

## ORIGINAL ARTICLE

# Of home-comings and home-scales: Reframing return migration through a multiscale understanding of home

Luis Eduardo Pérez Murcia  | Paolo Boccagni

University of Trento – ERC StG HOMInG – The Home-Migration Nexus, Trento, Italy

### Correspondence

Luis Eduardo Pérez Murcia, University of Trento – ERC StG HOMInG – The Home-Migration Nexus, Trento, Italy.  
Email: [lepm50@gmail.com](mailto:lepm50@gmail.com)

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## Abstract

Is return migration a form of ‘homecoming’, as common sense would have it? While increasing research has addressed both its determinants and the underlying lived experience, still lacking is a systematic revisit of return through the prism of home studies. Based on a multiscale approach to home and on our fieldwork into Ecuadorian migration, we explore return as a life transition between separate geographic spaces and biographical times; in essence, as an ongoing interplay between different views, forms and scales of home. What potential returnees construct as home, how different this is from the past, and on what spatial and temporal scales they (re)locate their sense of home, are all critical influences on their return orientations and practices. Overall, little generalization can be made about the shifting temporalities and spatialities of return migration. Nonetheless, reconstructing the attendant (re)locations of home affords a more nuanced and sensitive understanding of it.

## KEYWORDS

home, multiscale, return migration, spatiality, temporality, transnationalism

We worked in Spain three years saving every Euro we could to buy our house. We could no longer wait and as soon as we collected the money we travelled back and bought it. The house was so perfect to me and my girls were so happy. Each one had their own room. That was home. The house was beautiful and Guayaquil a good place to live. I thought it was home. Then, we lost the house due to a bad financial investment and we moved to Esmeraldas. This is my hometown and I love it but I no longer feel home. I am always thinking about going back to Spain. I was a fool asking my partner to come back to Ecuador. I just thought it was good to be back home. [Beatriz]

## INTRODUCTION

Return migration is often and implicitly seen as a matter of homecoming, as long as migrants' place of origin is their 'natural' home. Such an assumption, however, may hide more than it reveals. As the narrative that opens this article illustrates, the illusion of homecoming for returnees may easily vanish. This is not only because places and the social relations that constitute them are in flux (Massey, 1991, 2005), as much as people's place attachments and their personal social circumstances. Less visibly, but as critically, migrants' ideas, emotions and expected locations of home may change along with their imaginations and practices of return. What do the spatial and temporal scales of home reveal, then, about the actual or imagined experience of return?

In addressing this question by exploring the multiple layers and meanings of home (Blunt & Dowling, 2006; Brickell & Datta, 2011), we argue that the home(land) conflation can no longer be taken for granted upon return migration. Home, instead, may be rearticulated at different scales: country, city, neighbourhood, house and so forth. Our analysis intertwines the critical literature on home and migration with our qualitative research among Ecuadorian migrants in Europe and their families back in Ecuador. This involved a number of returnees who stayed in Ecuador, returnees who came back to Europe, people who stayed for short visits, and people who were contemplating a return option.

Theoretically speaking, we engage in a conversation with the literature on homecoming (Jones, 1984; Markowitz, 2004; Schutz, 1944), more recent ethnographies of home visits and return migration (Baldassar, 2001; King, 2017; Kalir, 2017; McGavin, 2017; Percival, 2013; Sampaio, 2017), and the interdisciplinary realm of home and migration studies (Boccagni, 2017). The latter invites a multidimensional and multiscale view of home, as a notion that is as ambiguous as necessary to appreciate people's social relationship with the place(s) they care most about—whether these overlap with their dwellings or lie away in space and time. Home itself, as a meaningful and somewhat exclusive relationship with place, is shifting in space and time. It may involve more locations simultaneously or different portions of the same locations, depending on factors such as life course stage and migrant relationships with significant others in the multiple locations they have lived in. Migrants' attachment to multiple places complicates questions of home, and the very idea of returning home. In fact, returning *where*? One's country of origin, the country where one has lived or worked for long, or possibly a location in which one only spent a few months, and yet developed a strong sense of place (Massey, 1991)? The location of migrants' significant others can also change over time, which means that, rather than going back 'home', migrants may consider moving 'elsewhere' (Amrith, 2020). More broadly, home may be experienced in the here-and-now but also be reconnected to the past and to selective memories of it, or anticipated and projected into the future (Boccagni et al., 2020). In short, home is a matter of ongoing engagement with place in, and across, multiple scales (Miranda-Nieto, 2020). Return migration cuts across these spatial and temporal coordinates, thereby providing a meaningful terrain to explore the shifting locations and meanings of home for returnees and their counterparts.

In fleshing out our argument, we first discuss the implications of looking at return through a scalar understanding of home and situate our discussion in return migration studies (*Approaching return migration through a scalar understanding of home* and *Toward an emic and biographically embedded view of return migration* sections). After a brief presentation of our research context (*Imagined and lived experiences of return among Ecuadorian migrants: A case study* section), we analyse the micro-rescaling of home in space and time upon return migration (*No more the same place: return migration*

and the spatial rescaling of home and *No more the same time: return migration and the temporal rescaling of home* sections), picking up empirical examples from our Ecuadorian informants. These cover distinct biographical positions relative to return migration as a 'real fact' or as an 'imaginary'. We eventually illustrate how research on the spatial, temporal and relational bases of home contributes to return migration studies, as long as it unpacks both the tensions that return arises and the prospects to sort them out.

