Decolonial Arts-Based Social Work and Education with Migrants in Spain: A Rights-Based Approach

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Abstract

This article examines how arts-based, rights-oriented social work can foster voice, dignity, and inclusion with migrants in Spain. Drawing on decolonial theory and an a/r/tographic approach, we designed a collaborative program in reception settings with 57 adult migrants. Visual and performative artifacts—self-portraits, cultural "subway-map" cartographies, photo-narratives, a red-threads performance, and a floor installation—were treated as primary data. A constructivist grounded-theory strategy guided analysis using a formal–symbolic–contextual matrix (composition/color/materiality; metaphors and chronotopes; production/audience). Findings show measurable learning in visual literacy and creative–expressive and social competences, alongside increased agency in public spaces. Participants co-curated what to share, reframing dominant narratives of mobility through collective meaning-making and community pedagogy. The study details a practical rights-based toolkit for social work: layered, accessible consent; anonymity and takedown options for images/QR content; safety briefings for public actions; member checking across stages; and co-curation to prevent aesthetic paternalism. We argue that arts-based practice, read through a decolonial lens, moves beyond using art as a mere method and functions as education *within* the arts that advances human rights in research, practice, and social work education. Implications are offered for curriculum, frontline practice, and community advocacy.

Keywords Human rights education · Migrants · Art education · Participatory research · Social work · Nonformal education

Introduction

For decades, migration has been approached through structural, legal, and policy frameworks—borders, labor regimes, and integration policies—(Bianchi & Kovalskys, 2017; Campechano-Escalona et al., 2024). In recent years, however, several "turns" have emerged that invite us to read migration not only as structure and policy but also as a lived, educational, and symbolic experience. Within migration and educational studies, the narrative and experiential turn shifts the focus toward biographical learning, belonging, and memory in contexts of mobility (Selimos, 2018; Popov, 2010; Marandola & dal Gallo, 2010). Complementarily, in the social sciences, the decolonial turn questions Eurocentric frameworks that hierarchize bodies, knowledges, and mobilities, proposing to reposition the epistemologies of social work and education (Lugones, 2023; Mendoza, 2024; Quijano, 2000, 2023). These perspectives help identify the asymmetries that shape the migrant experience—race, gender, legal status, language, and duration of residence—and how these influence access to rights and everyday coexistence (Gutiérrez Rodríguez, 2018; Gutiérrez-Rodríguez et al., 2024).

This epistemic shift converges with a growing intersectoral field linking art, health, and well-being. International evidence demonstrates that cultural participation has positive effects on health promotion, disease prevention, and social cohesion (Fancourt & Finn, 2019; Zbranca et al., 2022; World Health Organization Regional Office for Europe, 2023). Empirical studies have identified emotional regulation mechanisms activated through creative practices (Fancourt et al., 2019) and patterns of artistic engagement even in critical situations such as the

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COVID-19 pandemic (Mak et al., 2021). In the realm of policy and evaluation, well-being measurement frameworks in heritage and museums have been developed (Thomson & Chatterjee, 2022), policy implications synthesized (Fancourt et al., 2020), and the educational value of the arts for quality learning and inclusion recognized (Penketh & Riding, 2023; UNESCO, 2006; Venketest et al., 2023). Most recently, the WHO–EU report *Culture and Health: Time to Act* consolidates this agenda and, in its Priority 8, highlights pathways to inclusion through culture and the arts—with particular attention to migrants and displaced persons—calling for stronger cooperation between the cultural and health sectors (World Health Organization & European Commission, 2025).

Within this global frame, Spain's southern border has become one of the most critical humanitarian frontiers in Europe. The Canary Islands have experienced a dramatic increase in arrivals of African migrants traveling in unsafe conditions across the Atlantic route—currently one of the world's deadliest migration corridors (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), 2023). Civil society and research organizations, such as Centro Sira (2022), have documented severe human rights violations, trauma, and systemic neglect along this route, emphasizing the urgent need for psychosocial and rights-based interventions. The relocation of these migrants from the islands to mainland reception centers represents not only a logistical response but also a profound social and ethical challenge for inclusion and dignity. Situating this study in that context highlights its significance: arts-based, decolonial, and rights-oriented approaches become tools to rehumanize experiences often reduced to numbers, to foster recognition, and to rebuild agency through collective cultural and educational practices.

Understanding migration as an educational and aesthetic experience is especially relevant in contexts of grief, post-migration stress, and violence in transit, documented by both academic literature and humanitarian reports (Della Rocca et al., 2024; Deng et al., 2023; Jankovic-Rankovic et al., 2020; Kirsch et al., 2024; World Health Organisation, 2023; Wylie et al., 2018). In the Spanish and African migratory corridor, the Centro Sira (2022) report, provides crucial evidence of systematic abuses and trauma during the journey to Europe, underscoring the urgency of adopting rights-based and psychosocial approaches to migrant well-being. These realities resonate with the UNHCR (2023) global displacement trends and the UN (2015) Sustainable Development Goals, which demand frameworks connecting rights, health, and cultural participation. Within this context, arts-based and participatory mapping methodologies provide accessible languages to narrate trajectories, challenge stigmas, and foster community building (Gomis, 2022; Macaya-Ruiz, 2017; Moise, 2021; Murrani et al., 2023; Sánchez-Ayala, 2024; Zeng, 2024).

