

## **'La Lenin is my passport': schooling, mobility and belonging in socialist Cuba and its diaspora**

### *Abstract*

Based on an ethnographic study of transnational networks of alumni of an academically selective boarding school in Havana, this article explores the nexus between mobilities, schooling, and belonging in the context of socialist Cuba and its diaspora. Drawing on Goffman's work, I argue that the boarding school experience was transformative; it facilitated or consolidated social mobility for its pupils, which later, for many, led to geographic mobility in the form of study and work outside Cuba. After graduating, alumni continue to identify with the school and to reproduce their alumni identities. The affective webs of belonging forged through family links and friendships fostered at the school constitute emotionally sustaining networks that also provide material support after migrating. I propose that the school represents a site of identification for a globally dispersed non-national diaspora, and argue that migration scholars need to embed international migration within people's lives more broadly.

### *Keywords*

Diaspora, schooling, belonging, mobilities, Cuba, transnational network

Formal education has been a central tenet in the quest for modernity and nationhood across post-colonial societies in the twentieth century. Schools have been harnessed to 'inculcate the skills, subjectivities, and disciplines that undergird the modern nation-state' (Levinson and Holland 1996:1) with the aim of producing national subjects. Yet education also fosters aspirations of geographic mobility beyond national borders (Czaika and de Haas 2013). In Cuba this tension has proven challenging for the socialist government. Free education for all was a key principle of the 1959 Cuban Revolution, and was seen as a necessity by the revolutionary leaders if Cuba was to become a modern, independent, socialist state. Educational policy and reform therefore were closely tied to nationalism and the transformation of Cuba into a socialist society. Yet, many of those who were educated within the socialist system have chosen to leave Cuba. Their emigration not only represents a loss of skilled personnel, but also constitutes a political embarrassment for the revolutionary government.

Based on an ethnographic study of the transnational networks of alumni of the V.I. Lenin Vocational School (*La Lenin*), an academically selective boarding school in Havana, this article explores the nexus between schooling, mobility, and belonging in the context of socialist Cuba and its diaspora. The mobilities paradigm is helpful in this context for its insistence on paying attention to 'multiple interacting mobilities' (Sheller and Urry 2006:209) and for the recognition that subjectivities are shaped through movement and relationships to both people and places (Conradson and McKay 2007:168; Hage 2005). Specifically, I argue that social and geographic mobilities are inter-twined and accordingly need to be conceptualised together: Social mobility through schooling often leads to desires for geographic mobility, while geographic mobility is often pursued or desired in order to facilitate social mobility.

Several scales of inter-twining mobilities were important to my research subjects. These ranged from the move from neighbourhood school to the prestigious and nationally recognized Lenin School, and later to university studies, sometimes abroad, but also the move from parental home to boarding school, and later international migration. Echoing arguments from literature on rural-urban migration (King and Skeldon 2010), for many of my interlocutors, their initial move from childhood home to boarding school, which was geographically small-scale, carried more significance and was seen as involving a bigger change in their lives than their later transnational mobility. Leaving the family home constituted a moment of growing up and becoming independent. Additionally, becoming a pupil at the school entailed the conferring of substantial social prestige, in some cases signifying the consolidation of elite status, and in others upward social mobility. In all cases, the school provided a transformational experience.

Yet the mobilities paradigm does not provide conceptual tools for analysing the importance of migrants' networks and identification with compatriots or co-ethnics, the focus for this article. I therefore also draw on the concept of diaspora. As is increasingly acknowledged by scholars, it is problematic to assume *a priori* that diasporic subjects identify first and foremost with their homeland, i.e. as national subjects. Often, relationships to significant others and / or localities such as parental home, neighbourhood, city, or region constitute more significant sites of identification to migrants than the nation (Berg 2011; Conradson and McKay 2007:169; Olwig 2007). In this case, diasporic alumni of the Lenin School identify strongly with their school. A woman now living in New Jersey stated

emphatically: 'the school made me who I am,' and a man living in Mallorca called it 'a legacy, like a brotherhood, it marks you'. While not all alumni feel so strongly about the school, for many it is a very significant part of their self-identification suggesting an intimate link between schooling and sense of self. Identification with the school manifests itself in a plethora of Internet sites dedicated to the school, most prominent of which is [www.Lalenin.com](http://www.Lalenin.com), numerous online social networking groups, and a corpus of poetry and music paying homage to the school. Offline, alumni maintain friendships often transnationally, and some participate in regular alumni meetings.