## APPROACHING RETURN MIGRATION THROUGH A SCALAR UNDERSTANDING OF HOME

Return, for people involved in large-scale migration flows such as those between Ecuador and Europe, is potentially a fundamental biographic transition—an individual and family choice embedded in the life course. Whether it ends up in a linear process or a stepwise and reversible one, return still means transitioning between separate geographic spaces and, in a sense, biographic times (Anghel et al., 2019; Stefannson, 2004). Such a transition is illuminated by the study of the spaces, times and relationships migrants associate with home, on different scales. This starts from questioning the common-sense understanding of home as a fixed timespace—a condition attached to one's place of origin and/or to the place where one lives now, and marked by temporal stability and continuity. In fact, reframing home as a multiscalar experience is a necessary exercise within the life trajectories of migrants and returnees.

Return migration, in particular, is a key empirical field to investigate how migrants (re)scale home over time. A scalar view of home, we contend, offers a nuanced understanding of the gap between expectations and 'real facts' that often goes along with return migration (Cerase, 1974; Pauli, 2021). This can be reframed as a biographical transition from seeing the country of origin as natural home (with a subtext of continuity in space and time, across the biographical divide of migration), to finding out that the conflation between home and homeland no longer holds true, if it ever did. Such a gap has to do with often-discussed changes in migrant biographies and in societal circumstances. However, it is also a fruit of people's ways to rescale what they perceive, desire or claim as home. While home rescaling is arguably part and parcel of the life experience of each of us, it becomes more of a necessity for those engaged in large-scale migration. It comes fully back to the realm of conscience and of sensorial experience under circumstances of return migration.

We understand home scaling as an ongoing exercise of shifting back and forward in space (*where*), time (*when*) and relationships (*with whom*), the threshold of what people perceive and experience as homely enough; that is, of the conditions under which they feel sufficiently secure, familiar and in control over their life circumstances (Boccagni, 2017; Boccagni et al. 2020). Does the 'homely-enough' overlap with the present (dwelling) conditions, or is it scaled towards distinct timespaces, including those of migrant countries of origin (and potentially, of return)? Is the notion of home attached to one location as such, or has it primarily to do with a social setting, hence with the presence of some people and the absence of many more? Does one's sense of home rest in one place, or in a combination of different places and times (for instance different countries or locations, or different steps in the life course)? In the case of international migrants, how do their living conditions and social relationships in different locations shape their multiscalar understandings of home and their orientation to stay, return to the country of origin or move elsewhere?

Revisited at a subjective and existential level, all these questions come down to a more fundamental one—'when, where, with whom i feel well, recognized and protected enough'. Such a question encounters different responses over time, oscillating between specific or disperse locations in the here-and-now and in quite different timespaces: 'elsewhere', where people used to or would like to live (Amrith, 2020), 'nowhere' in particular (Pérez Murcia, 2019), or in separate spatial and temporal settings simultaneously (Boccagni et al., 2021). In fact, the (re)location of home varies anyway with socio-demographics and patterns of integration along family, housing and migration trajectories (Cuba & Hummon, 1993), and with the opportunities for people to cultivate new place attachments. Nevertheless, it becomes more of a necessity, and a dilemma, under circumstances or prospects of return migration. Within large-scale migration flows like those of Ecuadorians to Europe, return marks a significant transition in itself, if only for the costs it entails.

Even so, it may well be a non-linear, cyclical or reversible process. As Amrith (2020, p. 17) stresses, 'migration is not a story with a beginning and end, but one of shifting subjectivities across multiple locales, nations, time frames and generations'. Whatever the ensuing developments, it is worth exploring as a stage upon which people rescale their views, emotions and practices of home in multiple ways. Unpacking them affords a better understanding of return itself, as we illustrate through our fieldwork.

## TOWARDS AN EMIC AND BIOGRAPHICALLY EMBEDDED VIEW OF RETURN MIGRATION

### Situating return in migrant life trajectories

If a commonality can be found across the literature on return migration, this probably lies in the little scope for generalization on its determinants, temporalities and impact. These all vary with the infrastructural development of a migration system and with the socio-demographic and integration patterns of migrants themselves (de Haas et al., 2015; Fokkema, 2011; King, 2000). The perceived outcome of return has to do with a range of factors, including returnees' forms of portable capital, the infrastructures available for transnational connections and the prospects for homeland stability and development (Anghel et al., 2019; Gmelch, 1980; Hagan & Wassink, 2020). In practice, whether return should be framed as successful or not, as durable or provisional, as a source of innovation or otherwise (Cerase, 1974) is a context-dependent question. Whatever the answer, an increasing literature shows that return matters—it has meaningful social and societal consequences—at different biographical stages, as we exemplify through the stories of our Ecuadorian informants:

- (i) as a *new stage in the life course*, for those who did return to their country of origin, in the same local area or not, and keep living there for the time being;
- (ii) as an *intermediate step*, in the case of people who did return, only to leave again after a relatively short time span;
- (iii) as a *potential future option*, for those who have been thinking of return and possibly planned it, but have not returned (yet);
- (iv) as *no longer an option*, for those who, after getting settled abroad, no more see permanent return as a viable or meaningful scenario.

