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Comparative moves: the pursuit of value and belonging in transnational migration toward a "better life"

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ABSTRACT

Moving beyond comparison as a method that juxtaposes community-based case studies, this article explores how migrants with different backgrounds and trajectories themselves deploy comparison in their everyday lives and decision-making. To do so, it examines Cuban and Ecuadorian migrants' comparative appraisal of different places, values, and visions of a "better life", shedding new light on the motives, stakes, and effects of their endeavors. The proposed approach advances understandings of how migrants cope with the dominant comparative scripts and hierarchies that migration activates, notably by either conforming to, subverting, or unraveling them. Also highlighted are comparison's entanglements with questions of choice, belonging, and its experiential and emotional effects, including the suffering it elicits. A multi-dimensional exploration of how comparison plays out among migrants opens research avenues related to transnational living and people's pursuits of a "better life", while also raising ethical and epistemological questions for comparative research on migration and beyond.

Introduction

That transnational journeys are undertaken in pursuit of a "better life" elsewhere seems undisputed across otherwise diverse studies of migration (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 and projects, people across the

world are said to be moving in search of "more meaningful lives" (ibid, 125). Migration has thus become 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 multifarious situations of people-on-the-move, including to journeys that are "homeward" bound (Åkesson, Carling, and Drotbohm 2012; Graw and Schielke 2012). In cases of circular or return migration, people may draw on their own lived experiences to inform their considerations of where a "better life" might be located, their imaginaries and subjectivities having been modified through the actual migration journey (Schielke 2020, 94).

Comparisons generated by having lived in multiple places are the focus of this article. We open new analytical pathways to address migrants' pursuit of a "better life" by paying closer attention to the often stated but overlooked comparative dimension of migration aspirations, decision-making, and belonging. In so doing, we show the merit of explicitly and systematically reflecting on "comparison" in studies of migration, highlighting its manifold functions, values, and effects in a range of migratory situations. Our analysis expands on theoretical discussions in studies of transnationalism addressing (1) the multiple frames of reference shaping migrant subjectivities, emotions, and sense of belonging, and (2) recent social science reflections on comparison, modes of evaluation, and value regimes that are yet to inform studies of migration. Drawing on empirical material related to Cuban and Ecuadorian migration, we advance understandings of not only how comparison informs and justifies migration choices and decisions, but also how it experientially affects the lives of those who move.

Transnationalism highlights how people's life experiences relate to several societal contexts beyond single nation-states, notably through notions such as "transnational social spaces" (Faist 2000) and "simultaneity" (Glick Schiller 2018). Scholars also show how transnational lives shape people's sense of belonging and identity formation (Glick Schiller 2018; Vertovec 2001), increasingly taking into account the role of emotions (Boccagni and Baldassar 2015; Herrera, Espinosa, and Lara-Reyes 2022; Skrbiš 2008; Svašek 2010). Guarnizo's (1997) classic exploration of transnational living between the Dominican Republic and United States already 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. Guarnizo (1997, 310) refers to this as "translocal inertia", describing migrants' "dual visage regardless of the shores they are on". Analyzing returns of Filipina domestic workers from Hong Kong, Constable (1999, 208) conceptualizes "the plural vision that might result from diasporic experiences" and how it "can be both alienating and inspiring, a source of awareness and dissatisfaction, and a source of pleasure and apprehension"

(ibid., 224). More recently, Hage (2021, 50) suggests that migration engenders a "permanent state of comparative existence" which comes to envelop not only diasporic groups living far from their homelands, but also those who remain behind. His work highlights that the value-laden comparison of objects, experiences, and cultures, although reciprocal, is inherently unequal. Like migration itself, it is imbued with power relations. In addressing more explicitly and in depth how comparison is deployed in transnational contexts, the way it informs decision-making, as well as its experiential effects, we seek to make an original contribution to the study of transnationalism and diasporic subjectivities. To do so, we bring current social science reflections on comparison and value regimes into debates on transnationalism and migration.