Importantly, this study does not assume that rights-based approaches are automatically compatible with lived experiences. As critical human rights scholars have argued, the liberal human rights framework can reproduce exclusionary hierarchies that position migrants as passive recipients of protection rather than as active subjects of rights (Dembour, 2010; Freedman, 2015; Grugel & Piper, 2011). From this standpoint, rights should not be understood as static universal entitlements but as situated and contested social practices that must be reinterpreted through lived experience, cultural context, and collective action. Accordingly, this article avoids generalizations and instead situates its findings within the concrete experiences of participants, exploring how the principles of voice, dignity, participation, and non-discrimination are negotiated, learned, and performed through localized, arts-based practices—and what tensions and limitations these processes reveal.

Building on this foundation, we propose to understand migration as an integral experience where emotional, identity, and social dimensions intertwine with structural conditions and expressive possibilities. In line with UNESCO's *Road Map for Arts Education* (2006) and growing evidence in arts and health (Fancourt & Finn, 2019; Zbranca et al., 2022; World Health Organization Regional Office for Europe, 2023; World Health Organization & European Commission, 2025), we approach art not as a mere methodological tool but as a rights-based practice and form of public pedagogy that fosters recognition, agency, and belonging in reception contexts (Photiou & Meskimmon, 2021; Thomson & Chatterjee, 2022).

Consequently, this study addresses three interconnected dimensions: (a) the epistemological, which examines how the narrative and decolonial turns reconfigure migration studies; (b) the ethical and political, which problematizes the limitations of rights-based approaches when confronted with the lived experiences of exclusion and displacement; and (c) the pedagogical and methodological, which explores how the arts and participatory social cartography can function as practices of health, learning, and citizenship for migrants in reception contexts.

Research Question

How does an arts-based, a/r/tographic approach advance rights-based social work in reception settings?

Objectives

The objectives of this study were fourfold. First, to assess the learning gains achieved by participants in terms of visual literacy and creative–expressive and social competences. Second, to analyze how visual and performative artifacts, together with participatory mapping, encode rights-related

meanings such as agency, care, recognition, and belonging, using a formal–symbolic–contextual matrix. Third, to identify the process mechanisms of rights practice emerging during the workshops—including participation, co-creation, co-curation, layered consent, and safety protocols—that inform both social work practice and education. Finally, to examine the outcomes of public pedagogy and community advocacy, particularly through co-curated exhibitions and public actions that foster recognition, belonging, and engagement with audiences.

Methodology

Context

A Spanish university, within a Service-Learning framework for social work education, partnered with a development NGO that manages a protection and reception resource for 90 adult African men who arrived by boat on El Hierro (Canary Islands) in summer 2024. The initiative aligns with SDGs 3, 4, 10 and 11 of the UN 2030 Agenda and operationalizes human rights practice (voice, dignity, participation, non-discrimination) through an arts-based a/r/tographic program. The dual goal is to: (a) strengthen students' training in rights-based social work, and (b) support migrants' social inclusion by making migratory grief visible and accompanying emotions and meaning-making.

In response to this question, this research work collects the results of the mapping carried out cooperatively with the students of the Spanish University and the African migrants of the NGO's protection and reception resource, with the aim of, on the one hand, helping students to learn about migration, generating social commitment and, on the other hand, facilitating the social inclusion of migrants. To produce the participatory mapping, mixed teams (students–migrants) co-created cartographic images (Fig. 1) using the stone as a shared symbol (path/burden/anchor) and linked QR codes to short interviews, ensuring co-authorship and consent at each stage.

In this study, a rights-based approach (RBA) is understood as both an ethical framework and a methodological orientation that grounds social work and education in the fundamental principles of human rights: voice, dignity, participation, and non-discrimination**.** These principles are aligned with the United Nations' Human Rights–Based Approach to Development (UN, (UN. 2015)), which emphasizes empowerment, accountability, equality, and participation as interconnected dimensions of justice. In the Spanish context, such principles gain particular relevance given the persistent challenges faced by migrants and asylum seekers—ranging from administrative limbo and limited access to services to racialized discrimination and precarious living conditions (Bianchia & Kovalskys, 2017; United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), 2023). A rights-based social work framework therefore entails not
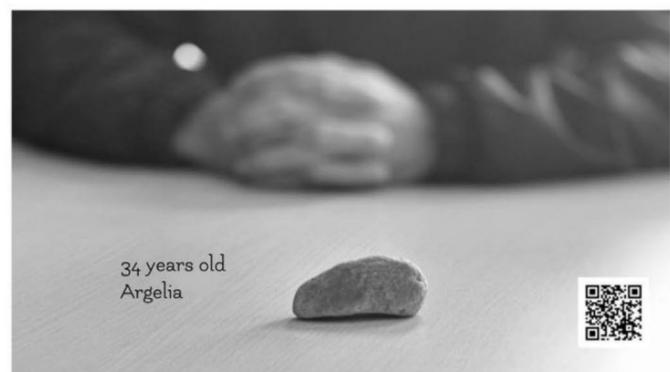

Fig. 1 Cartographic images, Source: Property of the authors

only defending legal entitlements but also fostering spaces where rights are practiced through recognition, dialogue, and shared agency (Freedman, 2015; Grugel & Piper, 2011). Within this framework, the arts serve as a relational and expressive medium to enact those rights, translating abstract norms into situated, embodied, and collective experiences.