In the politicised context of Cuba's relationship with its diaspora, expressions of identification with the school rather than the nation are particularly significant. The nationalism of the government like that of the self-defined representatives of '*the Cuban exile community*' (Eckstein 2009) insist on exclusive, territorially-bound loyalties. Yet diasporic alumni of socialist Cuba's most prestigious school do not identify with either side. In the relational space of their transnational networks, the erstwhile formidable borders of Cuban territorial nationalism are rendered permeable, and a new type of social formation is emerging, part of a diversifying 'new Cuban diaspora', defined not through antagonism to the Cuban regime characteristic of the 'old Cuban diaspora', but rather through shared memories of schooling.

In this article, I suggest that the affective networks of school-based friendships and family relations – the two are increasingly intertwined as alumni inter-marry, and recent graduates often constitute the second generation in their family to attend the school – constitute a transnational web of belonging, produced and reproduced through memories, narratives, and embodied performances of alumni identity. I critically examine the importance attributed to international mobility over other kinds of mobility in the lives of diasporans, and problematize the relationship between nation/nationalism and diaspora.

The article is based on 45 semi-structured interviews conducted in 2012-3, ranging in duration from about 20 minutes to several hours. Interviewees ranged in age from 19 to early 50s, evenly split between men and women, and including pupils at the school between 1972

and 2010, currently living in Cuba, Spain, the US, and France. In addition to interviews and other social interaction with alumni, I am a regular visitor to and observer of the virtual sociality engendered by the web-site [www.lalenin.com](http://www.lalenin.com), managed by an alumnus based in Berlin.<sup>1</sup>

The article begins by outlining the historical context for the creation of the Lenin School. I then proceed to discuss the school as an example of a total institution, and the ways in which diasporic alumni remember school life. Finally, I analyse the dynamics of mobility in the lives of my interlocutors and the ways in which they construct networks of belonging.

### **Education and the New Man in socialist Cuba**

In its period of independence before the revolution (1902-1959), Cuba had relatively high rates of literacy in a Latin American context (76% of the population above 10 years of age in 1953). The country was however marked by enormous inequities in wealth, especially between Havana and the rest of the country, with educational resources extremely unevenly distributed, and pervasive corruption in the education system (Breidlid 2007:620; Lutjens 1997). The upper and middle classes tended to send their children to private schools, many of which were religious. These schools often taught a US curriculum, and served explicitly as instruments of Americanization (Epstein 1987; Pérez 1999).

After the revolution, the government nationalised all schools, made primary education free and universal, re-organised secondary and higher education, and initiated its extraordinary literacy campaign with the aim of extending literacy to all Cubans across the country (Leiner 1984; Read 1970; Álvarez Figueroa 1997).<sup>2</sup> Illustrative of the modernist zeal of the revolution and the desire to break with the legacy of private, religious education, schools were to prioritise the sciences and technical skills. Many were located in the countryside, where pupils would spend half the day studying, the other half doing agricultural work, emphasising austerity, discipline and obedience (Smith and Padula 1996:83).

While it is a common trait of modern schools that children are removed from their families (Levinson and Holland 1996:1), in revolutionary Cuba this has been more radical than in many other countries. Schools explicitly aimed to minimise the perceived pernicious influence of tradition in families, and to discourage 'individualism' (Smith and Padula 1996):

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<sup>1</sup> Interviewees were recruited using a snowball approach, drawing on existing contacts from prior research. Margalida Mulet Pascual conducted some interviews for me, recruited via her own contacts. All interviews were conducted in Spanish. Names and some details of interviewees have been changed to protect their anonymity.

<sup>2</sup> For a review of scholarship on education in revolutionary Cuba, see Lutjens (1998).