While this typology does cover the possible facets of return as an experience or a prospect, it is only meant to designate ideal positions among which people may transition over time. It is not in the scope of this study to produce estimates on the relative incidence of the different 'types'—not even in Ecuador, where recent studies show an increase in return migration in the last decade (Rapado, 2020). Based on our fieldwork, we rather aim to explore the typical meanings of home and of the emotions and practices associated with it in each position.

Unveiling the subjective and biographical underpinnings of return migration, by looking at the scales of home, involves both homeward mobility as such and the constellations of expectations that coalesce upon it. Return is often investigated as a reported intention for the future, with a view to establish what demographics and structures of opportunities affect this intention and the likelihood that it turns into effective mobility (e.g. de Haas et al., 2015). Sociologically speaking, though, even a vague orientation to return matters in itself, as a cognitive solution that allows migrants not to prioritize one country over another (Leavey et al., 1994); put differently, not to have to choose one home as expected final destination, while struggling to achieve better conditions in another. For first-generation migrants like our informants, the availability of a return option operates as a resilient 'imaginary's empty shell' (Bolognani, 2016) with meaningful emotional and social functions. The very possibility of return opens a space for migrants to negotiate both their emotional and instrumental sense of home in multiple locations (Hunter, 2016). It reveals the emotional tug of the (home)land and of the past life there, but it also nourishes a sense of 'future-oriented

embeddedness' (Boccagni, 2015) that alleviates immigrant life hardships. All this being said, return migration is also studied, of course, as an actually existing social process—from the decision to leave, to its enactment and returnees' early adjustment, or lack thereof. In practice, return ends up in an incremental, piecemeal and potentially reversible sequence of events; one that holds an equally variable potential to affect the pre-existing power positions, hierarchies of prestige and social values in the countries of origin (Anghel et al., 2019; Grabowska et al., 2017; Sinatti, 2015).

## Home and the subjective experience of return from below

Both an 'imagined return' (Bivand-Erdal, 2017) and the actual return experience can be fruitfully revisited in terms of home (re)scaling. As we explore the subjective underpinnings of migrant 'return home', however, we need to acknowledge that both words are as fundamental as problematic. Unlike other key concepts in migration studies such as transnationalism or assimilation, return is 'a category that people themselves use, embellish, and understand' (Oxfeld & Long, 2004, p. 3). What migrants understand as return—and indeed, as home—can be deconstructed and appreciated, therefore, as a mirror of the biographic circumstances that shape return migration itself.

Revisiting return migration from below is not just another way to foreground migrant voices and viewpoints. It also makes for an entry point into the fundamental ambivalence of return. As migrants engage in it, or even only contemplate the option, they invariably face the consequences of their spatial and temporal distance from the communities of origin. This may be hardly affected by re-established bodily proximity. As Schutz famously pointed out (1944, pp. 369–75):

To the homcomer home shows—at least at the beginning—an unaccustomed face. He believes himself to be in a strange country [...]. Home means one thing to the man who never left it, another thing to the man who dwells far from it, and still another to him who returns. [...] The home to which he [*the homcomer*] returns is by no means the home he left or the home which he recalled and longed for during his absence. And, for the same reason, the homcomer is not the same man who left. He is neither the same for himself nor for those who await his return.

While Schutz was primarily referring to returnees such as soldiers and veterans, his argument has resounded in migration studies since. Several ethnographies of return migration, circular mobility (Hunter, 2016) and even short-term visits (Baldassar, 2001; McGavin, 2017) have unveiled the fine-grained foundations of an increasing dissimulation between migrants and their counterparts (Fitzgerald, 2014). As many returnees discover, their day-to-day routines and lifestyles abroad have been diverging from those of left-behinds, including their dear ones. Matching the ones and the others, and reconciling their respective experiences of space and time, may entail a significant effort. This does not mean that return migration is doomed to 'fail' in any way. It does mean, though, that the place of origin may feel no more like home to returnees, and that their very conceptions and locations of home may diverge from it.

Following this argument, reconstructing what spatial and temporal coordinates returnees associate with home (or imagine, if planning return), and how flexible and sensitive to reality checks the frame is, opens up a promising research agenda into the subjective experience of return. This reveals a whole range of scales and bases of home, with two underlying commonalities: first, home as an emplaced emotion is less and less likely to overlap with a single place, including one's country or local community of origin; and second, meanings and experiences of home tend to change over the life course anyway (Walsh & Näre, 2016). Home thus operates in and across multiple scales and timespaces, to be explored in light of their reach and of the dilemmas they raise. Prior to discussing that, some notes are in order on our fieldwork.