Research Design

We adopted a qualitative, interdisciplinary design that situates social mapping within an arts-based, a/r/tographic framework and a rights-based, decolonial lens (Gutiérrez Rodríguez, 2018; Lugones, 2023; Mendoza, 2024; Quijano, 2000, 2023; Sánchez-Ayala, 2024). Conceived as participatory and community-oriented inquiry, social mapping reframes dominant narratives that stigmatize mobility and foregrounds migrants' meaning-making and claim-making through visual/performative artifacts (Moise, 2021). By integrating social science, education and art, it enables collective representation of the journey and identity transformation through symbolic/visual narratives (Zeng, 2024). In our study, artifacts (cartographies, drawings, photo-narratives, installation and performance) were treated as primary data, while interviews and observation provided triangulation; the focus is the journey as an emotional, identity and social process shaping belonging and inclusion (Moralli, 2024).

Pedagogically, social mapping builds community links in contexts of exclusion (Murrani et al., 2023; Zaman, 2020). We developed the didactic resource "Voices of Migration" and a public exhibition as pedagogy of/for rights, grounded in co-creation and dialogic learning between students and migrants (Macaya & Ruiz, 2017). Art was mobilized to foster hospitality and intercultural dialogue (Gomis, 2022; Moise, 2021), integrating visual and emotional expression to re-signify experiences (Arosteguy & Gomes, 2023) and to support recognition and participation—core human-rights principles—thus contributing to inclusion and symbolic empowerment (Moralli, 2024). Co-curation and layered consent guided decisions on what to show and how, aligning research, frontline practice and social work education.

Adopting a decolonial methodology also shaped the overall research design. Beyond integrating participatory and arts-based tools, it required decentering Eurocentric research logics that privilege extractive observation and verbal data. Following Quijano (2000, 2023), Lugones (2023), and Mendoza (2024), we understood decoloniality as a methodological stance that repositions participants as co-researchers, validates multiple epistemologies, and treats artistic creation as a relational practice of knowledge, recognition, and claim-making. This perspective guided the design toward dialogic workshops, co-decision, and shared authorship, framing a/r/tography not only as method but as a pedagogical process for decolonizing social work education.

Participants

The study involved a total of 57 participants (47 men and 10 women) aged between 18 and 35, originating from different countries in West and Central Africa. Of these, 56 participants arrived irregularly by boat ("patera") to the island of El Hierro, in the Canary Islands. One participant (P12) arrived in Spain by plane, supported by an NGO under a refugee status program (Table 1). This diversity of migration experiences provided a broader understanding of the intersections between displacement routes, rights-based practices, and artistic participation in contexts of reception.

In terms of age distribution, the majority of participants are between 21 and 25 years old (32.65%), with a predominantly young population, followed by the groups aged 26 to 35 years (34.7%) and 18 to 20 years (24.49%). The type of sampling chosen, in coherence with the qualitative design of the study, was census-based, as all persons residing in the centre who met the following inclusion criteria were included (Ruiz, 2012): (a) be of legal age, with the capacity to participate voluntarily in the research; (b) reside continuously for at least eight months in the city's reception resource at the time of data collection; (c) have a sufficient level of understanding of Spanish or have the support of mediators to facilitate communication during the interviews; and (d) voluntarily accept to participate in the study, after prior information and informed consent, in accordance with the ethical principles set out in the Declaration of Helsinki.

Research Techniques and Instruments

Following Charmaz and Belgrave (2019), we combined arts-based visual inquiry with qualitative techniques—semi-structured interviews, narrative analysis, and grounded-theory thematic analysis—to capture subjective experiences together with patterned meanings relevant to rights-based social work. Semi-structured interviews elicited detailed yet flexible narratives, combining a core guide with probing for emergent themes (Jayalath, 2023). The guide was informed by the research aims and by participatory social mapping,

Table 1 Participants and country of origin

Country of origin	Number of participants	Percentage (%)
Mali	16	30.19
Morocco	16	30.19
Senegal	10	18.87
Mauritania	10	18.87
Guinea	1	1.89

Source: Own elaboration

and was structured around eight thematic axes focused on identity, inclusion and belonging (Table 2).

Video, photography, and drawing were used as recording tools to capture non-verbal expressions and key moments of the social-mapping process, reflecting interaction and co-creation. These visual tools facilitated the reading of symbolic and emotional elements that enriched oral narratives and positioned image-making as rights practice (participation, recognition, non-discrimination) in social-work routines (Marín-Viadel & Roldán, 2019).

Narrative analysis, read through a decolonial lens (Gutiérrez Rodríguez, 2018; Lugones, 2023; Mendoza, 2024; Quijano, 2000, 2023), and grounded-theory thematic analysis (Jayalath, 2023) enabled an inductive interpretation of journeys. Visual/performative artifacts were treated as primary data and examined with a formal–symbolic–contextual matrix (composition/color/materiality; metaphors and chronotopes; production/audience). We used open and axial coding, constant comparison across visual and textual materials, analytic memos, and member checking/co-curation to consolidate categories and mitigate aesthetic paternalism.