The new Cubans were truly to be the children of the revolution. The *Hombre Nuevo*, or New Man, who would be forged in these schools was a man who would sacrifice his personal life for the revolution; he would be co-operative, hardworking, morally pure and disinterested in personal gain; in Ernesto 'Che' Guevara's words, he would be 'unsullied' by the 'original sin of capitalism' (1977:14).<sup>3</sup>

In this context of a profound restructuring of the educational system to serve new societal needs, the V.I. Lenin School was founded in Havana in 1972. As the name suggests, it was modelled on the Soviet education system, but also inspired by Maoism and the Cuban nationalist hero José Martí's ideals of breaking down the barriers between manual and intellectual labour (Cheng and Manning 2003; Read 1970). La Lenin was meant to be a 'new kind of school', which would, in Castro's words, serve as a 'vanguard' for other schools in a future socialist Cuba (see Wald 1978:361; Granma 1974:5), and similar elite schools were opened in Cuba's other provinces. Only the most gifted students from Havana Province were admitted, and if a pupil's mark fell below a certain threshold, they were expelled. In the first years, La Lenin admitted up to 4,500 children from the age of 11 until 18; the age range was later changed to 16-18.

The school compound on the outskirts of Havana occupies sixty-six acres of land, and includes purpose-built accommodation and teaching facilities, a library, sports fields, Olympic-sized swimming pools, theatres, 45 fully equipped language and science labs, an infirmary, hair dressers, and a factory where the pupils were to work part-time.<sup>4</sup> The considerable investment that these facilities represent, testify to the significance the school had for the revolutionary government. In the words of one alumna whose father had been among the first cohorts, it was 'the dream of the revolution at that time'. The school's special status was marked by frequent visits by the revolution's highest leaders and international dignitaries.

In the absence of access to the official school records, it is difficult to establish the socio-economic profile of pupils and how it has changed over the years. In terms of gender, women were in the majority at elite schools across the country by the late 1980s (Lutjens

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<sup>3</sup> On the gender implications of the idea of the New Man, see Behar (2000).

<sup>4</sup> Not all these facilities are in use today.

1997:295). At the national level, there has been an increasing feminization of further and higher studies from the 1980s onwards, reflecting women's higher grade attainments and the competitive entry requirements of Cuba's universities (Domínguez García 1999:136-7). From interviews and testimonies of alumni it is evident that the vast majority of pupils at the school historically and at present are 'white' [*blanca/o*], reflecting longstanding problems of racialized inequality and structural racism in Cuba (Fernandez 2010).

In terms of class profile, many children of the revolutionary elite studied at the school. While I have not interviewed any offspring of the top leaders, one interlocutor was the son of a vice-minister, and several others were sons and daughters of high-ranking government officials. The quota system of allocating a set number of places to all municipalities in Havana Province suggests that academically able children from poor neighbourhoods have a chance of entering, and some interviews, especially with alumni from the first two decades, confirm this. A man now living in New Jersey remembered of his time in the school:

There were definitely people from poorer backgrounds and from the middle classes, but the people from the upper class never missed [being admitted]. ... I entered in ... 1972 ... The children of Fidel [Castro] studied in my year, three of them; Che [Guevara's] daughter ... the children of all the ministers [and] important personalities ... Between all of these were the rest of us who didn't come from powerful families.

The overall sample of interviewees suggests that children from families with substantial cultural capital are over-represented. Many alumni of more recent cohorts took private classes to pass the entry exams. That their families were able and prepared to spend hard currency on private tuition to ensure their children's entry into the school is indicative of the enduring prestige of the school as well as of the class profile of its pupils. When asked if he would define La Lenin as an elite school, Andris, who was at the school in the mid-1990s, quickly said, 'yes, it's an elite school *par excellence*.' He continued:

Of course the 2000 [students at the school when he studied] were not all of the elite, *but* there were many, many sons and daughters of government ministers ... I don't think that they favour them as such, but it's because they're the ones who were able to pay a private teacher to help them study. These children only had to worry about studying, they didn't have to do other things, they didn't have to worry about how to put food on the table ... So, it's an elite school in all meanings of the term.

Yet not all families were keen for their children to go to the school and some saw the school as a threat to family unity and patriarchal control, especially in the first two decades of the school's existence. Clara, who now lives in Miami, recounted strong family opposition in the late 1970s:

I entered La Lenin against the will of my family. I was an only child, raised by my grandparents because my parents had divorced. Nobody in my family had any education; they had left school after 3<sup>rd</sup> or 6<sup>th</sup> grade. ... we were *guajiros* [peasants]. But I did well in school ... and I knew I wanted to try to go to La Lenin so I sat the exam without telling my grandfather. When the letter arrived to say I had been accepted they didn't want me to go at first, but I pleaded with them and said 'don't do this to me, please, it is the best school, I want to go to university'. They ... were worried that I would have sexual relations, pick up bad language and that I would have relations with blacks – yes, I'm ashamed to say so, but my grandfather was very racist! I pleaded with them and in the end they said I could go, but if I came back speaking bad language or if I changed from what I was, they would take me out immediately. I didn't change! I kept saying 'may I', 'thank you', 'please' and so on at home, I never used bad language.

