From rapport to collaboration, and beyond?
Respect, opportunities, interests in an ethnography on Ecuadorian migration

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Abstract

The paper revisits my ethnographical study within a translocal migration flow between Southern Ecuador and Northern Italy. The research aimed to make sense "from within" of the social relationships and practices which may connect emigrants with their motherland. As fieldwork was conducted in a fluid and multi-sited "relational field", the import of my relationships with informants (and field members more broadly) was a crucial one. In reflecting upon the development of such rapport, as well as on its impingements, I draw on three interpretive categories: *respect,* in terms of reciprocal recognition and legitimation with the members of the social group I had selected for my fieldwork; *opportunities,* i.e. the influence of structural factors, along with contingencies, on my ethnographic involvement; *interests,* that is the motivations and objectives underlying my participant observation, along with the expectations emerging in those I met and stayed with. The implications and dilemmas of my field relationships are also sketched out, with respect both to the knowledge generated through my fieldwork, and to my own positioning within it. I finally attempt to shed better light on the scope for collaboration, and for fair and "balanced" relationships with the members of my fieldwork –, much more so in a transnational context delimited by significant power imbalances, and by hardly less relevant ethnic boundaries.

Keywords: Ethnography, Relations with informants, Ecuadorian transnational migration, Respect, Opportunities, Interests.

Introduction

"You are a great and good friend of mine", Miriam has recently written to me. She typically makes her more emotionally charged compliments by e-mail, rather than vis-à-vis, in our frequent but gender role constrained conversations. Both of us are married persons*,* Trento is a small environment, and every Ecuadorian migrant (including her) seems to have a peculiar inclination to fortuitously meet, aggregate with and gossip about the rest of them (and, to be sure, on their occasional Italian acquaintances). She was really moved after reading the acknowledgments in my book, as my most extended and passionate credit was to her.

With several dozens of her co-nationals in Trento I had mostly superficial conversations, while in fieldwork, and occasional encounters later on – often prompted by the book itself, as I eventually published it. None of them had read it earlier, and few would be probably interested in doing so even now. With many more of them I had got used to exchanging some clichéd greetings or, perhaps, a nod of reciprocal recognition, and that was all. "You are a very normal, Italian stranger of mine", they probably must have thought, now and then, provided I was significant enough to figure in their thoughts.

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All of these Ecuadorian migrants have made up my fieldwork: the occasional friends and contacts no less than Miriam, along the continuum of their different attitudes and dispositions towards me – overall reflecting the existence of a fragmented and disharmonious ensemble, rather than of a cohesive ethnic community. All of them have provided food for thought here, as a critical revisit of my relationships with them is the aim of this paper.

My fieldwork study resulted in a sustained involvement in their informal sociability initiatives, matched with a few visits to their family members left behind in Ecuador.[1] In the course of one year and a half I took part in a broad range of social events that went beyond the migrants' "wanted but not welcome" role in the local labour market (Zolberg, 1987): football tournaments, dancing groups and multiethnic festivals, associational meetings and even their ordinary ways of going out and spending leisure time together – whatever the activities involved. The sites relevant for my research corresponded to any spaces or situations suitable for co-ethnic sociability and informal gathering, developed and managed by the migrants themselves.

While my key theoretical concern was with migrants' transnationalism (cf. Levitt and Jaworsky, 2007, for a synthesis), the negotiation of my interpersonal relationships with them, and their own contribution to the knowledge generated through the field, emerged as no less significant topics. I will try to assess the meanings and implications of my fieldwork relations in epistemological, socio-political and ethical terms. With a view to this, I will revisit the cumulative course of the interactions with my interlocutors, drawing on three "sense-making" categories (cf. Dervin, 1998) I developed ex post: respect, opportunities and interests. To begin with, I will reflect on the many-sided contribution these persons made to my ethnographic research.

1. The contribution of the Ecuadorian migrants I met, from fieldwork to textwork

Field relations between a researcher and his subjects, albeit an obvious and inherently qualifying marker of ethnography, have traditionally been a matter for secondary attention in academic textworks. Over the last decades, however, they have been increasingly approached as much more than a simple device facilitating data generation. Attention has been growing about their substantive relevance in epistemological terms, and in the light of the socio-political and ethical positioning of the research process (see, among others, Whyte, 1979; Gold, 1985; Marcus, 2007; Crow and Pope, 2008). The

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[1] My ethnographical concern with them was facilitated by the choice of a local context of settlement (Trento, Northern Italy) where migrants from Ecuador are a few hundreds overall, most of them from the same context of origin – the town of Pasaje (El Oro, Southern Ecuador). The latter was a constant reference point for their self-narratives and social lives, and thus a relevant site for my fieldwork. As a part of my PhD research on the transnational ties between the Ecuadorian migrants and their motherland (Boccagni, 2009a), I complemented this participant observation with in-depth biographical interviews (on average lasting two to three hours) to 35 of them in Italy, and to 23 family members of theirs in Ecuador. My choice of the interviewees was "context-specific" and driven by a logic of "theoretical sampling" (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Gold, 1997). It however reflected the greater proportion of women (at about 62%) than man, and of relatively young individuals (the majority of them less than forty years old), among Ecuadorian immigrants in Italy. Ultimately, the criterion that drove my interviewees' selection (and number), along with the time span of the whole ethnography, was the "theoretical saturation" of their transnational social ties (concerning their scope and impact, as well as the personal meanings attached to them).

import of one's relationships with informants, traditionally framed as "rapport" (Springwood and King, 2001), can be critically appreciated all across the research process: in the interactive negotiation of an ethnographer's access, permanence and exit from the "field"; in the distinct motivations, expectations and understandings of the research informants, vs. those of the researcher; in the significant asymmetries in power, resources or opportunities, which may distinguish ethnographers from their counterparts.