The integration of arts-based and narrative techniques thus reflects not only a methodological innovation but a decolonial ethic of inquiry. Instead of extracting stories, we co-constructed meaning through aesthetic, affective, and dialogic forms that privileged participants' interpretive authority. This orientation redefined validity in terms of reciprocity and resonance, aligning with decolonial epistemologies that challenge hierarchies of voice, authorship, and representation.

Data Analysis Procedure

We analyzed 57 interviews together with the full visual corpus (cartographies, drawings, photo-narratives, installation and performance). Following constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz & Belgrave, 2019), we conducted open coding of textual and visual materials, applied a formal–symbolic–contextual matrix to artifacts (composition/color/materiality; metaphors and chronotopes; production/audience), and used constant comparison across participants, media and settings. Through axial coding, the migratory journey operated as the central integrator, with emergent categories such as identity, emotional health, social inclusion, and symbolic reconfiguration. A decolonial, rights-based lens functioned as sensitizing concepts for memo writing and category naming—foregrounding hierarchies of mobility/belonging and gendered coloniality (Gutiérrez Rodríguez, 2018; Lugones, 2023; Mendoza, 2024; Quijano, 2000, 2023;). Trustworthiness was ensured through triangulation, member checking (feedback in workshops and validation of captions for the exhibit), and external audit of memos and category structure (Denzin & Lincoln, 2012), alongside iterative comparative analysis (Estrada et al., 2021). Where participants limited dissemination, materials were anonymized and excluded from public outputs while retained for aggregate analysis.

Table 2 Thematic axes and interview questions

Thematic axes	Questions
1. Sociodemographic Profile	What is your name, age, and country of origin? Where were you born and where did you live before arriving in Spain? How long have you been in the country? What languages do you speak?
2. Migration Journey and Travel Motivations	Why did you decide to migrate? How was your migration journey (stages, duration, means of transport, emotions)? What were you hoping to find upon arriving in Spain?
3. Travel Conditions and Emotional Experiences	How did you experience the migration journey? What difficulties or fears did you encounter? What emotions do you most vividly remember from the journey? Who were you travelling with?
4. Expectations and Perceptions of the Host Country	What image did you have of Spain before arriving? Have your expectations been met? What differences do you perceive compared to your country of origin?
5. Identity, Culture and Belonging	What customs, foods, traditions or music do you miss from your country? What things have you kept here that connect you to your place of origin? How do you perceive yourself now: different, the same, changed?
6. Educational, Training and Social Inclusion	What are you studying or learning in Spain? ¿Do you feel included in the community? What support do you receive (institutional, social)? What difficulties do you encounter in your daily life?
7. Dreams and Future Projects	How do you see yourself in a few years? What would you like to achieve? What is most important to you for the future? What do you need to reach your goals?
8. Cultural Participation, Art and Expression	Would you like to tell your story through art (drawings, maps, music)? What image, symbol or place best represents your journey? What message would you like to convey with your experience?

Source: Author's own elaboration

Ethical Compliance and Researcher Positionality

This study received ethics approval from the University (BLINDED) Research Ethics Committee (PI 23–3402 NO HCUV) and was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki. Researcher positionality. As university-based researchers in Spain working alongside NGO mediators in reception settings, we explicitly located our work within historically unequal relations of race, citizenship and language. Guided by decolonial scholarship, we used reflexive memoing and team check-ins after each workshop, relied on bilingual mediation for translation/meaning, and adopted co-decision and co-curation with participants, who retained veto/takedown rights over any public use of their materials. Safeguards and risk mitigation. Before each activity we reiterated a pause/withdraw rule without negative consequences and activated referral pathways to the NGO's psychosocial support when needed. Layered, accessible consent was implemented (explained orally with linguistic mediation); refusal or omission never affected access to services. Privacy by design. For visual records, participants could choose non-identifying framings, pseudonyms and/or blur, with metadata removal; QR-linked materials were stored under restricted access and were revocable at the authors' request. Public-space actions followed specific safety protocols (site authorization, preventive briefings, off-camera option). Data governance included restricted access, encrypted storage, and limited retention in line with University (BLINDED) policy, with secure deletion at project end; mediators and students signed confidentiality agreements. Return and community validation. Findings were returned through the exhibition Voces de la migración, conceived as member checking and community dialogue, enabling participants to review, recognize and re-signify their artistic and narrative productions.

Results

Learning Gains: Visual Literacy and Creative–Expressive/Social Competences

For migrants, the journey is not only a physical displacement, but an experience that redefines the perception of themselves and the world, as it implies managing a constant insecurity that includes one's own survival, thus the predominant emotions that emerge from the testimonies include fear, uncertainty, hope and resilience. In a certain sense, the decision to leave the country and set off implies an epic that has no turning back, thus, despite the fact that "before leaving I was afraid, because I didn't know what awaited me and that every day of the journey was a test, I kept going because I had no other option" (P14).

For many others, the journey becomes a test of physical and emotional endurance, marked by loss, sacrifice and overcoming obstacles: "I have left my family, my friends, everything I knew. The journey has changed the way I look at life. Now I know I am stronger, but it is difficult" (P33). However, some participants also highlight that the journey was accompanied by moments of solidarity among fellow travellers, which allowed them to sustain themselves emotionally in the most difficult moments: "In the desert, I thought I wouldn't make it. But the people I met along the way gave me strength. We helped each other" (P27). The migration process impacts on the way people perceive their identity, so, some now, "after all I went through, I know that I am a strong person, someone who does not give up" (P19).

