terms of age and socio-cultural and economic background (all in their forties, of middle-lower class origin, with no university education).

Evoked in the article's title, I conceptualize the pressures on returnees that migration engenders as demands to 'make a difference' (cf. Kasbarian 2009: 370), a difference that would lend meaning and value to migration and return. The article is structured into two main sections, the first one – 'To make a difference' – starts by contextualizing migration and return in Cuba, before addressing the two main ways in which returnees strived to satisfy migration-related expectations. The strongest of such expectations is the pressure to make a material difference 'back home', in reference to the economic resources associated with a 'successful' return. Satisfying such demands proved challenging for most returnees I met, and I subsequently 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. In the second section – 'To unmake a difference' – I uncover returnees' attempts to deflect such pressure, looking, in turn, at how they deconstructed and criticized migration promises, normalized 'difference' in Cuba and ways of being Cuban, and minimized their agency, choice, and responsibility in a structural milieu that hampered their capacities and potential.

To make a difference
The significance of migration and return in Cuba
In Cuba's migration history, the 1959 Revolution led by Fidel Castro unleashed 'the largest refugee flow to the United States in history, with approximately 1.4 million people fleeing the island' (Duany 2017).[2] The notion of 'diasporic generation' (Berg 2011; Eckstein & Berg 2015) differentiates a more recent generation of 'migrants' from the first wave of Cuban 'exiles' and a shift from politically to economically driven migration, which began with the 1990s crisis that followed the collapse of the Soviet Union. The 1990s witnessed noteworthy changes in the Cuban government's attitudes and policies towards emigrants. Having vilified them as 'weaklings' and '*gusanos*' (lit. worms) for abandoning the island and its Revolution, a new discourse preoccupied with national cohesion and cultural identity emerged (Hernandez-Reguant 2008), 'calling on Cuba's diaspora … to help in the patriotic … task of "saving the nation"' (Kapcia 2021: 160), with the neutral word '*emigración*' progressively gaining ground. Shifting

governmental attitudes towards Cuban migrants are reflected in studies of remittances (Hansing & Hoffmann 2019; Simoni & Voirol 2021). Seen as a welcome if uneven injection of hard currency into a struggling economy, Cuba recorded the highest rise in transfers for the whole of Latin America between 2008 and 2014 (Morales 2016). Meanwhile, Cuban scholarship addressing return migration calls for 'a proactive political movement of influence towards emigrants and their descendants, to enhance feelings of belonging and identity with your country of origin, guide your attitudes for the benefit of the nation, and convert them into a functional piece for economic and social development' (Aja Díaz & Rodríguez Soriano 2022: 23, translation by the author).

My research participants 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 (de la Fuente 2008; Palmié 2021; 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 better life in Cuba was to have family abroad who could provide economic help. As Wig (2020: 102) writes, to 'become the "faith" of family members back home was a heavy burden to bear', tied to notions of the 'good' self-sacrificing migrant devoted to 'handling distributive claims' (2020: 98) from relatives in Cuba. Migration's significance for people in Cuba cannot be overstated, with even a moderate inflow of remittances strongly improving people's livelihood. As a result, Cuban migrants envisaging a return to the island were concerned with how to keep up with the economic expectations their migration had engendered (Simoni & Voirol 2021). During field research among Cuban migrants in Barcelona in the early to mid 2010s, I recorded signs of optimism at the prospect of returning. Among my interlocutors, there was widespread disappointment with the economic situation in Spain, consequence of the 2008 financial crisis (Simoni 2016a). By contrast, after over two decades of economic stagnation, new opportunities appeared on the horizon on the island. Cubans in Barcelona took stock of changes in Cuba's migratory legislation facilitating exits and returns in 2012, and the opening of opportunities for private enterprise (see Aja Díaz, Rodríguez Soriano, Orosa Busutil & Albizu-Campos Espiñeira 2017; Barcenas Alfonso 2023; Bastian 2018; Krull & Stubbs 2021). Some were eager to test the potential of such transformations and the possibility of having a 'good life' in Cuba, or at least a better one than they had in Spain (Simoni 2016a; 2019).

Aja Díaz and Rodríguez Soriano (2022) and Barcenas Alfonso (2023) analyse the exponential growth of return migration to Cuba between 2013 and 2020, which saw the 'resettlement' (*reasentamiento*) of over 60,000 Cuban emigrants, mainly coming from the United States and Spain. While no doubt significant, the numbers of 'resettled' Cubans, popularly known as *repatriados*, include Cubans who have undergone the formal procedure of reclaiming residence but who do not live on the island. This is what Roberto[3] made clear to me in one of our first conversations in Havana in February 2019. A white Cuban man in his forties, Roberto had come back from Italy five years earlier, after fifteen years living there. Unlike most *repatriados*, he insisted on being a 'real' return migrant living full-time in Cuba. For him, *repatriados* used their newly acquired Cuban residency instrumentally – to buy property, set up businesses, or facilitate imports – while barely visiting Cuba at all. Roberto did not hide his disdain when talking about *repatriados*, who did not face the everyday challenges of those who had come back to Cuba 'for good'.