From each of these angles, the real status of such counterparts (and of their research contribution) is however contentious and, at the same time, idiosyncratic – as it needs to be situated, and critically assessed, within the specific patterns of every ethnographic effort. Hence my interest to revisit my fieldwork experience, hopefully to produce an exercise of critical reflexivity (e.g. Gray, 2008), rather than of "navel gazing" alone.

1.1 Revisiting fieldwork, even after textwork

This paper is not primarily a story of my fieldwork (Boccagni, 2009a), nor an assessment of the ways and the extent it was a "multi-sited" one (Marcus, 1995; Hage, 2005; Falzon, 2009); or, for that matter, an account of my empirical results (Boccagni, 2009b,c). The focus, here, is rather on the impingements of my relationships with those Ecuadorian migrants, and with their family members left behind, whose reciprocally addressed practices were my object of study. Reflecting on this, as a part of a textwork by now detached (in time and space)[2] from my fieldwork systematic attendance, is a slippery effort. Although it obviously relies on my contextual field notes, the risk exists this conveys, ex post, an idealized picture of my relationships with the Ecuadorian migrants: one swept up of any tensions and misunderstandings with them, and above all of the lack of interest of many of them towards my study (and myself). Indeed, even more than on documentary sources, I'll rely on my own recollections of the personal encounters with them – their faces, expressions, and perceived social and emotional circumstances, along with my personal reactions.

As of now, I happen to go out – or even only to talk – with very few of them. This break with the past may be perceived as an odd behaviour, one hard to be justified with the very migrants – as they know of all the efforts I made to get, and then keep, in touch with them. Still, the hiatus has given me an analytical and emotional detachment, necessary to critically return on my fieldwork-related opportunities and dilemmas.

Despite the potential downsides, my endeavour to resituate my field results, with respect to the personal relationships underlying them, may contribute to the now fashionable debate on collaborative ethnography (Lassiter, 2001; 2005). This builds on an urge to move beyond the traditional construct of rapport, as Marcus summarizes it:

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[2] I ended my systematic involvement in fieldwork almost two years before writing this paper. To be sure, my field notes allowed me to catch several relevant insights, and then to plunge into them. Still, there was no simultaneity between my fieldwork and textwork – and indeed, between my participant observation and field notes writing. This resulted in a significant (if perhaps inevitable) limitation to the emotions and the perceptions, along with the cognitions, I was able to elaborate and convey. While in fieldwork, I happened now and then to think, as I perceived anything surprising, how easier it would have been to "jot it down" there and then – even in social circumstances (e.g. a drink together, a volleyball match, a party, etc.) where this would have been totally incongruous (cf. Emerson et al., 2001: 357). By the way, such temporal disjunctures are a challenge all across social research – as they apply not only to the gap between an empirical study and its textual elaboration, but even to the temporal distance between a draft text and its actual publication.

Classically, the scene of collaboration in ethnography is between the anthropologist and the subject as Other in order to describe the latter's enclosed cultural world […]. But […] it is the outsider initiating a relationship that is exploitative or of mutual interest with an insider, in relation to what the insider already knows or is in a position to be reflexive and paraethnographic about. […] The insider makes her culture visible for the outsider according to the latter's agenda for constituting data. This is collaboration as rapport […]. An alternative has arisen over the past three decades… [whereby the] essential affinity between observer and observed becomes the impetus for ethnography and the different kind of collaboration to which it now gives rise. (Marcus, 2007: 6-7)

Still, what this novel collaboration may amount to, whether for a researcher or for its (former) "Others", is far from obvious. My paper will provide some suggestions in the respect, at least within the realm of migration-related ethnographies (Fitzgerald, 2006). This will concern not only the conditions (and the ethical commitment) qualifying collaboration with informants, but also its reasonable scope in empirically grounded terms – rather than in ideological, or wishful thinking ones.

1.2 A multifaceted contribution: informants, gatekeepers, cognitive mediators

What was, to begin with, the actual research contribution of the Ecuadorian migrants that lay within the perimeter (to be sure, an arbitrary and expedient one) of my fieldwork? A tentative stratification could be made in this respect by drawing, on the one hand, on their inherent "informational yield" (Snow et al., 1986); on the other hand, on their potential for networking, i.e. to contribute to my good reputation, and to facilitate the development of interpersonal relationships with other Ecuadorian migrants.