The journey also influences the way migrants imagine their future in Spain and Europe, as the hardship of the journey marks a before and after, acting as an extrinsic motivating factor, as follows: "I went through a lot of difficulties to get here, so I don't want to give up. I want to learn, study and have a stable job" (P8). However, others express a sense of disenchantment when they realise that the Spanish and European reality does not always correspond to the expectations they had before leaving: "I thought it would be easy here, but it is not. The journey doesn't end when you arrive, it continues with all the difficulties we encounter here" (P41). Uncertainty about the future is also reflected in some testimonies, especially in those who have not yet managed to establish a support network or find stability in their new environment, thus, "I feel that I don't know what will happen to me. I came with the hope of a better future, but sometimes I wonder if I will make it" (P36).

Rights-Related Meanings Encoded in Artifacts and Maps

The migration journey is characterised by a set of extreme and dangerous experiences that generate a high level of emotional charge. The predominant emotions in the testimonies include fear, uncertainty, exhaustion, as, "the journey was long and difficult. We didn't know if we would arrive safely or if something bad would happen to us on the way" (P26). Thus: "I remember 4 days of fear, the whole night, no sleep, not knowing if we arrived. I was in the boat with other people, cold, I only saw water" (P2).

For this reason, post-migration stress is a recurrent phenomenon in the testimonies analysed. The insecurity experienced during the journey, the separation from loved ones and the lack of information about the destination generate a feeling of prolonged vulnerability: "Since I left my country, my head has not stopped. Sometimes I can't sleep because I remember what I went through on the way" (P41). At the same time, some participants highlight that the experience of the journey strengthened their emotional resistance and their

capacity to adapt, with hope and resilience also appearing: "After everything I experienced on the road, I feel that I am stronger. I know I can overcome anything, I have a chance here" (P18).

The emotional state with which migrants arrive in Spain directly influences their integration process. Anxiety and depression resulting from the journey make it difficult to learn the language, socialise and integrate into the education and employment system. "Sometimes in class I can't concentrate. I think about my family, about everything I have left behind and I find it hard to learn" (P9). Many migrants experience difficulties in establishing relationships in the host community due to the mistrust generated by their experiences during the migration journey. "After everything I saw and went through on the way, I find it hard to trust people. I don't know who really wants to help me" (P35). Therefore, "I would like to see more Muslim people and I would like people to speak French in Spain" (P57). However, support networks, both institutional and informal, are key elements to overcome the psychological effects of the journey and favour adaptation to the new context. "Here at the centre they help us a lot. They listen to us and explain to us how to move forward" (P22).

Process Mechanisms of Rights Practice in Workshops

The migratory journey acts, unwittingly, as a determining factor in the process of inclusion in Spain, whether as a motivational or demotivating element, since, as this migrant recounts: "I left Mali and it took me five days to get to Spain. During that time, everything was uncertainty. Now, every time I have to make a decision here, those memories come back and I feel afraid" (P41). In this sense, it is observed that those who experienced a long and difficult journey have emotional and physical sequelae that can become additional obstacles to integration: "The journey was very hard. I was hungry, cold and afraid. When I got here, I was too tired to think about studying or working" (P31).

However, one participant, who arrived in Spain by plane with the support of an NGO under a refugee status program, described a markedly different experience of inclusion and access to support services: "I came by plane, with the help of an NGO. Everything was easier for me…" (P12). Most other participants, by contrast, had arrived irregularly by boat to the island of El Hierro, and their testimonies reflected greater precarity, uncertainty, and prolonged vulnerability in the reception process. The difficulties of the journey, especially when entry occurs in an irregular situation, affect migrants' opportunities, as they limit the possibility of obtaining documentation, accessing employment, and exercising basic rights. In this sense, one migrant explained: "Everything here is more complicated without documents.

Without papers, you cannot study or work; it is a continuous wait and you are not always treated well" (P45).

Furthermore, the testimonies of migrants reveal that those who have gone through extreme experiences on the journey express a greater difficulty in trusting institutions and the host community: "for me the most difficult thing was to trust people, because on the journey I had learned to distrust everything" (P43), since: "the journey is infinite, and full of dangers and difficulties, every step is a struggle. Now, here in Spain, I still feel that I am on that road, not knowing when it will end" (P49). Despite the difficulties arising from the journey or precisely because of these difficulties, participants report having developed adaptation strategies within themselves that have facilitated their integration into the community and the education system, as one migrant explains: "At the beginning, I didn't speak Spanish and that made me feel isolated, I didn't speak Spanish and that made me feel isolated. But little by little I started to learn and with the help of friends and teachers, I feel more a part of here" (P28).

Access to support networks and institutional reception programmes is therefore essential to counteract the negative effects of the migration journey and to foster stability in the host country: "The Red Cross helped me a lot when I arrived. They explained my rights and how I could start building a new life" (P32). In this sense, some participants suggest that, to a large extent, integration opportunities depend on the receiving community and the resources that exist to facilitate their adaptation process, therefore, "if there were more possibilities to learn the language from the beginning and more help to find a job, everything would be easier" (P36). Complementarily, other participants express that "if I could change anything, I would ask for more psychological support for newcomers. Many of us carry difficult histories and that prevents us from moving forward" (P49).