By contrast, recent graduates describe family support for them to enter the school, reflecting the growing recognition over time that the school offers the best education available in the country. It is also significant that many parents later on were themselves alumni who wanted their children to have the same opportunities that they had:

*Claudia* (studied at the school in the late 1990s, now lives in Spain): From I was born, I was surrounded by people from La Lenin because my father's best friends were from La Lenin, or rather, they *are* from La Lenin and according to him, the best years of his life were in La Lenin, well, that's what we all say ... I always aspired to go to La Lenin ... It was completely clear to me that my first priority was La Lenin.

*Maria* (studied at the school in the late 1990s, older brother also studied there, father studied at predecessor school, now lives in Spain): It was an objective that was so clear to me that I took it for granted that I would get in ... In fact, it wasn't difficult for me. I mean, I *knew* I was going to be at La Lenin, it was a certainty that not everyone has.

In the first years, pupils whose families were supportive of the revolution and who themselves showed political commitment to it, were favoured for entry, but the opposite was

also sometimes the case. A woman who studied at the school in its early years believed she had been admitted to provoke her father who was then a political prisoner. She described the school as 'a brainwash' (because of its ideological indoctrination) but equally as 'a blessing' (because of its high level of education) and remained proud of being an alumna, referring to the broad education she had received, the many things she had learnt including from the manual labour, and the superior facilities of the school. After graduating, she had a distinguished career in Cuba, but later migrated to the US to join her father who had left Cuba after completing his prison term.

### **La Lenin as a total institution**

The hold that La Lenin continues to exert over its alumni even after they graduate needs to be understood as a function of the kind of institution it is. The school is an example of what Erving Goffman has defined as a total institution, i.e. 'a place of residence and work where a large number of like-situated individuals, cut off from the wider society for an appreciable period of time, together lead an enclosed formally administered round of life' (1968:11).

Goffman's analysis, based on his covert research at a psychiatric hospital in Washington DC in the 1950s, proved a powerful critique of psychiatric hospitals at the time, and the concept of the total institution has been helpfully applied in other contexts since then (Scott 2010; Davies 1989). Goffman's insight that in a total institution, the self can usefully be seen not as 'a property of the person to whom it is attributed', but rather as *constituted* through the prevailing institutional arrangements (1968:154), is especially helpful for understanding the degree of identification between La Lenin and its alumni.

The learning and inculcation of body techniques (Mauss 1979) is an important aspect of this constitution of the self. Pupils' bodily dispositions were moulded and disciplined through repetitive daily routines, such as the making up of beds followed by inspection every morning. One man explained to me how he still makes up his bed in the exact way that he learnt at La Lenin more than thirty years after graduating, and it was a source of regret to him that his adult sons did not follow his example. Members of early cohorts remember the rhythmic school applause, used during assemblies and meetings, and now reproduced at alumni meetings. More recent graduates assert that they can spot fellow *leninistas* by their

distinctive speech and manner of dancing. Remembering La Lenin and being a *leninista* or someone from La Lenin thus encompasses both narrative and embodied memories that are mobilised, performed and reproduced when alumni meet, and which set them apart from contemporaries who did not go to the school.

Goffman describes five 'rough groupings' of total institutions (1968:16), and defines boarding schools as belonging within a group of institutions 'purportedly established the better to pursue some worklike task and justifying themselves only on these instrumental grounds' (1968:16). Overall, he saw total institutions as coercive and degrading to inmates, allowing them only very restricted agency (see Scott 2010 for critique). This assessment is sharply at odds with the enthusiastic and positive accounts of life at La Lenin in my interviews. The contrast requires an acknowledgement of the qualitative differences between a prestigious institution like La Lenin and other types of institutions with which Goffman lumps boarding schools (see also Davies 1989:82-83).