In this perspective, their contribution can be traced to three functions – enacted to a variable extent, depending on the persons and the social situations involved. These make their role much more significant and complex than a mere subject of study one – demanding, on my side, less obvious acknowledgements and responsibilities. Such functions, which were no prerogative of any single individual, could be classified in terms of increasing complexity:

- *Informants,* obviously concerning the opportunities to gain access to information relevant for the focus of my research, or for its organization (e.g. "who-does-what, when and where"), through ordinary conversations or even simple encounters with them;

- *Gatekeepers,* i.e. the function some of them especially played, in allowing (or legitimizing me) in co-national social circles and events, even only with an introduction of theirs. This did facilitate my access to a greater diversity of social capital and information flows. Such a function was a crucial one both in Italy and in Ecuador, where several migrants literally allowed me in their relatives' homes, despite the physical distance from them. A gatekeeper role was often related to a special concern with my study, or with one's personal affinity with me, but it had even more to do with the central position a few immigrants did have within the coethnic social networks;

- *Cognitive mediators,* that is the function any Ecuadorian immigrant basically played – although some did much more than the rest – to familiarize me with their own life views and ways of doing things, hence with their symbolic references and cognitive schema. The process was even more significant and challenging, as their range of cultural attitudes and practices reflected an ambivalent coexistence between the references to their motherland, and the inputs provided by an extended contact with the Italian

mainstream. This (partially) new socialization function resulted less in outspoken explications of theirs ("we do things that way…"), than in the mere opportunity for me to systematically attend Ecuadorians-only events and meetings.

To be sure, this reclassification of the immigrants' informational, social and cognitive contribution does no justice to their personal identities. My systematic use of *they/them,* all across the paper, is also likely to prove oversimplifying and even reifying. It actually undervalues the significant differences among the Ecuadorian migrants I met, both in their demographic profile and in their trajectories of inclusion overseas – not to mention their orientations to be more or less collaborative with me. Strictly speaking, therefore, my use of a third person in the plural should always be with quotation marks.

Still, this is a first step – one, hopefully, worth being made. A radical deconstruction of the distinct, sometimes conflicting subjectivities conflated into that label, while being a sort of a moral duty towards them, is beyond the scope of this paper, and will need further writing elsewhere.

1.3 Three **sense-making categories**, *two ethical ambivalences*

What does fall, instead, into the remit of this essay is the import, and then the impact, of the mediation provided by my personal interactions with the Ecuadorian migrants, at several levels: a cognitive and epistemological, as well as an emotional and practical one. The paper will elaborate on three categories I found relevant to my rapport with them – that is, to the ways we interacted with each other, the reciprocal expectations at stake, the scope and endurance of the social ties so developed. After taking stock of the real scope for collaboration with the persons I met, I will hazard an assessment of their "epistemic contribution" to the results of my ethnography.

(1.) In the first place, a significant precondition for my fieldwork's effectiveness was represented by *respect.* By this I mean, on my side, a recognition of the self-images displayed by the Ecuadorian immigrants – that is, a non-judging and empathetic stance towards their attitudes and behaviours, along with a concern to make better sense of them; on their side a tacit acceptance, as time went by, of my "being there" as a legitimate and non-disturbing fact.

(2.) A focus on *opportunities,* moreover, sheds light on the role of contingencies that also affected my fieldwork. This involved, for instance, the differential accessibility of the potential sites for participant observation; the selection of the more promising contacts and channels for entering the field; the scope for interacting with each potential informant – in the light both of their concern (or lack of) with me, and of the expected contacts and insights they could give me. No less important was, to be sure, their differential willingness to cooperate, to have some talk together, or even only not to be patently bothered by my presence, as the only outsider within their events.

(3.) A third concern has to do with the *interests* that motivated my choices in delimiting the field, that is in building a "hierarchy of concerns" as to the social situations, and the interlocutors, warranting greater attention. From their viewpoints, the interests (if any) in collaborating with me could perhaps involve an expectation to keep a good reputation, or to be able to ask for something back in their own turn – for instance occasional favours, possibly related to my visits to their relatives in Ecuador.

All across the paper I will also try to cope with two ethical ambivalences emerging from my field relations. The first rests on the categorization effect of my instrumental concern with the Ecuadorian migrants. This was driven less by their personal attributes,

than by a background feature such as their belonging to a given Ecuadorian local community. I will explore, in other words, the impingements of a twofold, somewhat paradoxical stance towards each of the subjects I tried to stay with: (i), *"I am concerned with you less as an individual, than for your social position, or the information and the contacts you may let me have"*; (ii), *"If you were a non-Ecuadorian migrant, or even an Ecuadorian from a different local community, I would have no real grounds to take any notice of you"*.

Another, perhaps more obvious ambivalence involves reciprocity and fairness in the relationships with my informants: *"What can, or should I offer you, in return for your contribution?"*. At an aggregate level, and sometimes even at an individual one, the contribution was a very significant one. How should I cope, if at all, with the asymmetry between the benefits accruing to me (potentially at least) and to them, as a result of our encounters?

Neither issue was ever so overtly expressed, during my research. Still, on what grounds can a correct and fair behaviour with one's fieldwork members be distinguished from a manipolatory or a speculative one? Aside from peculiar cases, in which we did make friends, the return for my informants – if any – would be at most a symbolic and immaterial one. It was contingent on my attempts to make their life styles and conditions more visible, or easier to be understood in non-stereotyped terms, to the Italian natives. Casting some light on the efforts and toils inherent in immigrants' lives, as well as on the dilemmas of their potentially twofold belonging and attachments (involving both the country of settlement and the motherland), could be a reasonable response – in my own view at least.