**TABLE 1** Ecuadorian interviewees: A sociodemographic background ( $n = 97$ )

Variable	With direct experience of return		With no direct experience of return	
	Male	Female	Male	Female
Number	8	12	36	41
Age (average)	45.4	48.51	39.86	45.15
Living in Ecuador	3	8	19	22
Living abroad (Spain, United Kingdom, Italy)	5	4	17	19
Length of stay abroad (average)	10.66	14.5	13	16.5

## IMAGINED AND LIVED EXPERIENCES OF RETURN AMONG ECUADORIAN MIGRANTS: A CASE STUDY

This article draws from narrative and ethnographic materials collected among Ecuadorian migrants in Europe (Spain, Italy and the United Kingdom) and their non-migrant counterparts in Pichincha, Guayas, Esmeraldas and El Oro between 2018 and 2021, within HOMInG, a broader comparative study of home and migration. We followed a multi-sited research design through multiple points of access, aiming to maximize participants' diversity in terms of gender, age, migration trajectories, and occupation. In practice, our selection was also influenced by the variable ethnographic engagement with participants themselves, and with their transnational family networks. We conducted in-depth interviews with 97 Ecuadorians (including dual nationals) and engaged in more extended participant observation with 59 of them. Among our interviewees, with some of whom we had also follow-up interviews and 'home visits', 20 had a direct experience of return migration, at different stages: as 'permanent' returnees, for the time being at least; as potential returnees at an exploratory stage, in fact commuting between countries; as former returnees who had then migrated further. Eighteen more interviewees mentioned return as a potential option ahead of them and 30 of the left-behind family members we interviewed were witnesses of the impact of return migration on their life circumstances.

Participants' age covered the whole spectrum, from 19 to 88. Fifteen out of the 97 interviewees came from rural areas and eight from indigenous communities. In line with migration trends between Ecuador and Europe (Herrera et al., 2005), most migrants arrived in the early 2000s with tourist visas. Many of them have spent several years (from two up to 10) as undocumented migrants, and most hold dual nationality by now. Of those we interviewed in the United Kingdom, the majority moved there after getting a Spanish passport. With a few exceptions, our participants have low levels of education attainment. Most completed primary or secondary school back in Ecuador and a few hold an academic degree in Spain, United Kingdom or Italy. Most female interviewees were working in the hospitality and care sectors or in supermarkets. Their male counterparts were working in hospitality (mainly restaurants) as well as in construction, security, cleaning and farming. As Table 1 suggests, there are no major differences between the bulk of our interviewees and those with a direct experience of return.

All across the narratives of our interviewees, return was not necessarily articulated as a theme in itself. It rather emerged out of their incessant comparison between 'here' and 'there', or 'then' and 'now', as well as in their ways to rescale home across different locations, in the attempt to bridge the distance between them. More specifically, migrants in Europe were asked if and how their mobility trajectories had affected their attitudes towards home. Questions such as what and where home is, and with whom you feel at home, were part of the semi-structured interview guidelines. For left-behind kin in Ecuador, we focused on whether and how transnational family life had been shaping their everyday experience of home. In the case of returnees interviewed in Ecuador, we explored how far they felt at home in their current locations and what challenges they had encountered in making themselves at home there. Overall, we approached return as a potential step within a broader economy of mobilities and investments, rather than as

an event in itself. At an aggregate level, however, return has been the subject of increasing and dedicated research, including in Ecuador (Abainza & Calfat, 2018; Herrera & Martínez, 2015). While acknowledging this, for the remit of this article, we do not specifically address the sustainability and impact of return, which would require a study in itself. We aim rather to capture, through the optic of home (re)scaling, some idealtypical configurations that speak to a larger debate on transnational migration and changing views, emotions and practices of home.

## NO MORE THE SAME PLACE: RETURN MIGRATION AND THE SPATIAL RESCALING OF HOME

On the surface of it, the spatial outcome of return migration is self-evident. To the eyes of prospective returnees and in much academic discourse, return is essentially a way of going back home, as long as the country or local community of origin qualifies as such. Empirically speaking, though, the identification of such a place as home in a normatively positive sense should not be taken for granted, particularly for refugees and forced migrants (Graham & Khosravi, 1997; Pérez Murcia, 2019; Zetter, 1999). Wherever the material bases of home as dwelling or local community are inaccessible or were disrupted altogether, return migration or repatriation has obviously little to do with homecoming (Jeffery & Murison, 2011; Markowitz, 2004). Even for labour migrants, as already discussed above, returning home is hardly a restoration of the previous order of things. This is not only due to the transformations of places over time (Massey, 1991). It is also because of the changing life views and conditions of both migrants and left-behinds, as migration, from the very outset, dramatically expands the multiscalarity of home. The point is not only that people may feel at home here or there, or even in both (or no) locations (Pérez Murcia, 2019). More radically, migrants and returnees articulate their sense of home along different and shifting scales, not necessarily in tune with each other, or nested into each other. A case in point comes from the stories of Beatriz, who opened this article, Gloria, Juan Carlos and Santiago who were interviewed in Esmeraldas, Quito, Uyumbicho, and Madrid, respectively.

Beatriz spent 3 years in Spain with her partner. As she recounts, she did not feel completely at home there, mainly because of the cold winters and her own attachment to Esmeraldas. When the Spanish government launched a financial incentive scheme to support migrant return, Beatriz welcomed the opportunity. 'I persuaded my partner, sold everything and we found ourselves back to Ecuador'. With the money they had got back for social security and pension schemes, the couple bought a house in Guayaquil, a car and a piece of land.