Christie Davies's alternative classification of total institutions according to their purpose, degree of openness or closure, and mode of compliance, is more helpful. In her scheme, boarding schools emerge as an intermediate total institution in terms of relative openness, and as characterised by normative control and the aim of transmogrification of its inmates rather than internment as an end in itself (1989:90). For while none of my interlocutors explicitly made this point, becoming a pupil at the school entailed a degree of rendering oneself to the revolutionary project, and submitting to a process of transmogrification, both social, educational, and political. To illustrate, pupils were expected to participate in events in support of the government such as May Day marches. At times of heightened political mobilization, the demand on pupils' time could be considerable. During the Mariel boatlift in 1980, or the Elián González affair in 2000, pupils missed a substantial number of classes as they were taken in school buses to participate in demonstrations. In the words of one interlocutor, pupils at La Lenin were always 'Fidel's first column.' Some families were adverse to this political indoctrination. The alumni themselves saw it as at most a small sacrifice in light of the superior education they received. Clara, whose grandfather did not want her to go to La Lenin, was pragmatic:

I didn't want to lose out on the language lab, the chemistry lab, the 3 swimming pools and so on, so of course I went. My grandparents resented that I was being used for political stuff.

Notwithstanding, participating in protest marches did not necessarily have much of an impact on pupils' political consciousness; several commented that they primarily remembered the marches as welcome breaks from the school routine.

In a recent extension of Goffman's work, Susie Scott discusses 'academic hothouses' as examples of what she calls 'reinventive institutions'. These are late twentieth century versions of total institutions, defined as 'places to which people retreat for periods of intense self-reflection, education, enrichment and reform, but under their own volition, in pursuit of "self-improvement"' (2010:218). In reinventive institutions, peer relations characterised by 'emotional intensity' and a 'culture of commitment' are of crucial importance (2010:225). Scott's descriptive register resonates better with the many accounts of intense, supportive friendships and deeply felt commitment, than Goffman's account of degradation and lack of strong peer bonds.

*Iván:* Whenever I see [my friends from La Lenin] it makes me really happy, we always talk and joke, it's as if time hadn't passed at all ... it's like we were still room-mates. ... We met 17 years ago and we know each other so well that it's as if we've known each other all of our lives.

The mutual support is well illustrated in the numerous accounts of food sharing. In the first decade, the school provided abundant food to its pupils, but alumni from later periods remember food scarcity, reflecting the wider problems of food provisioning in Cuba, especially during the so-called 'Special Period' of severe economic crisis in Cuba following the disappearance of the Socialist Bloc (Eckstein 2003). Memories of sharing food brought from home with room-mates therefore carry strong emotional significance:

*Claudia* (studied at the school in the late 1990s, now lives in Spain): We got on very well with each other, we were very close. There was one of the other girls who always brought a tin of sardines in tomato sauce [from home] ... we were eight room-mates and all eight of us ate from the tin. She always religiously divided the sardines between the eight of us.

Such accounts were often accompanied by assertions to the effect that the school was 'marvellous', 'wonderful', 'a paradise', whether the interlocutor graduated decades or merely a few years ago. A woman who was a pupil at the Lenin School in the mid-1980s, before training as a medic, and who now lives in New Jersey, said: 'it was the best thing that happened to me'; 'the school was my home, my family, everything'. This positive assertion of a self, moulded by and in the school, is far removed from the 'amoral arts of shamelessness' as the end point of the 'moral career' of the mental patient described by Goffman (1968:155).

### **Life at La Lenin Remembered**

Memories are not 'simply records of the past', they are 'interpretive reconstructions', embedded in particular cultural and social contexts of recall and commemoration (Antze and Lambek 1996:vii). Analysing memory narratives therefore provides insight into the tensions and disjunctures between the intentions of La Lenin and the state for its children and young people, and what they themselves make of it, something which is missing in many accounts of education, including in Cuba (see also Froerer 2007; Charon-Cardona 2013; Domínguez García and Lutjens 2002).

The accounts of life at La Lenin by alumni are surprisingly consistent despite the up to forty years separating their time at the school. They describe a daily life entirely contained within the school compound, consisting of strictly regimented days starting with wake-up calls on the central tannoy at 6am, followed by morning exercises, inspection, breakfast, and classes. Most students were required to participate in manual labour either in the fields, the on-site factory, or to clean the school, 2-3 afternoons every week. High performing students were selected for extra classes, and were generally exempt from manual labour. The evenings were dedicated to independent study with one evening a week set aside for entertainment organised by the school. Pupils would usually go home every weekend, although this right might be taken away as punishment for disciplinary infringements.