2. Respect

> *The immigrant football tournament, promoted by the so-called Ecuadorian community (in fact by C. alone, whom I've been following for months), has finally started. Tonight a fight has broken out in the pitch and in the stands. There's a general stampede, the police soon get there and call off the match. After half an hour, a few guys only are still near the pitch: C., some team captains, the Italian pitch manager (who's trying to indoctrinate them as to the "right behaviours"), and myself. And here's a sort of wrong-footing: after spending all the night with the Ecuadorians alone, now – in a small group where they speak Italian, with an Italian dignitary (from their viewpoint at least) – I don't feel any more in a position of inferiority or marginality (sometimes even of mendicity), with respect to them. It is as if the earlier tacit hierarchies that allowed me to enter the field – whereby they are the landlords, and I am the host searching for information – had already been overturned. All of a sudden, there I see again "the immigrants", doing any sort of "hard work". It's also not to lapse back into this cognitive frame, indeed, that I prefer staying always with the Ecuadorians only…* [3]

> *We're at R.'s, an Ecuadorian dancing teacher, for long married to an Italian. As every year, she's rehearsing a few Ecuadorian girls for the "typical dance" they will perform at the "Peoples' Festival", next Sunday. As usual, I'm the only one out of place – as an Italian, and as a man. R. soon introduces me to the rest, in a more or less humorous way: "This is Mr. Paolo. He's a good guy, he's writing down his thesis… on us! Be careful, we're the object of his study! How do you feel, as you're being studied?".* [4]

There is a principle which I found specially fit to underpin my relations with the Ecuadorian migrants, and to understand their expectations towards me (and the host

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[3] Fieldwork notes, Trento, 02/04/2006.
[4] Fieldwork notes, Trento, 26/03/2006.

society in general): respect.[5] In my experience, this was not only an ethical and practical precondition for the empirical research viability. It was also a way to satisfy the only tacit demand that every Ecuadorian migrant would address to me: no matter my real closeness to them, or the returns they could get from my frequentation, respecting them – understanding, without questioning, their own terms of representing themselves –, would provide an answer to a pervasive expectation of theirs. This applied both to the interpersonal relationships with each of them, and to my ways of staying in their sociability contexts.

2.1 To the people: approaching them as ordinary (Ecuadorian) guys, rather than immigrants (or subjects of study)

I often appreciated, while in fieldwork, the importance of an empathic attitude, one oriented to build unsophisticated and informal relations with my informants. However, against the risk of constructing such relations as "peer-based" – which they hardly could have been, whatever my wishes –, a more minimalist notion of respect applied in practice; one grounded on reciprocal recognition, hence on my attempts to approach migrants on their own terms – as far as I perceived them.
At stake was, to begin with, my commitment to observe migrants' self-representations and behaviours, and to listen to their stories, without contenting myself with the mainstream cognitive categories applying to them: migrants, foreigners or *Latinos* (Boccagni, 2009d). Confidentiality and – an even trickier issue – flexibility towards their ways of self-exhibiting and staying together were important preconditions. The crucial issue was however to make my staying in "their" sociability places a legitimate fact – one deserving a basic respect from them. I have found evidence that this tacit legitimacy was achieved, judging at least from the public reactions to my presence. The latter ranged from some simple nod or overt greeting, to extended conversations, up to reciprocal exchanges of simple favours (which for instance involved, on my side, translating short texts, providing logistical information or contacts, etc).
Respect, in my personal relations with the Ecuadorian migrants, implied also an awareness that the subject of my study – strictly speaking – rested on their transnational practices and orientations, rather than on their individual features per se. In a sense, they were rather to be approached as information providers, albeit of pieces of information seemingly natural (and often scarcely relevant) for them, while potentially noteworthy for me.

2.2 To the setting: staying in the background, rather than exerting an active influence

Respect has also meant, in the development of my fieldwork, a probably more contentious stance: an attempt to be "unobtrusive" (Fine, 1993), that is to influence as little as possible, insofar as it depended on me, the setting of spontaneous migrant interactions I was witnessing (cf., among others, Van Maanen, 2001). A "participant as observer" role (Gold, 1985) applied, in other words, to the bulk of my fieldwork.
Within ordinary contexts of co-national informal gathering – such as sport, music or recreational events – my presence was by no means unnoticed. Still, my position within the field of co-national sociability was generally a "peripheral membership" one (Adler,

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[5] On mutual respect, as a crucial resource being negotiated in interpersonal relations, cf. the analytic (rather than normative only) account of Sennett (2003).

Adler, 1987), whether as a necessity or, sometimes, even as an active choice. It was only a few times – mostly related to the start-up of a ground-breaking (and soon failed) Ecuadorian association, which I co-promoted – that I actively "created" the field of my interactions with migrants. More often than not, I just participated to social situations that would have been there anyway, without really significant differences.