However, returns such as his did raise uncomfortable questions. Sipping our beers on the terrace of the Hotel Inglaterra, in Havana's Parque Central, Roberto explained: '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 bring me with you [next time you go to Italy]?' Telling me he had no intention of moving back to Italy, Roberto went on to criticize 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 Roberto often signalled to people in our company that he had lived in Italy. 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 question easily arose: what was he doing back in Cuba? Many of his interlocutors would have loved the chance to live in Italy. His return to Cuba called for an explanation. When I asked Roberto about this frequent questioning, he brushed it off impatiently, saying he generally mentioned his profitable business ventures, and that would quench people's curiosity, keeping any suspicion that his return could have been 'a failure', *un fracaso*, at bay.

'Success', the obligation to share, and demarcations of belonging

The six months I spent in Cuba since first meeting Roberto led me to realize that despite the 'profitable businesses' story he liked to recount, he was far from leading a life of plenty. Instead, he got by on the tight earnings of his *ferreteria* – a private household appliances business he set up in his parents' place a couple of years earlier, where he also lived. Engaging with other returnees, it became clear that what was at play was a subtle 'economy of appearance' (Cole 2014), promoting the image of a 'successful' return (Cearns 2023). Cearns (2023: 46) subtly unpacks the socio-cultural meanings of notions of 'success' among Cubans on 'either side of the Florida Straits', convincingly demonstrating that the 'the ability to give the impression of success becomes just as important as actual material possession' (2023: 47). The circulation between Havana and Miami, I would add, could obviate scrutiny of showcased material prosperity. For Roberto and other returnees, however, keeping up appearances was more demanding. People interacting with them in Cuba would not miss a chance to spot inconsistencies in their performances of success. Such 'unmasking' of appearances could support their conviction that coming back from abroad was a risky endeavour, most likely doomed to fail.

Observing the everyday life of my returnee research participants across the years, I noticed that stories of smooth re-incorporation into Cuban life, notably as well-off *dueños* (owners) of some business, were regularly punctured by examples of more precarious day-to-day livelihoods. All returnees I met, even the most fortunate in terms of savings brought back to Cuba, had seen these quickly dwindle in a socio-economic context that made forceful demands for a share of the wealth coming from abroad. Yordanis, an Afro-Cuban man of very humble origins who had come back to his hometown of Viñales after twenty years in France, had channelled over 100,000 euros into Cuba, but had seen his fortune 'magically' vanish. '*Se fué*' (it's gone), 'they ate it up' (*se lo comieron*), he told me, listing his Cuban partner, relatives, and friends in need among the people pressing 'distributive claims' (Ferguson 2015) he could hardly eschew, eager to keep the notion of a failed return at bay. His biggest investment was the construction of a house planned to function as a tourism rental, which he struggled to complete and had recently put up for sale.

Scholars of Cuba link values of sharing, redistribution, solidarity, and forms of reciprocal care to Cuba's long-term emphasis on socialist egalitarianism, connecting

these to several realms of life on the island: in transformations related to Cuba's dual economy, views of 'poverty', 'needs' (*necesidades*), and the day-to-day 'struggle' (*lucha*) to get by (Holbraad 2017; Padrón Hernández 2012; Tankha 2018; Wilson 2009); in notions of desirability, reciprocity, and the role of money and material contributions in sexual and gender relations (Andaya 2014; Härkonen 2019; Simoni 2016*b*); and in new realms of entrepreneurship in private market sectors (Gold 2016; Köhn & Siré 2023; Simoni 2018*a*; Wig 2020). These studies concur in signalling an enduring critique and moral condemnation of behaviours judged as 'abusive' and 'immoral' due to their lack of concern for others and their disregard for valued forms of solidarity. At the risk of generalizing, to be a 'good Cuban' is to know how to share and redistribute, as part of a people collectively engaged in the struggle (*lucha*) to get by in times of economic difficulty. Interventions by Tankha (2018) and Simoni (2018*b*) highlight how these values signal belonging to a shared collective and demarcate boundaries between 'us' and 'them': '[p]articipation in *la lucha* discursively carved out boundaries both between Cubans and foreigners', but also 'between *el estado* [the state] and the individual Cubans collectively engaged in *la lucha*' (Tankha 2018: 119).