Some alumni describe the school as run with 'military discipline', with penalty points added to report cards for minor infringements. This is how Iván, who studied at the school in the mid-1990s, and who now lives in Spain, recalled disciplinary enforcement:

The thing about discipline was very important ... Men weren't allowed earrings, it was firmly prohibited, always short hair, and you had to wear the uniform correctly. The monogram had to be exactly halfway down the sleeve ... Trousers had to have straight legs, they couldn't be tight ... I've ... had reports for long hair and once I had to stay behind for one day during the weekend to do little jobs in the garden.

There is little evidence of an extensive or organised 'underlife' at La Lenin. Most likely this is explained by the high degree of normative solidarity between pupils, and between pupils and the school (Davies 1989:93). There are some hints in stories of subversion of the school dress-code, including also unauthorized escapes, and other similar small-scale acts of resistance (Scott 1986). Some interviewees did mention negative memories of the school. These include one man who disliked the discipline at the school and being away from his family so much that he decided to leave; another man who retrospectively identified himself as a bully and who felt shameful about his past behaviour; and one man who said he had no memory whatever of his time at the school, suggesting it had not been unambiguously happy. However, I have not heard a single alumnus dismiss their education. A woman in her early thirties, now living in Paris, commented that none of the students in her year group would be capable of criticising 'the system' because it is 'good'. Equally, very few recount examples of abuses of power, bullying or ritual humiliation, which are such staples of accounts of elite boarding schools e.g. in Britain. What stands out is rather a strong, positive feeling of belonging to the school and its community of students. For some La Lenin additionally provided an escape from dysfunctional family homes.

In the early years of the school's existence dormitories were large, but this was later changed to smaller, 8-pupil cubicles. The small group of room-mates became a sort of substitute family with whom pupils shared daily life.

*Iván:* It's wonderful because you arrive at the school at a conflictive age, but you have to reach a point where you know people. The first time you shower you see everyone naked so you end up knowing people completely. ... It is also the age of discovering your sexuality and you simply can't imagine the conversations we had in the dormitories at night, from advice to absolutely everything, everything is told. Some people are more timid, some people less. People would say things like 'I have a girlfriend and I don't know what to do, she is more experienced than me' or the opposite case 'she is like a little girl, what can I do?'

Alumni also have fond memories of the academic rigour of the school and its dedicated teachers. Many Lenin alumni have later taught others and often mention teachers at La Lenin as their role model.

*Andris:* I had been used to being number one in my secondary school. I had the best grades ... without having to study much because the level wasn't very high. ... At La Lenin it was serious, you really had to study because if you didn't, you wouldn't qualify [to stay at the school]. And of course you knew that it wasn't enough just to pass ... it was about getting the best marks.

Pupils at La Lenin regularly won national and international competitions in maths, chemistry and physics. The level was such that for some the first years at university were merely repeating what they had already learnt at the school. One woman who had to leave the school for not achieving high enough grades, subsequently found herself top of her class in her local high school. Surprisingly given the many accounts of a highly competitive atmosphere where everyone was ranked against each other, I have heard no accounts of resentment among pupils. By contrast, after graduating, and especially during their years at university, some Lenin alumni commented that other students who did not go to La Lenin resented their identification with the school and their perceived air of superiority.

Because the vast majority of Lenin alumni go on to study within the fields of science, engineering or architecture they are often well placed to help each other. And because their children also go to the school, the web of connections and the scope for support has widened and deepened over time to cover not just the world of work. As an example, Beatriz, a woman in her fifties living in Havana, was a pupil at the school in the 1970s; several of her close relatives also went. She married a schoolmate with whom she had two children who both went to the school. After divorcing, Beatriz married another alumnus. These relations of kin, friends and marriage make up a dense web against which Beatriz's life unfolds. When she moved to a new neighbourhood, a fellow alumnus introduced her and her husband to their new neighbours, and she also secured her current job thanks to her alumni network. When alumni leave Cuba, this same web of affective relationships and material support extends transnationally with alumni staying in touch like other transnational migrants do (Vertovec 2009), and helping each other in the new country.