Beyond studies of migration, interest in the subject of comparison has recently been revived in the social sciences, particularly in anthropology (Bayart 2022; Candea 2019; Meyer 2017; Pelkmans and Walker 2023; Schnegg and Lowe 2020; Trémon 2019; van der Veer 2016). Comparison as a scientific method has been essential in grounding and legitimizing the social sciences and their universalist pretension (see Bayart 2022; Foucault 1966; Gingrich and Fox 2002; Holý 1987; Pelkmans 2023). More fundamentally, comparison is a human cognitive ability – "humans always compare, whether we intend to or not" (Gingrich and Fox 2002, 6) – 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). Our study reveals the centrality of quotidian comparisons to our interlocutors' way of being in, moving through, and making sense of the world – ontologically, figuratively, and geographically speaking. Migration research, we argue, can illuminate forms of ordinary comparison by shedding new light on the value regimes and emotional registers on which such comparisons rest and through which they are also transformed.

In the following sections, we begin by contextualizing our study and its methods. We then focus on how prevailing expectations of migration challenge our interlocutors to conform, subvert, and unravel dominant comparative scripts and hierarchies. Subsequently, we address comparison's entanglements with issues of belonging and its 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 inspire future work on how comparison becomes entangled in the transnational lives of people on the move, shaping, constraining, and transforming their pursuit of a "better life".

Researching Ecuadorian and Cuban migration to/from Spain

Our contribution stems from a multi-sited and collaborative 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). Participants varied in terms of gender, age, class, and racial attribution, and while Elise interacted mainly with Cuban women in Spain and Cuba, Valerio and Jérémie engaged mostly men in Spain, Cuba, and Ecuador. Most of our research participants were middle-aged (30–50 years old) and had middle to lower class backgrounds. Their migration trajectories and transnational family situations were also diverse, and we reflect on this in our examples when relevant for discussing their comparative endeavors and visions of a "better life". In the case of Valerio's research participants in Cuba, these included returnees who had come back from countries other than Spain, such as France, Italy, and Japan, but who had also suffered the effects of the economic downturn that followed the 2008 global financial crisis.

Common to our field stays was the establishment of close ties with participants, with whom we spent repeated time over the last six years, keeping in 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 experiences and aspirations linked to their transnational migratory trajectories. Our data consist of written notes and interviews' transcripts, shared and analyzed for the scope of this article based on their relevance to the topic of migrant-led comparisons.

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, represented almost 40% of the foreign-born population residing in Spain (Ballesteros, Basco, and González 2009). In the years that followed the 2008 global economic crisis, Spain's migratory balance shifted dramatically – a shift to which returns to people's countries 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 the crisis: whereas unemployment across Spain jumped from 11% to 26% between

2008 and 2013, for example, among immigrants it reached 36.5% (Valero-Matas, Coca, and Valero-Oteo 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. This emigration was driven neither by war nor natural disasters, but rather by Ecuador's own severe economic and political crisis (Herrera 2008). In 2008, Ecuadorians were still the largest Latin American collective in Spain, constituting almost 20% of the total Latin American population (Ballesteros, Basco, and González 2009). From this date onwards, however, their number declined, and it is among Ecuadorians that the greatest rate of return migration has been recorded (Rosas and Gay 2015).

By contrast to the Ecuadorian case, Cubans in Spain number far fewer. Nevertheless, between 1990 – when the fall of the Soviet Union, Cuba's privileged economic partner, plunged the country into dire recession – and 2009, the Cuban population in Spain also increased sharply from a few thousands 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 (Martín 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 and Rodríguez Soriano 2022; Barcenas Alfonso 2023). 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 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 they in whichever of these three locales or some other place. Structural living conditions, migration policies, and prevailing representations of migrants also varied and changed over time. In the ethnographic cases we analyze, such differences and changes informed the relationships between people's comparative endeavors and their articulations of a "better life", and we address them in our examples. More broadly, during Rafael Correa's presidency (2007–2017), the Ecuadorian state considered its emigrants as properly part of the nation (e.g. implementation of external voting) and encouraged their homecoming through policies facilitating their return and settlement. These initiatives were undertaken in cooperation with the Spanish government, which implemented, after the financial crisis, a plan intended to encourage voluntary returns of unemployed migrants (Boccagni and Lagomarsino 2011). In

the case of Cuba, while no such formal bilateral agreements were in place, significant changes in the Cuban state's attitudes and policies towards emigrants occurred from the 1990s onwards (Aja Díaz and Rodríguez Soriano 2022). Previously vilified for abandoning the island and its Revolution, transnational connections and returns to the island became increasingly facilitated and valorized for their potential "to help in the patriotic … task of "saving the nation"" (Kapcia 2021, 160). Among Cuban migrants in Spain and other European countries, however, an enduring dissatisfaction with Cuba's institutions and the sentiment of being mistreated and disparaged on the one hand, and economically instrumentalized while not having their contributions recognized on the other, continued to prevail (Simoni 2022; Simoni and Voirol 2021).