Congruent with such demarcations of a 'Cuban-we', returnees' assessment of abusive behaviours at their expense, such as overpricing or excessive demands for material help, could be read as a sign of non-belonging. As he pondered his difficulty 'fitting in' back in Viñales, Yordanis lamented how people were taking advantage of his lost familiarity with local ways of navigating economic transactions, making him the victim of frequent scams, much like any foreigner. On the purchase of two wooden doors for the house he was building, for instance, he realized too late how badly they overcharged him. Reflecting on whether he was 'French or Cuban', he concluded that his 'soul' – *el alma* – had, by now, become French. '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 said he could not avoid also being Cuban, but that he had lost the cunningness – *la malice* (in French) – that characterized socio-economic relations in Cuba, including the ways foreigners were squeezed for money. Padrón Hernández (2012: 91-4; Köhn & Siré 2023) notes the ambivalence with which Cubans lament cheating and a lack of solidarity as signs of crisis in contemporary Cuban society, while at the same time valuing street smartness and guile as key skills to hone given the contemporary economic landscape. With his willingness to be generous, share, and redistribute wealth, Yordanis sought recognition as a 'successful' and 'good' Cuban migrant. But his lost familiarity with the alleged 'typical' Cuban guile prompted a feeling of not belonging.

Questioning or breaking obligations and co-dependencies has moral and ethical implications. Drawing on research in contexts of poverty in Malawi, Englund (2008) calls for renewed attention to situations of 'deliberate dependency', focusing on their existential dimension as integral to people's loyalty to a relationship – in my case, loyalty to other Cubans as part of a collective 'we'. Elsewhere (Simoni & Voirol 2021), I have addressed how Cuban migrants challenged assumptions about unconditional obligations towards kin, notably the obligation to send remittances. This saw them broadening spaces for 'choice' in how they redistributed the fruits of their migration. Their reasoning went as follows: if all migrants were simply obliged to give, no matter their merit, what of the recognition of one's individual effort in 'being good at being a migrant'? My interlocutors questioned views on unconditional obligation, asserting the primacy of personal choice. In doing so, they defied the existential dimensions

highlighted by Englund (2008: 35), to foreground what this author suggests is a more liberal approach that turns moral obligations into a conditional and discretionary matter of ethical choice. Such endeavour was often premised on returnees' relatively privileged economic position and their asserted lack of dependence on kith and kin 'back home'.[4] The risk in criticizing 'obligation' and valorizing 'choice', however, was not only to distance oneself from prescriptive views of what made a 'good Cuban', but to be additionally cast as a 'bad migrant' who had forsaken allegiance to those one belonged with. Overall, obligation and dependency were key subjects of ethical deliberation that my research participants re-evaluated in the light of their migration experience. Roberto, for instance, repeatedly complained of how much people in Cuba depended on one another, praising the 'autonomy' and 'freedom' people had in Italy.

Ethics of self-accomplishment and migrant difference 'gone wild'

As I spent more time with Roberto, I noticed that, perhaps also encouraged by my presence as an Italian speaker, he liked to dwell on his life in Italy. He praised its interest, value, and superiority: from ways of seasoning a meal, to modes of sociability, to the sheer pleasure of partying 'the Italian way'. 'Italy is the place to have fun and enjoy, no comparison with Cuba', Roberto told us once as we sat down for dinner at his place. The tension became palpable and provoked a reaction from his Cuban partner – a woman he had met and married upon his return to Havana. '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!?'. Roberto found in me a sympathetic ear, but his partner and mother showed little interest in the perceptions he had brought back from Italy. They also resented the boastful attitude, casting 'foreign' qualities as superior and contrasting them with an inferior Cuban reality.

I observed similar attempts to fashion a valuable worldly and cosmopolitan self with Jorge, a white Cuban man in his forties who came from an impoverished family of farmers. Like Yordanis, Jorge had been back in Viñales for five years, after twenty in France labouring in the construction sector. Thanks to a French friend who supported him with ideas and capital, he had built a big house where he lived with a Cuban woman he had married upon his return and their four-year-old daughter. In August 2019, he had finally obtained the licence to start renting rooms for tourists, but business was slow. This notwithstanding, Jorge repeatedly boasted to his Cuban friends and me that he had learned how business worked 'out there' (abroad), *en el capitalismo*, and that this would give him an advantage with tourists – when they showed up. The imaginative horizons Jorge activated were of a bright future, in which the superior economic skills cultivated abroad would finally bear fruit. However, his assertions of being *el grande* ('the big one') on the brink of success were eyed with scepticism by many in Viñales, who dismissed Jorge's claims as simply 'showing off' (*està inflando*).

Jorge's wife once told me that she had been attracted to him because his migration made him 'interesting'. But this had better reflect nicely on her and not, as occurred regularly, highlight her comparative lack of cosmopolitanism. Jorge'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 was an inclusive source of collective pride in one moment, and a sign of estrangement in another. Migration-related difference-making required careful deployment to be recognized as virtuous – especially when not accompanied with explicit evidence of material success – and

not as a sign of eccentricity. In the Caribbean island of Nevis, Byron (2005: 214) notes that when 'cash is not forthcoming from returnees from Britain they frequently found themselves dubbed eccentric and mean and were increasingly isolated'. The challenge for returnees like Jorge and Roberto was to enrol people in their value creation endeavour and have audiences validate its worth (Graeber 2013). However, finding a sympathetic audience was not easy, prompting frustration and sometimes leading to heated disagreements, as I witnessed with several of my interlocutors.