To be sure, I was often involved in ordinary conversations with the Ecuadorian migrants, and the scope for a good understanding of their sociability "here and there" was granted by my systematic attendance of such situations, as well as by my biographic interviews with them. As time in fieldwork went by, my position within their social circles was still perceived as an outsider one – proper of someone who did not belong there – but also, simultaneously, as a customary and non-intrusive one, which did not need to justify itself.[6]

Although not exempt from ambivalences and dilemmas, even this self-positioning has represented, in my perspective, a form of respect: to the people, to their ways of spending time together (as different from mine as they were), to their difficult but crucial connectedness with the family members left behind. A case could obviously be made that my influence would exist anyway: as a foreigner (to them), with no immediate and evident purposes, my presence was extraordinarily visible – even more so in generally mono-national groupings. Wherever I went, the number of those that showed some acquaintance with me, and even with my book project, was systematically higher than the number of my personal acquaintances. This was even more the case as I strolled around and chatted with their family members in Pasaje, Ecuador.

The crucial issue, therefore, was not to achieve some mimetism I could not have realized anyway. Distances in nationality, social status and class were however relevant, and perceived as such by the immigrants, not to mention their non-migrant counterparts in Ecuador. My attempt was rather one to reduce, on my side, the scope for less than "natural" attitudes and behaviours with me (even as this could imply indifference, suspicions or sarcasm for my stubborn "staying there" without doing much more than greeting everybody, or talking with those who would like to).

Altogether, my marginality to the field spontaneous dynamics was in no sense extraneousness to the field itself. It was rather the result of a months-long process of negotiation for access, and research for relevant information, that in a sense lasted as long as the research itself (Riccio, 2006). Judging from the perceived reactions of most of the immigrants I stayed with, I was quite successful in turning my fieldwork presence into that of a background figure – after a while, one perceived as a normal, even an obvious one, capable of self-legitimation and, I contend, relatively uninfluential, for the worse or the best, on the spontaneous course of their interactions.

3. Opportunities

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[6] This outsider position, related to an ethnic boundary (Ecuadorians vs. Italians) grounded on nationality, legal conditions, past life experiences and even social class (Boccagni, 2009d), would have required much longer – including, perhaps, getting married to an Ecuadorian woman – to lose saliency. Nevertheless, our distinct backgrounds were never, in themselves, a hindrance to my fieldwork development. I found extraordinarily true and modern, in this respect, a famous extract of *Street corner society:* "I learned that people did not expect me to be just like them [...]; in fact, they were interested and pleased to find me different, just so long as I took a friendly interest in them" (Whyte, 1955: 304).

After one hour spent alone right there, near the football pitch, I'm finally starting to talk with someone. As usual, one contact may be enough – say, one who's introducing me to the rest ("he's a student, he wants to know anything on the Ecuadorians"), or some lucky chance (e.g. as someone offers me a beer, or vice versa) – to start some promising relationships, and perhaps to pave the way for further ones. I'm really persuaded this is the best way to move on: staying there, starting with those I already know, and then tapping whatever opportunity for conversation – although it may be cumbersome, tiring, sometimes even distressing[7].

It's pretty weird – I'm mulling, as I sweep that small crowd in the parish hall, soon after the "Migrant Easter Mess" is over. My underlying idea is utterly irrational: if I find that you are Ecuadorians, I'll be very much interested in you. If you are not, I won't really care much about you… .[8]

Ethnography, in a grounded-theory perspective, is a process partially driven by the opportunities (and constraints) met in fieldwork, in ways not necessarily predictable ex ante, rather than by a rigorously predefined, survey-style planning (Van Maanen, 2006). I often appreciated how helpful, if demanding, was an attitude of openness to the insights potentially provided by fortuitous encounters and unexpected events, even when they were against my initial hypotheses.

A second understanding of my fieldwork relations concerns indeed the role of the opportunities and contingencies that contributed to shape the research process. What was the influence of my initial choices in delimiting the field, then of the scope and the channels for entering it, and – ultimately – of its fluid, blurred and transnationally spanning social boundaries?

3.1 Why just them?

While an ethnographer may have strong theoretical grounds for choosing a specific field for participant observation, such grounds may be not so obvious for those staying within the field itself. In my own case the option to focus on the Ecuadorians, rather than on a different migration flow, was somewhat accidental. It basically reflected my need to do ethnography using a familial language, on a case study potentially relevant for migrant transnationalism.

Once fieldwork had started, however, Ecuadorian migration, and *the* Ecuadorian migrants I met, became for me a significant concern in its own right. They could no longer be like "any other immigrant group". In other words, my ethnographical fieldwork prompted a cognitive and emotional transition from an undifferentiated concern with any immigrant collectivity (provided it had certain demographic characteristics), to a special interest in a single group of people (many of whom I was relatively familiar with), by no means fungible with the rest.

Still, at the very beginning, such an accidental choice made poor sense, to the eyes of my Ecuadorian interviewees and early contacts. Why was I interested in them, rather than in any other immigrant group – possibly one from a distinct ethnic background, perceived by them as much more "alien" to Italians than themselves? As I was starting, this may have been something of a hindrance – since the most of my interlocutors could hardly see in their communities anything so special, as to be worth being studied. As my presence in their sociability events was more and more frequent, however, I could perceive almost no more signs of amazement, concerning my option. My persistence in

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[7] Fieldwork notes, Trento, 02/04/2006.
[8] Fieldwork notes, Trento, 17/04/2006.

being there, and my emerging relationships with them, have legitimated ex post my concern with them, more than any theoretical argument could ever have done.