Upon return, Beatriz did experience a positive sense of homecoming. She had been able to buy her 'dream house' (Fletcher, 1999). Her family members had given her a warm welcome. She still remembers the joy of her entire family when they moved into the brand-new house. This was located in a condominium with a pool and the sport facilities for the children she had always desired. Although she had not come back to Esmeraldas, where most of her extended family live, she felt at home in Guayaquil. Following return, regular visits to her family in Esmeraldas were also experienced as being at home. This dramatically changed, however, when Beatriz and her partner lost their house. 'It was my home. I do regret I gave my consent to mortgage the house. In the end we made a very bad investment in a license store and we lost everything. All our effort in Spain just gone'. They would have probably left for Spain again if it had not been for the conditionalities of the return programme, which made this impossible. Instead, they moved back to Esmeraldas:

Everyone in Esmeraldas welcomed us and showed solidarity about our lost house and offered us support. However, here [*in Ecuador*] I have never achieved the standard of living I used to have in Spain. There you have better school facilities, universities, health facilities. You are able to properly feed your family. I do regret my stubbornness to return and I wish we can go back there again. I still see home here [*in Ecuador*] because I am with my family but we are doing anything we can to go back. This time, we do not expect to return.

Beatriz's account shows us the centrality of significant relationships (Holmes & Burrows, 2015) for understanding home. Her emotional home was largely linked to Esmeraldas, where her extended family lives, but a more practical understanding of home informed both her decision to settle back in Guayaquil and her nostalgia for Spain (Hunter, 2016; Walsh & Näre, 2016). Her narrative also reveals the multiple scales returnees associate with the idea of home, notably country, city and house. The location, distribution and accessibility of family members and other dear ones shape the perceived position of home, and the view of homecoming as a source of continuity with past family life. Her account also reveals the ephemerality of homecoming as a normatively positive experience, though. This largely vanished after her financial circumstances changed.

Moreover, there may well be a transition period between going back to one's country of origin and feeling at home again, if ever. There is little new in this, if we look at the interplay between return and homecoming by conflating home with homeland. In fact, a migrant may experience a sense of going back home at the national scale, while feeling very little at home upon different ones: city, neighbourhood and house.

Gloria left Quito for Madrid in 1995 and spent 15 years there, working as a caregiver for older people. At an early stage, as a live-in careworker, she would hardly feel at home in the place of someone else (Boccagni, 2018). Later on, she started to live with relatives and friends, having her own room and sharing access to communal areas such as the living room and kitchen. However, rarely did she feel at home there either (Miranda-Nieto, 2020). This was mainly related to the fact that, in a cohousing arrangement, she did not have a space of her own, under her own control. 'I had a very positive relationship with my cousin and paid the rent for my room', recounts Gloria, 'but it was *her* house. The experience with friends was similar. I always felt in other people's places'. In sum, Gloria did not feel at home in the many houses she lived in Madrid over time. This does not mean, however, that Gloria would feel irremediably homesick. Rather, she built a strong emotional connection with public areas in the city and started to realise that she was actually more at home there: in cafes reading a book, in a bar drinking a glass of wine, in a public park contemplating the environment and being with herself.

Gloria had moved to Spain with the intention to collect money for a new house in a plot of land she had inherited from her mother. As a matter of fact, by living in shared flats for so long she was able to save money and return as initially planned. However, after her initial excitement for being back, she started to miss the 'home in the public' (Boccagni & Duyvendak, 2021) she had enjoyed in Madrid. Now she felt somehow enclosed in her house, as there was no longer 'the rich Spanish environment, with cultural activities everywhere', to feel at home outdoors: a café for spending her free time reading a book, or a bar to stay on her own for hours, without being misjudged as a non-accompanied woman. 'In Ecuador', she stressed, 'women are subject to gossiping if they go to a bar alone. People think you are looking for a partner'.

Once back to Ecuador, moreover, Gloria missed a sense of being safe in the public space. Even the less secure areas of Madrid, she said, are safer than most places in Quito. On top of this, people in Quito tended to look at her as a foreigner for her dress code and Spanish accent. Although foreigners are notably welcome in cities like Quito, the locals, she said, tended to make fun of her. 'They thought I was pretending to be a Spaniard. They did not understand that after so many years in a country your accent and the ways you speak may change a lot'. Following this, Gloria started to spend more and more time indoors. Within the house she had built with her savings, she created a private 'Spanish corner' with the favourite objects she had brought from Spain (Boccagni & Pérez Murcia, 2021). In sum, she brought the public space of Madrid into her private space in Quito. Overall, then, Gloria experienced return as going back to her homeland but found that home needed to be scaled down to her Spanish-inspired domestic space. Although her journey 'ended' in the place she planned, the lived experience of that place did not match her expectations. As Amrith (2020, p. 5) suggests, 'migrants orient themselves in unpredictable ways as past, present and future experiences intertwine to produce ambivalent emotional lives'.

A more positive experience of homecoming was narrated by Juan Carlos. After a short period in Spain, he moved back to Ecuador and built a house on the second floor of his father's storey house. Part of his motivation to migrate to Spain, he said, was gathering money to build a family house. As his experience illustrates, a 'remittance house' completely built or refurbished, as an investment and a marker of achievement, may be a precondition for 'successful'



return. That house felt like home to Juan Carlos. In building it he had practiced the techniques he had learnt by working hard as a bricklayer in Spain. However, the house is not the only aspect that has shaped his homecoming. Upon a 'walking tour' with Juan Carlos across Uyumbicho, Pérez Murcia noticed that he was deeply engaged with the town and people around him. As he eventually stressed, he had good memories of Spain but had always planned to be back: 'You know, it is good to be home and look after your dear ones'.