In response to the interrogation of their return to Cuba and the nature of its value, returnees seemed to live under the burden of, and feel compelled to mark and think through, some meaningful migration-related difference. The pressure was to show that something significant had changed, and for the better, thanks to their experience abroad. Their actions and discourses were easily read in the light of their migration, the latter becoming an overdetermining frame to illuminate and explain their ways of being back in Cuba. Such 'stickiness' of the migrant identification finds parallels elsewhere, in Drotbohm's research with Cape Verdean deportees, constantly reminded of their migrant past and facing 'the pressure of migration-related expectations' (2015: 656). The 'migration explanation' and the difference-making lens intrinsic to it similarly thematized and overdetermined interpretations of returnees' behaviours and reasoning, functioning as a ubiquitous relational call to act and think in response to it. This resulted in high levels of self-awareness and reflectivity, deemed typical in situations of return (Oxfeld & Long 2004), but yet to be analysed for their experiential implications via anthropological approaches to ethics and morality.

Zigon's (2007; 2021) theorization is useful to clarify the heightened reflectivity engendered by returns to Cuba. For Zigon (2007: 138), '[t]he ethical subject' is one that, as a result of 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 geared at re-attuning oneself to dwell once again with others in a familiar, intensely relational world (Zigon 2021). The problem for returnees, as much as for the 'homecomer' described by Schütz (1945), was that such attunement could be hard to reach. More often than not, the forms of dwelling my participants were pushed to inhabit, being somewhat 'different' from Cubans who had not migrated, were characterized by un-dwelling and dis-attunement. A potential source of valuable distinction, their uncanny difference could simultaneously seed estrangement and exclusion. Lacking, when compared to ethnographic contexts where ethical reflectivity is part of routine cultivation of a virtuous life (Laidlaw 2014: 124-8), was a socially shared repertoire of clear 'moral exemplars', of collectively recognized values 'actually existing and experientially available in the exemplary figures and institutions of their social surround' (Robbins 2018: 191). Not unlike in Armenian return cases explored by Kasbarian (2009: 376), whose new 'unscripted' identities are simultaneously narrated, negotiated, and experienced, Cuban returnees seemed largely to improvise and lack a guiding exemplar in their efforts to make difference significant, valuable, and virtuous. Unaddressed by Kasbarian is the ease with which such difference-making could be seen as irrelevant and 'wild': difference for the sake of difference, leading to attitudes on the verge of the inexplicable, odd, if not 'crazy'.

Existential estrangement clearly appeared in Roberto's dismal assertion, late one night as we roamed the streets of Havana, that 'migration is a bad thing'. A bit drunk and entering a confessional mode, as if wanting to let something heavy out, he told me that he was, all things considered, *un comemierda* (lit. 'shit-eater'), a Cuban expression

to evoke a 'loser' and easily fooled person. I felt bad for Roberto, 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 responsible. He was pointing at the challenge of living in a world that compelled him to be somewhat different, a weird character. The tragic irony – when compared to the range of situations in which migrants are made to feel different in the settings they emigrate to – was that this was the world Roberto was meant to be calling 'home'. The Cuba to which he allegedly 'belonged'. Among the ways of dealing with such disjuncture, and Roberto regularly did this, could be to 'unmake' the difference his interlocutors assumed migration made, and level the contrast between life 'here' and 'there'. Key to my contribution and to the discernment of new analytical pathways at the juncture of migration, morality, and ethics, are the three prevailing and complementary ways of 'unmaking' such difference to which I now turn.

To unmake a difference
Dismantling migration promises
Migratory trajectories pressured my research participants to make a difference, be it in terms of sharing economic gains and/or showing how migration had changed them for the better. While scholars have identified the tensions between these two expectations and moral frameworks (see Introduction), my ethnography sheds new light on how returnees attempted to un-make such demands. A first way to do so was to criticize the notion that migration ought to make any positive difference whatsoever. Returnees' failure to 'measure up' to a dominant comparative logic led them to bring 'the norm, rather than the self, into question' (Greenberg & Muir 2022: 312), and to do so from the authoritative position of having lived 'out there' and therefore knowing what migration was about. I addressed Roberto's allusion to 'the American dream' and assertion that migration was ultimately 'a bad thing'. Lola and Roby – an Afro-Cuban woman and her white Spanish partner, both in their forties, who had come to live in Cuba from Spain in 2017, seeking a less stressful lifestyle after years of hard work managing a restaurant – also upset Cuban dreams of migration by pointing to people's naïve and misplaced illusions about life abroad. They criticized the way Cubans were ready to sacrifice all they had, just to travel to Spain, only to find out, too late, that what awaited them was demeaning labour that barely enabled one to survive, let alone save money for family back home.