Public Pedagogy and Community Advocacy Outcomes

The possibilities of ethical or committed art can be seen in this work, as it is a tool, a space for expression, that allows migrants to represent both the experience and the emotional impact of the journey, highlighting the resistance, nostalgia and personal transformation of the migrant. Thus, we can see how artistic representation through photography, drawing and music allows migrants to reconstruct their history and share it with the receiving community.

Figure 2 shows self-portraits made by young African migrants which, although childlike in appearance, should be understood as emotionally significant graphic expressions. According to the theory of Viktor Lowenfeld (1970), these drawings reflect a form of self-expression intimately linked to the migratory experience, where formal simplicity, the

Fig. 2 Self-portraits of exodus: identity and visual memory in transit
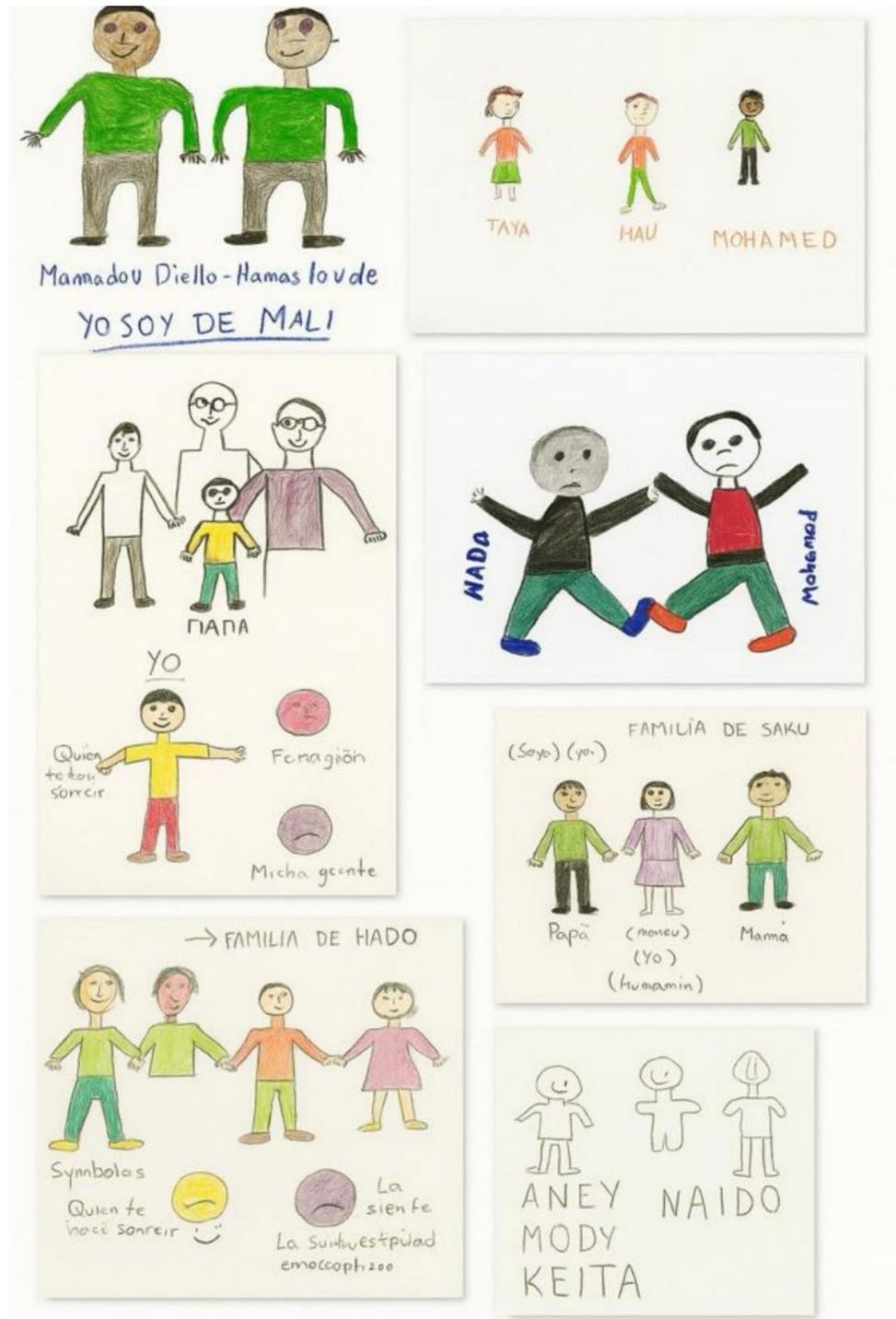
absence of background or the schematization of the body do not reveal technical deficiencies, but rather visual metaphors of uprootedness, fragility and suspended identity. The use of codes typical of children's art can be interpreted as a mechanism of symbolic resilience and emotional return to a more integral self. These drawings should not be read as spontaneous productions, but as vital documents that, from a pedagogical and therapeutic perspective, reveal profound processes of personal reconstruction, belonging and memory.