Juan Carlos' brother, Santiago, still lives in Spain. He would also like to build a house in Ecuador for his wife and daughter, but his initial return plan 'in a few years' has been indefinitely postponed. After getting a residence permit, Santiago decided to apply for family reunification. After a holiday visit to his family in Uyumbicho, however, his wife got pregnant with his second child. 'I do not know what is best for the family now,' he told Pérez Murcia in a follow-up interview,

whether to go back or stay longer and save more money for our house. At the same time, I think my children and my wife will have more opportunities here. If you ask my wife, she would probably tell you that it doesn't matter where, as long as we live together.

'If you ask me about home,' added Santiago, 'I would say my family is home'—a transnationally distributed one. What 'Madrid' meant to him, however, was less clear: 'I do not know. I feel comfortable here but miss my family'. Return for Santiago is still a plan but it is unclear if it will ever come true. He has strong affective and cultural attachments for his indigenous community back in Uyumbicho, but every time Pérez Murcia has the opportunity to follow up his life story, he seems equally engaged with Madrid.

To wrap up, both returnees and those who imagine return conceive and (re)negotiate home along multiple and possibly conflicting scales. This process is critically affected by the temporality of return migration (including the possible 'temporal mismatch' between returnees and their counterparts), and by the temporal multiscale of the very notion of home, as we illustrate in the next section.

## NO MORE THE SAME TIME: RETURN MIGRATION AND THE TEMPORAL RESCALING OF HOME

The temporal dimensions and implications of the migration experience have received increasing attention in the recent literature (e.g. Cwerner 2001; Griffiths et al., 2013). The contribution of a time-sensitive understanding is also valuable for the study of return migration (Bivand-Erdal, 2017; Carling et al., 2011). This is not only because return is temporally patterned, as a biographical step that may be postponed, enacted and reversed. Variables such as length of stay, age at migration and stage in the life course affect both individuals' orientation towards return and their patterns of homecoming (Jeffery & Murison, 2011). As remarkable is that the experience of time returnees encounter—the rhythms and pace of everyday life in the context of origin—does not necessarily match the one they had got accustomed to abroad. This makes temporality a central, if hidden aspect of their efforts at readjustment after return (Levitt & Lamba-Nieves, 2011).

Still more intriguing, for our purposes, is the temporal scalarity of the notion of home. The desire and possibly the experience of return migration may be driven by different and temporalized understandings of home: as something that reaches back to the past, possibly to one's childhood home in the country of origin, which is as suggestive as remote from the here-and-now; as a construction that is maintained and nourished in the present through migrants' transnational connections; as a notion that is projected into the future and tentatively re-emplaced in the country of origin, in the moral economy of a 'natural' life trajectory in which migration is reframed as the only real breach. While home as the place of origin may be a fixed location (albeit one that does change over time), home in the normative sense of an expected place of comfort and protection is neither fixed or immutable. It is worth interrogating the ways in which returnees rescale it across the continuum of past, present and future, and their degrees of openness to the

test of reality. Ultimately, the critical factor is not only how home-like a place feels in the here-and-now, but also what potential it holds to become home again, given returnees' life opportunities; in short, whether or not people can reasonably envision it as their future home.

Mira and Camilo went back to the province of Guayaquil after several years in Almería, Spain. Camilo migrated in the early 2000s and started to work on a farm. He and his wife shared the ambition of buying a plot of land in Guayas and building a house there. It was their plan to stay in Spain as long as needed to gather the funds. Plans changed, though, when their teenage son Marco had a severe accident in Ecuador and became paraplegic. By then, Camilo had a resident permit and was able to apply for family reunification. Part of their savings were spent in bringing his whole family to Spain: Mira and the two children. The rationale was to bring the best medical care available to their son. Even so, the damage in his body was diagnosed as irreversible. Although the family settled in Spain for years waiting for a 'miracle cure' and postponing return accordingly, at some point they reluctantly engaged with a different scenario—their son might not move his limbs and walk again. In turn, Marco, who lives in a special care unit in Madrid, would have liked to go back because of his emotional connection with Ecuador and people there. However, he receives care of higher quality in Madrid. He is also entitled to social benefits—since his disability was diagnosed as total and permanent—which would hardly be accessible in Ecuador.

At the end, Mira and Camilo returned to Ecuador, whereas their son and daughter stayed in Spain. Although the family split brought significant emotional impacts, Mira stressed that 'we are a strong family and look after each other regardless of where each of us is living'. Her son and daughter are always present in their new house in Guayas, she added, with a room being built for each of them. Marco's was a 'special' one, as she proudly showed Pérez Murcia upon a video tour.

There are no barriers in this house. When my son comes he can freely move with his wheelchair to every corner. His room was built following the one he lives in the care unit in Madrid. We know he loves Guayas and people in our town love him. When he comes for holidays, everyone in our community is waiting for him. He is so charismatic and good-looking and people like to spend time with him.

'Our house', added Mira,

[D]oes not only think about our needs but above all about our son's needs. He holds two nationalities and two homes. He is Spanish and Ecuadorian at the same time and he has a home in Madrid and a home here [*in Guayas*]. He can feel the love of people in both places.