Underscoring his subaltern position in a global hierarchy that his migration had left unaltered, Jorge evened up the differences between life 'here' and 'there'. One day, as he was draining the clogged sewage installation of his tourist rental house, at the risk of spilling human waste all over, he reached the conclusion that, in the end, not much had changed with his move from France to Cuba. Over there he had been exploited serving French people, while back in Cuba he continued to be exploited serving French tourists, literally 'cleaning up their shit'.[5] In the wake of their criticisms, Roberto, Jorge, and Lola and Roby were challenging views of migration as the route towards a better future, be it in collective or individual terms. No wonder their narratives were unpopular or led to the suspicion that it was they themselves who had failed. Several would-be migrants retorted to returnees' pessimistic appraisals of migration that they would fare much better abroad, if given the chance to go. Such 'individualization of failure' (cf. Hernández-Carretero 2016; Kleist 2016; Sørensen 2022) helped to keep their migration dream alive.

Opening spaces of belonging: remaking Cuba and ways of being Cuban

Aside from dismantling migration promises, returnees also countered the notion that their trajectory had made them dis-attuned and ill-adjusted to life in Cuba and proper ways of being Cuban. At stake were attempts to broaden views of what Cuba and being Cuban were about in the first place (cf. Simoni 2022). I read this as an attempt to 'normalize' difference and carve out open-ended spaces of dwelling and being upon return. The problem for Roberto, as he explained on several occasions, was that what Cuba and being Cuban had come to mean, both abroad and amongst its inhabitants, felt like a straitjacket – a Cuba reduced to 'salsa, tobacco, rum' and averse to incorporating anything foreign if not in instrumental terms. Roberto, by contrast, liked to add complexity and recover neglected aspects of the island's history and cultural diversity, recalling the times in which Havana was a 'true melting pot', highlighting monuments that testified to its diverse heritage. Drawing parallels with Rome, Roberto praised 'multiculturalism' and cosmopolitan stances, signalled by another Italian expressions he liked to use: '*tutto il mondo è paese*', 'the whole world is a village'.

'*Cuba es un país de locos*' ['Cuba is a country of crazy people'] anyway, Roberto often said, drawing on a popular expression that emphasized Cuban idiosyncrasy.[6] Therefore, what is the problem with another 'crazy guy like me'! Roberto longed for a Cuba that would allow him to realize the open-ended modes of being he desired, described as 'out of the box', 'crazy', 'rebel', or 'underground'. He reclaimed the possibility of being seen and treated as other than an (ex)migrant. Lola's repeated insistence that 'this' Cuba, the one to which she had returned four years earlier, was neither 'her' Cuba nor the 'true' Cuba, had similar connotations. Things had changed; people had changed. She felt there was no longer space for her to be how she wanted. Lola longed for a 'former' Cuba, allegedly more open to difference and a broader range of ways of being Cuban. She also projected her desired country into the future, daydreaming of a 'capitalist' Cuba to come, in which people could do business as they pleased, say anything they wanted, and be whoever they wished. Roberto and Lola were conjuring a more open-ended Cuba and 'Cuban-we'. Their references to 'multiculturalism', 'craziness', or even 'capitalism' – as a capacious contrastive Other to 'socialism' in which anything could fit – were pointing towards new 'clearings' and 'sites of potentiality' for being and for 'being-together-otherwise' (Zigon 2021: 393), beyond the (stereo-)typical strictures of prevailing embodiments of Cuba and Cubanness in which they felt trapped. By recovering, or foreshadowing, such versions of Cuba, Roberto and Lola were simultaneously 'de-migranticizing' (Dahinden 2016) their difference, making it integral to what was, or ought, to be 'truly' Cuban.

Another parallel emerges with Kasbarian's (2009: 376-7) observations of Armenian returnees challenging 'concepts and realities of "homeland"' and actively trying to shape their 'version' of what Armenia is about, expanding its parameters'. In Cuba, attempts to create a 'new site' of 'nation building from below' (Kasbarian 2009: 377) seemed destined to fail against prescriptive visions of what it meant to be Cuban, what Cuba stood for, and how a 'good' migrant returning to the island ought to relate – culturally, socially, and economically – with those left behind. During fieldwork, I repeatedly heard Cubans who had never left the island assert their unrivalled authority to speak about what 'Cuba' and what 'being Cuban' were all about when discussing with returnees. In such context, the latter's attempts to carve out alternative spaces of value, self-fashioning, and open-ended potentiality could be dismissed as fanciful and

'migranticized' accordingly. They could be resented as arrogant and selfish; typical of exclusionary assertions of superiority migrants brought back from abroad, illustrating a lack of loyalty towards those left behind when migrating, an unwillingness to 'move-with-them' (Gaibazzi 2019).