In spite of specificities related to sociodemographic aspects, migration trajectories, transnational family arrangements, and living conditions in origin and destination countries, when analyzing and discussing our findings, we noticed striking similarities in our participants' use of comparison, and the concrete effects such comparative endeavors engendered, notwithstanding their specific content. We were thus progressively led to move beyond the comparison of national migrant "groups", "societies", "cultures", or "case studies" (Glick Schiller, Çaglar, and Guldbrandsen 2006) and to redirect our attention towards how different entanglements of comparison and the pursuit of a "better life" – across all three field sites – informed and affected our interlocutors' migratory decisions, trajectories, and experiences.

These entanglements are at the center of our article's contribution, whose focus moves from the more widespread comparison of predefined units in migration research (be these based on nationality, origin, and reception contexts, or sociodemographic differences), to how comparison is deployed and affects the lives of our participants. We also consider how our presence in the field and our lines of questioning prompted our participants to reflect on their lives and migration trajectories, to (re)assess their drives and views of a "better life", and to map and contextualize such life geographically, socially, culturally, economically, and politically. In the following sections, we make punctual reflexive forays into the way our engagements in the field informed people's comparative endeavors, assessing their ambivalent effects, and thus contributing to generate relevant questions for future research at the crossroads of migration and comparison.

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. Powerful narratives leading people to "collectively envision the world and their own positionalities and mobilities

within it" (Salazar 2011, 577) fuel such imagination. Such narratives often activate a dominant ideology of "development"/"progress" (Pajo 2008; Raffaetà and Duff 2013) that gives prominence and value to the economic domain and results in 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 (Malkki 1992; Merry 2016; Pajo 2008; Wendland 2012) – and to (re)produce national and cultural stereotypes. Nevertheless, they allow social actors to construct a "geographic imagination" (Gregory 1994), as imaginaries of a "better life" come to be associated with a given region or country, and social, cultural, economic, and political context.

Elise first met Nicolás[1], a white Cuban man in his early forties who had arrived in Spain two years earlier from Havana, at the apartment he shared with his wife Blanca and her son in Tarragona. Elise and Blanca were in the middle of breakfast on Blanca'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!". Blanca 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 fieldwork. In highlighting how well he had 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 an Afro-Cuban man of very humble origins in his forties who had lived in Japan for over a decade before returning to Cuba. As he roamed the streets of Old Havana with no apparent purpose, his peers, who knew him well before his first marriage to a Japanese woman, gossiped about his trajectory. What was Ozmin doing back in Cuba? Had he returned with an idea for a business in mind? Late one evening, as they shared some rum in a park in Old Havana, Yaniel, who was familiar with Ozmin's story, openly challenged him, arguing that he had 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 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, said Ozmin, hanging out in the street, at one o'clock in the morning, listening to music and sipping rum, with beautiful Cuban women passing by. "This is life!", he exclaimed, becoming excited and trying to make others see his point. But for Ozmin's 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 over-arching 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".

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 free and reasoned decision-making.

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 coming from a working-class neighborhood of Quito, who had experienced a series of setbacks in Spain that pushed him to return in 2013. In Spain, Julio 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 failed to find a job. 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 a different sphere of value than 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. Currently, he prioritized a "simple life", for which Ecuador was a better place. Such prioritization, however, could also 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 Julio had decided to stay in Ecuador despite not having met prevailing expectations on economic improvement via migration.

Unraveling comparison: leveling 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, a middle-class man in his fifties from Quito, 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 in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis. What Agustín valued and 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" policies. With the regime change – which for Agustín meant shifting to "capitalist" politics – and 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 such an ideal before changing course. In 2022, Agustín left Ecuador for Palma de Mallorca, Spain. There, however, 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 with 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, a white Cuban man who had grown up in an impoverished family of farmers, emphasized his global subalternity moving between Europe and Cuba. Now in his forties, Jorge

returned from France to Viñales, a rural town and tourism "hot spot" about 200 km west of Havana, 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. Draining the sewage installation, 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. "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 when 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 contrasted starkly with the tepid and dismissive reactions that Jorge often 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, disattunement, 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, 18) – what Berlant (2011)

calls "cruel optimism" – namely, that the high hopes generated by prospective migration are frequently met with "feelings of failure" (Graw and Schielke 2012, 18) 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 convince their audiences of the primacy of other values that strained their sense of belonging.