3.2. Entering a fluid and relational fieldwork: negotiating opportunities and constraints

This said, both my access to migrant sociability events, and the selection of informants, were contingent also on the distinct degrees of willingness to collaborate – or even only to accept my presence – of the people I met. In the first place, while my prime focus was on migrant transnational social ties in general (e.g. Levitt, 2001; Portes, 2003), the insights provided by participant observation and by migrants' life stories involved mostly relationships and practices related to transnational family life (e.g. Smith, 2006; Banfi and Boccagni, 2009). To be sure, transnational parenthood was a key issue, but its striking predominance in my field accounts may have been due to the far greater accessibility of migrant women, and of middle-aged people, compared with their male and younger counterparts. I cannot exclude that a greater involvement in Ecuadorian youth groups than I was able to negotiate would have generated partially distinct insights.

In the second place, my earlier contacts with Ecuadorian migrants involved a few people far more visible to the host society, and embedded in interethnic social networks, than the rest. Community leaders (or would-be such), activists, or people with a dual citizenship – mostly women married to Italians – were the gatekeepers that allowed me to gain some initial clue on the Ecuadorians' own social life in Italy.

Still, their role proved ambivalent. In a sense, the more they appeared "integrated" in the host society, the higher the likelihood that they were also detached – or perceived as such – from the bulk of co-nationals. During fieldwork I had to counterbalance their influence with a growing range of relationships with "ordinary" Ecuadorian migrants – perhaps less educated subjects, or anyway less interested in making acquaintance with me, but much closer to the standard life experiences of their co-nationals abroad. To put it differently, while the initial mediation of Ecuadorian gatekeepers represented a clear opportunity, a persistent connection with them only would have been a constraint to the development of a wide and differentiated network of contacts. It would also have provided a more idealized, or more normative-oriented picture than the one I was able to reconstruct from the bottom up.

Generally speaking, my initial expectations to approach them successfully, both via participant observation and in-depth interviews, were not exaggerated. To be sure, asking for an interview made sense in its own right (and in fact was more easily accepted). My tacit demand to stay there for much longer, instead, sometimes encountered greater resistance. Indeed I succeeded first in staying in relatively public events (football matches, services, public feasts etc.) and then, gradually, in a part at least of the group-only ones.

After a while, I found a predominant acceptance of my presence, as a student interested in writing a book on them. The formula proved effective, as it could allow anybody to make sense of my being there, relating it to a specific output. At the same time, the risk existed to convey a construction of immigrants as exotic subjects, as such "worth being studied". Accordingly, I preferred to present my attempt as one involving migration in broader terms, their valuable role being one of direct witnesses.

3.3 "You who were there, you know what I mean"

Even my visits back to their communities of origin contributed to deeper connections between our life circles, and to a significant background for daily conversations with them – whatever the topic and the interlocutor: the new façade of the local church, or their rebuilt houses there; their nostalgia for the Ecuadorian ways of living, but also their disdain for the bad conditions in which public places and facilities were kept there, or their distrust of Ecuadorian politicians; the *plazas* and *bares* where they used to go out there, the location of the village brothel, etc.

Having been to Pasaje, whatever my understanding of the changes driven by emigration, provided a good repertoire of communal reference points with the *Pasajeños* I was approaching in Italy – and then, for making better sense of their comparative construction of the life styles and conditions in Italy. While the real "multisited" scope of my research – or for that matter, of most of the multisited work – may be contentious (Hage, 2005), doing some fieldwork *there* was an extraordinary resource to gain better access, confidentiality and understanding within migrants' daily lives *here.* It also showed, by the way, that their potential for transnational social action – i.e. to exert an influence, while here, on the daily lives of those left behind in Ecuador – was much lower than commonsense transnationalism, and migrants' own wishes, would have it (Boccagni, 2009b).

4. Interests

It's the first time I got access to the meetings of M.'s women group. They allowed me in, as "I'm writing a book on the Ecuadorians", but they've still a lot of questions for me – as if they were curious and suspicious at the same time. What am I doing there, what do I want to interview them about, and why? And then: what's my job, how much do I gain? One of them is specially provocative: "Interviews are OK", she starts, "but – we may be telling you a pack of lies!". "Why should you", I try to counter, "as I won't give you anything in return, anyway?". [9]

"Why", M. says to me, soon after we've made acquaintance, "are you asking me about Ecuador? Have you been there, or are you interested in it?". I wonder if my answer makes any sense: "Well, I'm doing a research at the university [pointing at a building at the end of the street], and I'd like to interview all the Ecuadorians here – that is, I'd like to write a book on them…". This apparently sounds convincing to her. Three hours later we're still standing there, near the street market where she works. "I don't think I've ever happened – she'll tell me at last –, not even with my co-nationals, to talk so in-depth of my country, of its problems, with one who understands that". In fact, after the earlier mentions to Ecuador, we've been talking only about her life story. Altogether it was very helpful to me, while, to be sure, she didn't dislike it. [10]

One more useful notion, for revisiting my interpersonal relationships with the Ecuadorian migrants, is that of interests – applying both to the reciprocal benefits inherent in our transactions, whether the expected or the actual ones; and, less obviously, to the potential discrepancies between my own cognitive interests, and the issues they did perceive as more relevant, given their daily life needs and concerns.