Agency, choice, responsibility: moving between and beyond anthropologies of ethics and morality in migration

The last way to temper expectations of a 'successful', difference-making return I consider, saw returnees downplaying the measure of 'agency', 'choice', and 'freedom' they had in Cuba to realize and express the gains of their migration. Such narratives externalized responsibility for the relatively unremarkable, not-so-different conditions in which returnees could be judged to find themselves back home. Laidlaw (2014: 197) shows the interest of looking at 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'. Blame and responsibility become aspects 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 situations considered here, it was the Cuban authorities, often objectified and externalized via the term *ellos* ('them'), who were mostly ascribed responsibility for hampering the returnees' potential to make a valuable difference 'back home'. Responsibility for the lack of a remarkable 'success story' could thus be attributed not to a supposedly 'failed' migration, but to oppressive and dysfunctional living conditions in Cuba. The latter explained why returnees' potential was not (yet) realized. This also became a way to tap into the well-established repertoires highlighting the ever-present *lucha* (struggle) to get by, seeking the complicity of Cubans who had not migrated but could empathize with the hardships of making a living and fulfilling one's potential on the island. *No es facil* ('it ain't easy'), went the closing refrain of so many conversations I heard in Cuba, and many agreed that even money was often not enough to *resolver* ('resolve'), to find what was needed.

Jorge liked to speak ironically about the incongruities of life in Cuba and the government's inaptitude at letting people 'grow', and was fond of the *lucha* metaphor to describe his own struggles. Externalizing responsibility and diminishing their autonomy and agentive capacity, Jorge and other returnees were lowering the pressure to make a difference, re-embedding themselves in a more level social realm in which everybody had to live and make do within very limited conditions of possibility. Jorge 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.[7] An overstatement and provocation, such a stance nevertheless informed Jorge's sense of agency and possibility, as well as his way of relating with others and responding to their demands. Jorge sought to extricate himself from not only expectations of material success and the obligation to redistribute (Englund 2008), but also to resist the pressure to signal and act upon the difference in thought and perspective associated with his experience abroad. In the above section on self-accomplishment and migrant difference, I analysed such demand as one that pushed returnees towards 'ethical reflectivity' (Laidlaw 2014). This is what Laidlaw (2014: 102), drawing on Foucault (1997), identifies as a key quality of 'thought' itself, seen as 'freedom in relation to what one does, the motion by which one detaches oneself from it, establishes it as an object, and reflects on it as a problem' (Foucault 1997: 117).

'I could do much more' – both in ideational and practical terms – was the gist of Jorge's reasoning, but the country we live in forces us to live a pared-down, less ambitious life, and it is better to live this way to avoid frustration. In his day to day, Jorge found satisfaction in simple routines, he told me: going fishing in the pond near his house, playing dominoes with his uncle, or picking up his daughter from school with his electric scooter. Countering the prefigurations of success and the business genius he liked to brag about at other times, he once confided that he was simply not made for *negocios* ('business'), and was happy to let his wife take care of their tourism trade. The 'most precious thing' and ultimate recipient of all he had and knew, he repeatedly argued, was his daughter. Such assertion countered gender scripts associated with Caribbean 'moral and social values', pitting 'feminine' narratives prioritizing 'obligations towards the family' against 'masculine' public displays of 'social and economic achievements' (Olwig 2012: 831). Jorge's remarks resonate with Härkönen's (2023) reflections on the growing importance, among poor Cuban men and women, of filial relations to secure trustworthy lasting bonds, 'kinship futures', and by extension a purpose in life, to obviate the overwhelming sense of 'futurelessness' characterizing many people's lives in post-Soviet Cuba.

Jorge's self-effacing stance found parallels in dispositions I also observed repeatedly among Roberto, Lola, and Yordanis. A disposition of diminished expectation for what life in Cuba, or elsewhere for that matter, could harbour. Such resignation to a restrained agency recalls the 'deliberate disengagement' theorized by Frederiksen (2017: 10), based on his research in Georgia, which helps him unpack the 'taken for granted understanding of the subject as somebody who is *acting* and somebody who *wants* something'. Such assumptions direct anthropological attention towards people's efforts to achieve a meaningful life and improve their conditions of existence, but make it difficult 'to analyse situations in which people deliberately disengage' (2017: 10).