The challenges of belonging: lost in comparison?

Discussing anthropological comparison, Candea (2019) 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. An Afro-Cuban man in his early forties, with a tough youth before finding his way out of Cuba through marriage to a French woman, he had been back in Viñales for

about a year when he and Valerio first met, after having spent twenty 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 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 seemed 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 are the way returnees may face material, practical, and social difficulties (Conway and Potter 2007; Gmelch 1980; Stefansson 2004), or the jealousy and envy expressed by those who stayed behind (Gmelch 1980; Oxfeld and Long 2004). Research in other areas of the world shows how 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" and heightened reflexivity about how they have changed (ibid, 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 that people were taking advantage of his lost familiarity with local ways of doing business. He became 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.

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. A middle class Afro-Cuban woman in her mid-fifties 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, Lareina 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 Blanca 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 requires "opening up the world" (ibid, 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.

While a growing body of literature links transnational mobility with emotional life (Boccagni and Baldassar 2015; Skrbiš 2008; Svašek 2010), the role of comparison has been mostly overlooked. And yet, as Walker (2023, 192–195) recently noted, "comparison does more than produce knowledge: it produces emotions" and "affective dispositions", which "not only push people to compare in the first place, as a motivating factor, but also are an important part of its effects". 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 Havana in January 2019. Alberto came from a white middle-class family with Italian ancestry, which had lost much of its socio-economic status following the 1990s economic crisis in Cuba. He had returned to live on the island in 2014 after ten years in Rome, and the

close friendship he developed with Valerio gave the latter many occasions to grasp Alberto's stance towards migration and its consequences. "Migration is a bad thing", Alberto observed late one night, as he and Valerio were roaming the streets of Havana 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 to 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, 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, 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 them 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 acts of rational choice between two discrete alternatives (Lambek 2008). 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 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 (Graw and Schielke 2012) as a way to achieve a "better life" for oneself and one's family. Such narratives tend to rely on dominant standards and criteria as the benchmark, the "higher principle", "meta-value" (Lambek 2008; Robbins 2012), and external vantage point of comparison. Comparing Cuba or Ecuador with Spain – or, for that matter, France, Italy, and Japan – along a linear evaluative axis of "economic development" made for a strong and convincing rationale to account for migrants' decision-making. Such comparison was easily relatable and justifiable. It was clearly audible. It downplayed hesitation, doubt, compromise, and ambivalence in weighing values and alternatives, including, for instance, notions of freedom, love, familiarity, peace of mind, simplicity, and "life itself" (see Ozmin), as what mattered most.

In the worst-case scenario, lack of clarity as to the comparative criteria and values 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. The theoretical approach we propose, at the juncture of studies of transnational migration, value regimes, and everyday modes of comparison, is what enables such analytical insights to emerge.

This brings us to the emotional and affective drives and effects of comparison. These are aspects often neglected in social science reflections on comparison (Walker 2023) and emotions in migratory contexts (Boccagni and Baldassar 2015; Herrera, Espinosa, and Lara-Reyes 2022; Skrbiš 2008; Svašek 2010) but which our article clearly highlights, and on which we encourage more studies of migration to focus. 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 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 decision-making and choices called for comparison, what did such comparisons demand of our interlocutors? These are among the questions opened by our study.

By empathetically engaging with our interlocutors, our hope was also to open up a 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. However, as the adoption of a reflexive stance towards our research methods and endeavors foregrounds, our lines of questioning could also work *against* our research participants, forcing them to reluctantly dwell in uncomfortable comparisons, 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, particularly as we reflect on the generative potential and ethical dimensions of comparative lines of enquiry. This means paying closer attention to the entanglements, resonances, and frictions between how we deploy comparison in research – relying for instance on taken-for-granted axes of difference and sameness, typically national, ethnic, and sociodemographic variables – and whether these may inhibit or bias a subtler understanding of why, how, and to what effect people-on-the-move compare.

Note

1. All the data and conversation excerpts presented in the article are based on interviews or recollection after the events occurred and were translated into English by the authors. Personal names and some details in the examples presented were altered to protect the confidentiality of research participants.

Ethics statement

The research received ethics approval by the European Research Council (Ethics Monitoring Note-759649-006, Ref. Ares(2023)4985918 - 18/07/2023).

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