4.1 What's the use for me (and for them)?

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[9] Fieldwork notes, Trento, 17/02/2006.
[10] Fieldwork notes, Trento, 11/03/2006.

My rapport with the Ecuadorian migrants I met was also significantly affected by my personal interests, as an early stage researcher. First of all, my interest in gaining an original knowledge of their life conditions. While, at the very beginning, this fuelled an expectation of tangible results in the short term, I had soon to recognize that my fieldwork would in fact take much longer. Studying their transnational relationships resulted in an extended collection of personal information, sometimes in delicate or painful terms, for a primary purpose – i.e. generating knowledge – that had little to do with their own interests or expectations; with no necessary development of significant personal relationships with them (indeed, most of my field relations were only instrumental or transient); with my cognitive interest, and perhaps my aim to professional self-fulfilment, as the basic driving forces. Our frequent encounters could perhaps pave the way, as far as I was concerned, for some future professional progress. Hardly were they a resource at all, seemingly at least, from their vantage point.

In the face of the question "what's the use of this for us?" (which, however, I was very rarely made), I could have hazarded several responses (cf. Whyte, 1979). One, to begin with, would involve my ability to listen to their stories with care. Not, of course, as an explicit purpose in itself. Still, as the time in fieldwork went by, the conditions occasionally emerged with some twenty migrants – a tiny fraction of those I happened to speak with (some 200), and an even lesser of those who knew about me, but not *vice versa* – for them to give free rein to their own concerns and troubles. Remarkably, this could occur not only during my biographical interviews, but, even more often, in more spontaneous and less formalized circumstances.

Another reply has to do with recognition, and possibly with reputation. During my fieldwork in Italy, I could be recognized as a witness – towards the host society, and their very co-nationals – of their self-representations as truly hard workers, committed to moving up with their families (including those left behind in Ecuador). In my small way, I could provide a counter-narrative to the more frequent stereotypes addressing them, whether from the host society (e.g. that of "culturally different", perhaps dangerous or anyway needy strangers – or even that of unreliable and noisy *Latinos);* or, ironically, from their very immigrant co-nationals (such as in the vignettes of greedy or egoistic individuals, with no concern at all for "the community", which they often applied to the rest of Ecuadorian immigrants). The book I was going to write should rather provide, in the expectations of some, a narrative of worthy and respectable immigrant workers, capable to cope with the challenges and self-sacrifices demanded by migration. By the way, this was indeed the prevailing picture – not, of course, in so idealistic and unilateral terms – I drew out of my fieldwork.

At the same time, while in Ecuador, my visits to the migrants' family members were often represented by the latter as a marker of their social status: a way among others to show that their emigrant relatives had good relations with Italians, were valued by them, and could even afford to host one of them at home. I was often introduced (with some proud) as "the Italian friend" of their emigrant dear ones, during my daily encounters in Pasaje.

Apart from that, spending some time with me might provide migrants with some more usable contacts among the native population, or give them the opportunity – now and then – to have some small presents sent for free in Ecuador, as I paid a visit to their relatives. None of these potential benefits, to be sure, was so relevant as to affect their relationships with me since the beginning.

Having said this, one could argue that there would have been no necessity of a significant interest at stake of theirs, in any case, for our interactions to generate helpful information and insights. Reasonably good relationships did develop anyway, without any practical returns for them – those hazarded earlier being only peripheral, and not necessarily emerging, rewards. After all I never met, within the fluid and informal boundaries of my fieldwork settings, higher expectations to be voiced towards me. That I did (and could) not offer them anything in return, was no hindrance to entering the field of their communal sociability events. Personal affinities, or (sometimes) their lack, mattered much more in this respect.

4.2 What interested to me (to learn/observe), what interested to them (to tell/let me in)

Less obvious was that my primary cognitive interests, in approaching the Ecuadorian migrants, did not necessarily match with the aspects *they* would judge more significant to tell about. As I found out, transnational social ties were generally marginal in their current life trajectories, apart from the affective bonds with the family members left behind, on the one hand; from the nostalgia for their earlier ways of living, often resulting in "symbolic ethnicity" practices (Gans, 1979), on the other.

Their narratives made clear that the life context in which they were currently settled was generally perceived as more important, in practical terms, than the one of origin *as it was then*. The host society, despite being often blamed for their disadvantaged life conditions, was by then their predominant frame of reference, and the main "target" of their claims and short-run life projects. On the other hand, to many of them, Ecuador – as a set of political institutions, indistinctly perceived as culprits of their emigration – raised even deeper suspicions and discontent.

As I attempted to orient their narratives, first, towards a broad recollection of the motherland, I could easily see the signs of a still significant emotional attachment. The same emerged from their large use of national symbols. Had my primary concern been a specifically biographic one, involving their pre-emigration lives, I would have gathered much more information, and far more easily, than I did with respect to their intermittent transnational practices. Once the focus, however, shifted to Ecuador here and now – my expectation being to delve into their *simultaneous* relationships here and there (Levitt and Glick-Schiller, 2004) – I generally encountered a deep-rooted detachment from the current affairs back home, out of their private family lives (Boccagni, 2009b).

As a principle, my interest in Ecuador was highly appreciated by most of them, who would offer me any sort of advice concerning my visits there. Yet, it sometimes sounded as if referring to Ecuador, for them and for me, was not the same – not only for my obviously lesser familiarity with it. It was as if Ecuador were a substantively different entity for the two sides: a country with its government, for me; the key background of their past lives, and an inexhaustible source of nostalgia and identification (rather than a socio-political entity), for them.