At times, it became clear to me that Jorge, Roberto, Lola, and Yordanis displayed a marked disregard for, and pessimism towards, dominant scripts and promises of a 'good life', embracing passivity and absence of expectation. Faced with widespread misrecognition and lack of interest in their ways of being and feeling upon return, they retreated from the public sphere and isolated themselves at home, lying in bed, watching TV, and doing nothing in particular. Such stances expose the frequent bias in anthropological research and analyses of migration in particular, of seeking and highlighting expressions of agency, purposefulness, and self-accomplishment even under the most challenging living circumstances. We can think of Willen's (2014) emphasis, drawing on Arendt's (1958) reflections on the 'basic condition of life' and Jackson's (2005) related proposal for an 'existential anthropology', on 'the "existential imperative" to convert givenness into choice and live *the* world as if it were *our* own' (Jackson 2005: xxii, in Willen 2014: 91). This universalizing proposition draws scholars' analytical gaze towards how people 'resist subjugation', how they 'struggle against being seen as … driven by circumstances that one can neither comprehend nor control' (Jackson 2005: 182). Willen's compelling exploration of a Filipina woman's lifeworld in Israel as 'a single mother, an abandoned lover, an unauthorized migrant, a victim of harassment, and an outlaw' (2014: 84), leads her to find in her 'motherhood – and the horizons of possibility … that motherhood invites' (2014: 84), a 'space of relative groundedness, comfort, and intimacy' (2014: 93).

Following Jackson (2005) and Willen (2014), Jorge's example could serve to highlight the comfort and moral purpose found in his fatherhood, and to point to 'agency' and

'purpose' in his otherwise difficult life. Other approaches to ethics and morality in anthropology could further support this analytical choice, among them Mattingly's (2018: 44, 49) encouragement to explore ethical intentionality and find exemplary 'moral engines' in people's 'care of intimate others'. Attention is thus drawn towards how people 'struggle to obtain some version of a good life' (2018: 50). Another influential theoretical proposal foregrounds 'ordinary ethics' (cf. Lambek 2010) and the importance of 'recognizing the ethical in the small acts of everyday life' (Das 2012: 142), acknowledging the pervasiveness and immanence of ethics (Lambek 2018), and ultimately rendering superfluous its differentiation from human action and practical reasoning.

While recognizing the analytical appeal and power of the scholarly approaches addressed in the last two paragraphs, in concluding this article I wish to point towards a different theoretical proposition and provocation based on my empirical material. The insight I wish to draw is that the ways in which Roberto, Jorge, Lola, and Yordanis respond (or not) to migration's demands can also help expose some limits of current anthropological approaches to migration and to ethics and morality. Instances in which people willingly seek to relinquish responsibility for their living conditions, and call on observers to take seriously their lack of possibility for actively shaping their lives, have yet to become a sustained focus of analysis. In the last examples I addressed, Jorge, Yordanis, and Lola did not call for the recognition of intentional efforts that would demonstrate their struggles to have 'control' over their existence. Nor did they encourage me to focus on and value the moral wisdom of their ordinary acts of care. Nor were they dwelling on the tension – pertinently highlighted in migration scholarship as identified in the opening of this article – between individual aspirations and moral obligations. Rather, what they wanted me to take due notice of was the impossibility to exert choice, agency, and intentionality: the way their lives, like those of fellow Cubans, were constrained and truncated by the circumstances in which they lived. In this context, insisting on discerning and appraising the moral and ethical dimensions of their everyday endeavours seems counterintuitive. The analytical demand, if we may call it so, was not to excavate and uncover meaningful traces of virtuous conduct, ordinary acts of care, or ethical self-accomplishment. Rather, it was to heed the critique of migration-related expectations, and the refusal to respond to such pressure.

Anthropological takes and debates on ethics and morality have grown significantly in the past three decades and, I would venture, are currently ever more capacious in terms of the realities they strive to illuminate. This becomes particularly evident once we attempt to bring them together, as I endeavoured to do in this article by moving between different approaches to show their analytical pertinence and complementarity for research on migration. Combining such approaches, always in dialogue with my ethnographic material, ultimately revealed their limitless analytical potential. Such unboundedness became cause for concern when chronicling how my research participants struggled to evade social scrutiny of their own moral conduct. Hindering the analytical drive to continue excavating moral and ethical aspects of their lives is what enabled recognition of their attempts to resist such scrutiny, of how having their discourses and behaviours under constant appraisal could become a burden and unwanted reminder of the overwhelming societal expectations and demands already pressing on them. A possible solution to deflect such pressure was for my research participants to isolate and reduce their social engagement. But if they wanted to cultivate a social life in contemporary Cuba, they could hardly escape the widespread societal

desire to even inequalities between 'here' and 'there', between North and South, and the role ascribed to migration in such task. Being among the 'lucky ones' who had been where prosperity was projected, they were meant to take on migration responsibilities and (do their) share.