In this sense, when describing the journey, drawn on a sheet of paper, a migrant explains that "if the journey were a photo, it would be that of a boat at sea, with faces full of fear and also hope" (P43). Absolute darkness and night is present in almost all the landscapes described and depicted; it is a long journey without a clear direction, where the uncertainty

and hardship of the journey are reflected in images that evoke feelings of loneliness and fear. In this sense, one participant relates that in his drawing "a dark night appears, without stars, only the sound of water and the cold on the skin" (P45).

Some testimonies describe with great rawness the emotions that accompanied the journey, the fear, the absolute insecurity and the nostalgia, as follows: "I remember that my journey was full of uncertainty. We slept in the open air, without food, sometimes in hiding. I thought about my mother all the time" (P6). In addition to photography and drawing, some participants highlight the importance of music and orality as means to narrate their journey and keep the memory of their culture alive. "In my country, music tells stories. I would like to make a song about my journey, so that others can understand what we experienced" (P49). On the other hand, migrants are aware of the consciousness-raising power of art and express that "if there were more spaces where we could show our stories with photos and drawings, people would see us differently" (P26). In fact, some participants propose that schools and cultural centres could include artistic and narrative projects where migrants share their experiences, thus helping to reduce stereotypes and promote a more humane view of migration, since, "if people could see our stories in drawings, in books, in films, they would understand better why we are here" (P38).

Social mapping emerges as a key methodology that makes visible not only the migratory journeys, but also the emotions and experiences lived by migrants, thus encouraging reflection on the reality of the migratory exodus. By mapping and giving meaning to the experience, migrants not only reconstruct their memory of the journey, but also communicate their experience in a format accessible to the host community, since, "in this way, people can see everything we have been through to get here. We are not numbers, we are stories" (P22). In this sense, we can see how the possibility of making their experience visible through psychographics makes it possible to construct a visual narrative, highlighting the most critical moments of the journey, the places they passed through and the obstacles encountered along the way. Thus, for example, a migrant explains how: "If the map of my journey were a drawing, it would have many broken roads, places where I slept without knowing if I would wake up and borders that were not just lines, but invisible barriers that changed everything" (P47).

In addition to its testimonial value, social mapping can also serve as a practical tool to orient other migrants about available resources in their integration process. "When someone arrives, they should find a map with places where they can ask for help, learn the language or meet more people" (P26). Some participants suggest that social mapping should be integrated into educational spaces in order for Spanish society to better understand the dynamics of

migration and the difficulties of forced displacement, so that "maybe there would be less racism and more understanding" (P49). The creation of collective maps in reception centres is also proposed, where migrants can record their own trajectories and share them with other newcomers, generating support networks based on common experiences. "If everyone could draw their own path and see it alongside that of others, we would realise that we are not alone. We have all crossed some desert, some difficult border, some night when we didn't know if we were going to make it" (P42).

These findings should not be interpreted as universal representations of empowerment but as localized, situated, and diverse experiences of rights practice. While arts-based and participatory mapping processes can foster agency and recognition, they also reveal the uneven and fragile nature of rights enactment in precarious migratory contexts. The notion of "protection" often coexists with experiences of exclusion, waiting, and dependency, reminding us that rights are lived and negotiated rather than granted. This ambivalence—between agency and vulnerability—invites a critical reflection on the limits of rights-based approaches and underscores the need for decolonial, context-sensitive social work.

Discussion

We read the findings as the lived story of the migratory journey: a vital and transformative experience that reshapes identity, emotional health, and inclusion, and that can be re-narrated through art and participatory mapping. Framed as rights practice in social work (voice, dignity, participation, non-discrimination), this story unfolds within structural hierarchies of mobility and belonging (Quijano, 2000, 2023; UN, 2015; United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), 2023) and calls for educational responses consistent with arts education as nonformal learning and public pedagogy (UNESCO, 2006). The set of results we present interweaves conceptual, methodological, and practice/education planes and suggests a move from mere visibility to claim-making.

Identity appears as a narration in process (Selimos, 2018), recomposed between prior trajectories and the conditions of the receiving country, where "home" and "us" are renegotiated through transnational strategies (Popov, 2010; Marandola & dal Gallo, 2010) and biography is projected amid uncertainty (Campechano-Escalona et al., 2024). Our data resonate with the idea that shifts in social identity support well-being when recognition is achieved in new settings (Bianchia & Kovalskys, 2017; Jetten et al., 2018). A decolonial lens helps name the texture of these negotiations: the coloniality of power articulates race, labor, knowledge, and authority and orders hierarchies of mobility

and belonging (Quijano, 2000, 2023); the coloniality of gender regulates masculinities and care (Lugones, 2023; Mendoza, 2024); and the coloniality of migration is expressed in institutional racialization, transversal mourning, and waiting without rights (Gutiérrez Rodríguez, 2018), a key updated by recent reinterpretations for critical practice (Gaytán Zamudio & Pacheco Chávez, 2024).

Within the decolonial framework guiding this study, listening to the body and the journey is not merely metaphorical, but a methodological and ethical stance. It recognizes embodied expression as a site of knowledge and resistance, consistent with decolonial approaches that challenge the separation between mind and body, researcher and participant. This reflective posture invites us to understand participants' artistic gestures, movements, and silences as forms of epistemic disobedience (Lugones, 2023) — ways of narrating what cannot always be said, and of reclaiming the body as a space of memory, pain, and creativity.