In a sense, my fundamentally theoretical concern was encountering their deeply practical, life-related (albeit projected to the past) ones. Whilst ethnography was the fittest way to make sense of my theory through their practices (and to a lesser degree, vice versa), an ultimate gap did remain between my theory-driven knowledge, and their experiential, life-embedded one. In my own understanding this also explained why, despite the importance of reflexivity, collaboration and respect, our roles could not but remain deeply distinct.

Had I even wished (or been able) to conflate such roles into a single reciprocity-based outcome (Lassiter, 2001), I could not imagine any way to bridge, through a unitary account, the distance between the idiosyncratic richness of their individual biographic experiences, and my attempts to make theoretical sense of them, although via an extended field engagement.

What I did instead, thanks to their active collaboration, was to highlight some life fragments of theirs, highly relevant to me – not necessarily so much to the migrants themselves –, endowing them with a scope for debate, and hopefully for theoretical reflection and public awareness, they could hardly have reached otherwise. To this extent, my effort had a relevance also to the migrants I stayed with (Lassiter, 2005) – although a lesser one than for myself and, hopefully, for my peer (academic) community.

Conclusion: on the grounds, and the scope, for collaboration

The last remarks above lead me back to the role and the epistemological status of my informants. Overall, the now widely debated need to "include a greater role for the ethnographic subject" (Van Maanen, 2006: 16) did emerge throughout my fieldwork experience, on practical no less than moral grounds. However, as this paper suggests, I basically constructed the role as one of *interlocutors* rather than *co-authors,* as a radical approach to collaboration would have it.[11]

To some extent, every Ecuadorian migrant I met (along with their family members at home) contributed to the cumulative generation of my knowledge. A few of them provided me with especially valuable insights. In a sense, these were indeed my "epistemic partners, who produce in their own terms something equivalent to ethnography" (Marcus, 2007: 8). This is not enough, however, for me to overturn a basic distinction of role between them and I, in the outcomes of my research. While the need to report my results (also) to them – provided they were interested to – was a real one, altogether my ethnography's authorship remained an essentially individual effort. It hardly could have it been otherwise,[12] in my opinion, for three key reasons:

- in the first place, as my textwork resulted of a rich and diverse range of sensorial and cognitive stimuli emerging from the participant observation – migrants' personal witnesses being only one (and not always the most important) of them;

- while interacting with the Ecuadorian migrants, in the second place, I was never questioned in the terrain of the legitimacy of my personal writing on them. What was at stake was my capability to show respect and comprehension towards any interlocutor of mine, rather than my "right" to provide an account of their life experiences – hopefully in non-judging but discerning terms, in any case under full anonymity. To be sure, they could have done it themselves. Some indeed cultivated the expectation, if ever their

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[11] As Van Maanen (2006: 16) provocatively puts it, "the career path of those we study is currently on the roll – from savage to primitive to subject to native to informant to interlocutor to, ultimately, co-author". In fact, the status of co-authors should be understood as a mere possibility, which applies under specific conditions, rather than as the utmost stage of a necessarily evolutionary progression.

[12] As the same author remarks, an ethnographer's personal categorization and interpretation of what one has "heard, seen and felt", while in fieldwork, is a hard task to be devolved, even if one wished so: "To be sure, we rely heavily on others… but, in the end, it is the ethnographer and not the native who develops and takes responsibility for whatever cultural accounts and representation mark the study" (Van Maanen, 2001).

fatiguing life experience abroad had allowed them to. Even so, this would have simply resulted in a different textwork from mine, generated from different needs and concerns; - as a last point, even in an ideal (and unreal) scenario where they had been my co-authors (involving at most the few of them, often the more educated, who somewhat cared about it), we would have probably been locked in stalemate: no consistently communal, unitary account would have been shared by the whole by them. A multivocal representation, provided by an external (and qualified) party, affords a potential synthesis out of their distinct ways of representing themselves and their life projects.

None of these remarks, of course, is to deny either the stubborn partiality of my situated and outsider viewpoint on them, or my gratitude and indebtedness – in *moral* terms, hardly convertible in any different currency – towards many of them.

One last remark concerns the implications of my fieldwork and textwork to the broader aim, underpinning (also) the stances of collaborative ethnography, to "construct a more equitable social science" (Lassiter, 2005). My own experience suggests some scepticism on the viability – whatever their desirability – of the expectations for ethnography to inherently act as a channel of greater societal equity, which typically underlie such claims.

At the end of the day, after I stopped systematically attending the Ecuadorian migrants' sociability events, our structural positions were unchanged. I am still an autochthonous middle-class would-be researcher, while they are still doing, in most cases, badly paid "immigrant jobs" (although their peculiar drive for self-advancement may result, in the middle term, in significant progress – on their own terms at least). Having said of the several stimulating acquaintances I made with them (and some of them made with me), our power imbalances have remained basically unaltered; pace the respect and the equity that, I would contend, inspired my relationships with them. I wonder however, leaving rhetoric aside, if my ethnography – or for that matter, any ethnography – could ever have done more, or better, than that.

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