This family narrative is revealing of the entanglement of multiple scales in negotiating return and homecoming. It also shows the importance of life disruptions in migrants' sense of home and attitudes towards return. Once they have eventually made it back to Ecuador, Mira and Camilo feel proudly at home in the new house they built, as much as in town. 'Our community cares about us', says Mira. 'When we arrived after eight years in Spain, people welcomed us and wanted to know about our lives there and about our children'. In the domestic space, however, they are missing the everyday sense of family they used to experience before migrating to Spain. In turn, Marco feels largely at home in his care unit room and in Madrid at large. 'I can go wherever I want in my wheelchair. You know, most areas of Madrid are accessible for people with disabilities. I can easily go to visit my sister in the metro and go back to my room'. At the same time, he loves Ecuador—his country, culture and people—and appreciates that his parents built a special room for him.

People [*in Guayas*] have always been so kind to me. It's not because of the accident, they were kind to me when I used to spend my time with them. I was welcome in every house. When I go back, I see they still care about me. I am part of their lives and they are part of mine.

Return, however, is not an option. 'I know I can freely move in our place because of the efforts of my parents, but what about other people's houses and the city? I would probably be most of the time enclosed or relying on others to go out—I do not want that for my life'. In essence, the scale on which Marco experiences home back in Guayas had reduced itself over time, eventually overlapping with the family house. This is not only because he has long lived in Madrid. Besides that, the impossibility to freely move around has made him aware that return, as opposed to short-term holidays, is unviable. As in the case of Beatriz, the emotional and instrumental aspects of home shape Marco's attitudes towards return (Hunter, 2016). This is a more or less desirable, realistic and sustainable option, depending on people's personal circumstances over the life course—those that made them leave in the first place, and those that would make them feel at home or not again.

The significance of critical life events and the multiple tensions inherent in negotiating home emerge also from the stories of those who visit their homeland for a while, only to decide to leave it again. Karla's story is a case in point. Born in Quito, she was 'left behind' with her sister and grandparents when her divorced mother migrated to Spain in search for better financial opportunities for the family. Once she acquired residency, she brought her two daughters to Spain and over time met a Spanish partner and created a new family. As a result, Karla grew up 'between two homes': the one with her mother, sister and stepfather in Madrid and the one with her grandparents in Quito. She does feel at home in her Madrid room, which is decorated at her wish, as well as in her house and in the city as a whole, 'both with the Ecuadorian community and with Spaniards'. She was not considering going back, except for holidays with her grandparents, until she was diagnosed with bulimia. At that point, together with her mother she decided that 'there is no place like home' to recover, both physically and emotionally. She then travelled back to start a special medical treatment.

When I was so fragile, I began to think more and more about my grandparents' house. It was home. [...] There are good doctors in Madrid everywhere and people who know how to deal with bulimia but what I needed was home. I needed the love and affection of my grandparents. They were always feeding me like a child and giving me love.

In Quito, Karla's grandfather explained:

Karla's home is Ecuador, with us. Here she finds a sense of family. We know her mother and siblings are in Spain, and they love her as much as we do. In Spain, however, migrants only have time for work and very little time for family. She came here because she needed love to overcome that terrible illness.

And Karla's aunt added:

When people have a life-threatening medical condition, what they most need is attention and support, even more than medicines. Love and affection are the best medicine and that is what Karla always finds in this house. All of us, including our close neighbours, care about her.

Likewise, Karla's narrative prioritizes love over medical care for her recovery. It was the love of her grandparents in their own place, she says, that facilitated her recovery. After recovering, however, she decided to go back to Spain. While return to Ecuador had indeed been a form of homecoming, her family in Madrid was equally home—and equally important for her to return.

While Karla's story exemplifies the multiple and entangled scales of home over time, both in Ecuador and Spain, Paola's narrative illustrates further the complexities of return, and the contrasting ways in which people in one family understand home on different scales. After 11 years in Spain, and largely due to the financial crisis, Paola and her family went back to Esmeraldas. This was nothing like 'going home', however, for her two Spain-born children, who struggled to cope with the cultural differences between Spain and Ecuador on every single scale. They disliked the city,

the neighbourhood, and found the remodelled house uncomfortable. As Paola's aunt in Esmeraldas pointed out, they just felt remote from home, despite all family efforts to welcome them.

They were always sad and often ill: the weather, food, everything affected them. They just wanted to go back to Spain. We [*the family*] see Ecuador as their home but they think of Spain as home.

Even Paola, contrary to her own expectations, did not feel much at home. This was not only for the challenge of finding a job and feeding her family. After many years in Spain, she found Esmeraldas unsafe. Her experience of home in the domestic space was further complicated by the problems with her partner: 'women in our neighbourhood did not care about our family and my partner either. He just started to have affairs with whoever'. Following this, she began to search for ways to return to Spain.

My partner did not want to go back. He was happy there, spending time with family and friends and affairs. However, I decided to go back to Europe with my children and he decided to join us.