The emotional impact of the journey confirms elevated levels of stress, anxiety, and migratory grief, especially when routes are precarious or violent (Deng et al., 2023; Jankovic-Rankovic et al., 2020), with effects on educational and social integration (Campechano-Escalona et al., 2024). Evidence suggests that post-migration stress can be as disabling as trauma en route, affecting concentration, motivation, and bonding (Kirsch et al., 2024; Lu, 2023; Poudel-Tandukar et al., 2024; Wylie et al., 2018). From a rights-based social work perspective, this is not read as individual deficit but as an obligation to create safe, sustainable environments and culturally responsive care (Della Rocca et al., 2024; UN, 2015, recognizing the patterned inequalities that decolonial theory has long signaled (Quijano, 2000, 2023).

The findings also nuance the assumption that rights-based frameworks are automatically compatible with migrants' lived realities. As noted by Dembour (2010), Freedman (2015), and Grugel and Piper (2011), liberal human rights discourses can inadvertently reproduce paternalistic hierarchies that position migrants as passive recipients of protection. Our participants' narratives, by contrast, reveal rights as situated, relational, and often precarious practices—negotiated daily in spaces of waiting, dependency, and informal solidarity. This calls for a shift from abstract rights frameworks toward contextually grounded practices of care and recognition, consistent with decolonial and participatory approaches to social work.

Even within such constraints, participants mobilize coping and adaptation strategies—community networks, practices of care, and mutual aid—that sustain belongings "from below" (Gutiérrez-Rodríguez et al., 2024). Our results show that recognition and participation are co-produced in everyday life and become empowering when minimum conditions of dignity are present (Bianchia & Kovalskys, 2017). A decolonial reading clarifies why

barriers persist (documentation, language, time in residence) and how non-discrimination must be operationalized in frontline work (Lugones, 2023; Quijano, 2000, 2023).

Within this frame, art and social cartography operate as methodologies of inquiry and expression (Macaya & Ruiz, 2017; Marín-Viadel & Roldán, 2019) through which participants encode their trajectories in sensitive, accessible forms that contest stigmatizing narratives (Moralli, 2024; Zeng, 2024). From critical geography and artivism, such practices open hospitality, denunciation, and intercultural dialogue (Gomis, 2022; Moise, 2021) and cultivate critical literacy, empathy, and narrative agency (Murrani et al., 2023; Zaman, 2020). In our case, co-curation and layered consent translated rights principles into concrete steps, mitigating aesthetic paternalism and aligning with the arts-education roadmap (UNESCO, 2006); the exhibition functioned as public pedagogy, extending classroom learning into community spaces and returning results for collective validation.

Methodologically, the study reaffirms the contribution of qualitative and grounded theory approaches to access the subjective, symbolic, and emotional layers of migration (Charmaz & Belgrave, 2018; Jayalath, 2023). The innovation lies in treating drawings, cartographies, and performances as primary data, read through a formal–symbolic–contextual matrix, reserving interviews for triangulation—a crucial choice when language or trauma limits verbal expression (Marín-Viadel & Roldán, 2019; Murrani et al., 2023). This combination de-centers ethnocentric gazes and consolidates a decolonial, horizontal reading of mobility (Macaya-Ruiz, 2017; Moise, 2021), while training students and professionals in rights-based social work routines (co-creation, safety, consent as an ongoing process).

Implications for practice and education point to policies and programs that articulate structural supports (education, language, employment) with symbolic recognition, artistic expression, and participation. Art is not only therapy or leisure but a cultural right and a pathway to active citizenship (Photiou & Meskimmon, 2021), consistent with UN/UNESCO frameworks (UN, 2015; UNESCO, 2006). In classrooms and reception centers, combining artistic and cartographic practices enables migrants to tell themselves, connect, and negotiate meanings (Gomis, 2022; Mekdjian, 2018), without losing sight that representation is a contested field of stereotypes and identities (Sharma, 2019). For social work, this implies consolidating a research–practice–education loop: research that recognizes coloniality and rights claims (Gaytán Zamudio & Pacheco Chávez, 2024; Gutiérrez Rodríguez, 2018; Lugones, 2023; Mendoza, 2024; Quijano, 2000, 2023); practice that operationalizes participation, co-curation, and safety; and education that prepares for public pedagogy and advocacy using arts-based methods.

In sum, we propose moving from making visible to making claimable: a decolonial, rights-based, arts-informed

social work that reframes the migratory journey as a terrain of learning, recognition, and shared responsibility.

Conclusions

As we close this work, the migratory journey is no longer merely movement but a process of learning and claim-making that reshapes identity, well-being, and inclusion. In the a/r/tographic workshops, visual and performative artifacts—read through a formal–symbolic–contextual matrix—allowed us to hear what often finds no words: agency, care, recognition, and belonging encoded in form, symbol, and relations with audiences. Co-curation and layered consent translated human-rights principles into concrete decisions in research, frontline intervention, and social work education; the exhibition and public actions operated as public pedagogy, broadening community recognition. We acknowledge limitations (cross-sectional design, single site, a sample of African men), yet the findings outline a replicable pathway. The next step is to accompany other trajectories longitudinally (diversifying gender and status) and to explicitly evaluate rights outcomes and curricular impacts of arts-based practices toward a more just, decolonial social work.

Declarations

Conflict of interest The authors declare no competing interests.

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