The ethnographic material analysed in this article shows that, in the lives of my returnee interlocutors, to make a valued difference from their migratory trajectory constituted a sort of Sisyphean predicament: an ongoing struggle made up of exhausting material and ethical demands. If anthropological approaches to ethics and morality are to remain responsive to the life experiences and situations that call them into being, and in which they become theoretically insightful in the first place, we must also be ready to set them aside when such experiences and situations point in other directions. In their attempts to un-make their difference, as (ex)migrants, returnees were reclaiming the possibility to just 'get on with things' and forget about the need to make or show something virtuous or particularly significant, no matter how immoral and unethical this could be judged. It is here, analytically, that the urge to uncover the moral and the ethical dimension of their everyday life is to be kept in check. The risk, otherwise, is to impose our epistemological agendas, theoretical inclinations, and conceptual priorities over realities that invite a different attention. If this is true for the situations I explored in Cuba, the numerous comparative bridges established throughout this article indicate that its analytical insights are likely to be pertinent and to merit consideration in other contexts. At the juncture of current debates on migration and morality and ethics in anthropology, the aim was to open new questions and perspectives on how situations of return lead to a problematization of the possibilities and values ascribed to migration as an engine of difference and change. My hope, in concluding this article, is to have convincingly shown that the examination of how my returnee interlocutors responded to pressing societal demands advances the understanding of how people, including anthropologists, imagine, work over, and un-make relations between migration, difference, and ethical and moral life.

Acknowledgements

NOTES

[1] Acknowledging the existence of different empirical foci, theoretical approaches and conceptual propositions (see Mattingly & Throop 2018 for a review), my engagement with the ever-growing body of anthropological literature on ethics and morality is necessarily partial.

[2] Aja Díaz and Rodríguez Soriano (2022: 17) estimate the number of Cubans in the United States at over 2 million, followed by over 127,000 in Spain. The most severe outflow of Cubans since the 1959 Cuban Revolution is currently underway with 300,000 Cubans reaching the United States in 2022 (Albizu-Campos Espiñeira & Díaz-Briquets 2023).

[3] To protect confidentiality, I changed all personal names and some details in the examples presented. Translated conversation excerpts draw on recollection after the events occurred.

[4] In his study of self-employed market traders in Havana, Wig (2021: 59) provides subtle insights into 'how Cubans at times embed themselves *in* and disembed themselves *from* social relations'. See also Martin and Yanagisako (2020: 649) on the contemporary salience, across the world, of 'contests over what kinds of relationships might be considered appropriately (in)dependent'.

[5] The parallel is striking 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).

[6] At least since the notorious work of Cuban anthropologist Fernando Ortiz (2014 [1940]), the notion of a peculiar Cuban national character, resulting from centuries of global population movements and unique contributions of different 'races' and 'cultures', has marked academic and popular narratives on the island. For an influential example of valued forms of 'craziness' in everyday Cuban popular culture, see the hit song from iconic salsa and timba band Manolito Simonet y su Trabuco (2003), '*Locos por mi Habana*', best known for his refrain '*en la Habana hay una pila de locos*', 'in Havana there's tons of crazy people'.

[7] Jorge's words at the time reminded me of the stance taken some years earlier by Ramona, an Afro-Cuban woman in her forties who had lived in Spain for twenty years. During an animated discussion on the topic of return visits to Cuba, in a Cuban bar in Barcelona in the winter of 2012, Ramona argued that when travelling back to the island she simply 'left her brain in Spain'. This was to avoid taking issue with the incongruities of life and the limits to what one could think and consequently do in Cuba – a reasoning that hinted at the futility of developing and expressing critical judgement (cf. Simoni 2022).

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Faire la différence : répondre aux attentes envers la migration quand on revient à Cuba

Résumé

L'article est consacré aux difficultés rencontrées par les migrants qui reviennent à Cuba et à la réponse de ceux-ci à la société qui les presse de faire une vraie différence « au pays ». Il ouvre des perspectives analytiques au croisement de l'anthropologie de l'éthique et de la moralité et des migrations. Pour cela, il dévoile cinq manières distinctes mais complémentaires de répondre aux demandes liées à la migration. En les conceptualisant comme des efforts pour « faire la différence », il examine d'abord l'importance, pour ceux qui reviennent, d'incarner et de partager les gains économiques que tout le monde attend d'une migration réussie, puis il s'intéresse à des tentatives d'exploiter d'autres sources de différence valorisable, issues des expériences à l'étranger. Pour échapper à la pression qui s'exerce sur eux en tant que migrants (ou ex-migrants) et qui les épuise et les fait se sentir à l'écart, ceux qui reviennent tentent aussi de « défaire » les différences liées à la migration. Pour cela, ils déconstruisent les promesses de la migration, recadrent les notions et les formes de l'appartenance et minimisent les possibilités offertes par la vie à Cuba. Bien que la combinaison de diverses approches anthropologiques de l'éthique et de la moralité soit une piste d'analyse prometteuse, la résistance de ceux qui reviennent à l'examen de leur vie morale suggère que la portée et l'adéquation de ces prismes interprétatifs ne sont pas infinies. En dernier ressort, elle aide à évaluer leur pertinence et à déceler les pièges de la recherche, que ce soit sur les migrations ou au-delà.

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