Going back to Spain turned out to be impossible, though. Paola and her husband had lost their property in the context of the Spanish housing crisis and were significantly indebted (cf. García-Lamarca & Kaika, 2016). By resuming an old contact, however, she eventually made it to Manchester. As of now, Paola recounts, 'Ecuador' has become 'a place for holiday'. Apart from her own family, she no longer has strong attachments there. And as long as she thinks of return, she would rather think of Spain. Although she has a house in Ecuador and no house in Spain, the latter is home. In fact, Paola's experience of home is complicated both within and beyond the domestic space (Pérez Murcia, forthcoming). She has recently divorced, which has further affected her ideas of family and home. Unless when she works (i.e. selling street food and cleaning houses), Paola stays most of the time indoors. 'There is no place like Spain,' she repeats. The way she expresses it suggests that every corner of Villafranca del Penedes is home for her and her children. This is not only because of her strong past attachment with that place but also because the divorce makes her 'home' in Manchester less homely. For her partner, however, home seems to be back in Ecuador. Interestingly, for her mother-in-law, who was also interviewed in Esmeraldas, home lies mainly in Manchester, where her son lives. Or, to be more precise, it lies in the memories of living together with him—a temporalized understanding of home, which strives to connect the past with a hardly predictable future.

## TO CONCLUDE: SCALING HOME, MAKING HOME, AND THEIR CRITICAL (MIS)MATCH

This study has illustrated how home is unequally (re)scaled, in space and time, within the actual or imagined experience of return migration. Drawing on the narratives of Ecuadorian migrants in Europe and of their relatives back in Ecuador, we show that a multiscalar approach to home illuminates the complexity and ambiguity of return. Whether as a place or an ideal, home is an inescapable term of reference for returnees. There is a promise, however, in looking at it less as a static entity than as an ongoing attempt to make that entity real—to reproduce, sensorially and materially, a *home-like* lived environment on multiple scales. While such an attempt ends up being more or less successful in people's own terms, it is in any case revealing of their (un)satisfaction with the return experience. Thinking of return means precisely wondering if and under what conditions the place of origin meets a normative standard of home, besides an ascriptive one. While migrants' transnational practices such as sending remittances, or keeping in touch with left-behind kin, already articulate some engagement with that place, returning means precisely betting on its transition from home-of-ascriptio to home-of-achievement. Such a prospect may not live up to the test of reality, whether for the inherent complexity of return or simply because, in the meantime, one's emotional, relational and cognitive field of home has embraced different and contrasting people, places, aspirations and needs. In fact, it is not only people's emplaced

attachments and social relationships that change. Places themselves are also in a continuous process of transformation (Massey, 1991, 2005).

In principle, migrant ways to cultivate transnational connections with their places of origin affect their return 'preparedness' (Cassarino, 2004) and prospects. Whenever potential returnees retain a realistic sense of what used to be home, they are in a better position to assess the risks and opportunities of return. In practice, what happens once they are back cannot be fully predicted in advance. At that point, feeling at home again, and engaging in homemaking as an everyday embedded set of routines and activities, keeps being a necessity. Whether returnees then enjoy or not the conditions to (re)make themselves at home emotionally, relationally and materially says something of their chances for permanence—or of their re-orientation to yet another, potentially future home.

Critical to their efforts is then the scope for them to see home, wherever located, less as a romanticized part of the past than as a place worth investing for the future (Stefannson, 2004).

Furthermore, feelings about home and migrants' homemaking practices may operate across different and even contrasting scales and locations. Migrants constantly negotiate the tensions between their emotional homes, mainly the places where their relatives live, and their instrumental homes. The latter are seen to best suit their own needs, including economic and health ones (Hunter, 2016; Walsh & Näre, 2016). As a result, the question of where returnees feel most at home, if anywhere, has no self-evident or generalized response. The narratives of our interviewees across the Europe–Ecuador corridor powerfully illustrate the tensions between being at home here or there, whenever those who make them feel more at home live 6000 miles away. This is certainly not meant to deny the influence of additional external constraints on return migration, nor the huge variation in its actual occurrence. It however suggests that there is much to gain for scholarship on return by engaging with the multiscalarity of home. One thing—a fixed one—is the dwelling migrants left behind and the moment in time when they did so. Another thing—a biographically evolving and relationally shaped one—is their possibility to reproduce and project into the future a meaningful sense of home in terms of material cultures, atmospheres, people and ways of life. In this perspective, the often-quoted idea of an 'impossibility of return' (Ahmed, 1999, p. 343), which does capture the existential ambiguity of most returnees, is not without limitations. It holds true, as long as we stick to a fixed and past-bound understanding of home. It does not necessarily do so, however, in a more open-ended and interactive perspective. Or rather, it is an invitation to take into account the biographical gap that migration expands between movers and stayers, but also the potential opportunities and resources to negotiate it and limit its downside through homemaking from afar.

Whether as a final event or a step in longer migration trajectories (Amrith, 2020), return exposes people to a disjuncture between different spatialities and temporalities. While the weight of this transition has to do with well-discussed structure- and agency-related factors, there is an everyday dimension that is equally critical: migrants' ability and scope to (re)make and (re)scale home over the life course. How home is perceived, imagined and materialized, on a variety of scales, is then a fundamental and yet neglected aspect of return. It is actually the missing link for the equation between return and homecoming to operate in a meaningful way. Our analysis marks only one step further towards grasping that link. More research is needed for a deeper understanding of how the different temporalities and place attachments of migration shape the lived experience of return across space and time.

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## CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data not available due to privacy/ethical restrictions.

## ORCID

Luis Eduardo Pérez Murcia  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0241-0866>

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