*Claudia:* The experience I've had here [in Spain] is that people [i.e. other alumni] recognise that you're from La Lenin and you end up with a closer relationship ... it

makes you relate a little more ... It's like a point of reference ... it helps you ... especially in terms of work.

Sometimes transnational mobility itself is facilitated with the help of other alumni. To illustrate, Andris left Cuba with a scholarship to study at a Spanish university. A friend from La Lenin who was already living in Spain helped him during the application process and when he arrived his friends from La Lenin picked him up at the airport:

[My friends] are almost all from La Lenin ... some of them are friends from university but they also went to La Lenin ... They organised a party for me when I arrived. It was more like moving from one neighbourhood to the next, I was already well integrated when I arrived here. ... I really enjoy living here ... I miss my parents, but I don't really miss Cuba. Basically what one misses isn't that bit of land anyway, it's the people and they're not there anyway ... my generation are all outside of Cuba.

The scope for mutual support is greater where Lenin alumni are residentially clustered, principally in the US, Miami especially, and in Barcelona and Madrid in Spain. Gladys was at the school in the early 1980s, and is married to another alumnus. She works at a public university in Miami where she often meets Lenin alumni among the students. She said she spots them from their manner of speaking and that, when she can, she helps them find jobs through other alumni who are running businesses in the Miami area. Iván had the same experience in Spain:

I maintain [my friendships from La Lenin] ... from my class at La Lenin ... 6 of us graduated together in the same year from the University [of Havana]. We spent 5 years together at university as well [as the 3 years at La Lenin]. ... Alexis lives in Barcelona and we stay in touch a lot. ... He's reached a good position and he's always offering me jobs.

### **Conclusion: La Lenin transnational**

The title of this article 'La Lenin is my passport' is a quote from an interview with Claudia who now lives in Spain. Being an alumna of La Lenin is a vital aspect of her self-identification, to the extent that she claims it as her homeland: 'I say frankly that I am from La Lenin'. It resonates with similar assertions by other alumni, who, like her, live outside

Cuba. This suggests a paradox: The Cuban government founded La Lenin to produce political subjects who would serve and govern socialist Cuba. By definition, if the school was successful, its alumni would therefore stay. Yet, as Levinson and Holland have noted, schools have often proven themselves a 'contradictory resource for those who would fit the young to a particular version of society' (1996:1).

The material I have presented shows that the school was successful in the sense that alumni remain deeply committed to the institution that proved so decisive in shaping their lives. They are grateful for the education they received and appreciative of the opportunities it bestowed upon them, *but* many of them now live in diaspora. The paradox is best explained, I suggest, by paying close attention to the intertwining of social and geographic mobilities, and to the texture of everyday life at the school. The school became a transformational experience which set its pupils on a path of what Ghassan Hage (2005) calls 'existential mobility'. This is the kind of mobility which makes people feel they are 'going somewhere' in their lives. Hage argues that it is when people do not have a sense of existential mobility, that they start contemplating physical mobility. In this case, the horizons widened and the friendships forged at school proved decisive for many alumni and fostered a feeling of exactly this kind of existential mobility. Alumni almost all explained their emigration from Cuba in terms of aspirations for existential mobility, in the form of careers, and an overall sense of better opportunities in life. Their physical mobility out of Cuba was in turn supported and facilitated by the strong social networks of support fostered at the school, as well as the cultural and educational capital it bestowed. As Andris described it, moving to Spain was like 'moving from one neighbourhood to the next'. For him, as for others, the big, existential move was *geographically* small-scale, from their local school to La Lenin.

My material further shows that schools can become sites for non-national affiliation and identification, raising wider questions about belonging and diaspora formation in a context of globalisation and transnational migration of elites and the highly skilled. While none of my interlocutors explicitly made the point, identification with the school provides a highly ambiguous identity narrative, an alternative to the polarizing discourse and counter-discourse of the government and organised Cuban exile organizations respectively. The appeal of this alternative narrative further underlines the importance of taking into account the pre-migration experiences of diasporans, completely over-looked in assimilationist

literature, which is otherwise keenly interested in the educational achievements of migrants. It also points to the need to embed international migration within people's lives more broadly and not presume a priori that mobility across national borders is more important than other kinds of mobility.

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