



Mapping the Migratory Exodus: Art, Education and Narratives Between the Local and the Transnational

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Abstract

At a theoretical level, migration is conceived as a relational, identity-based and multi-scalar process that goes beyond the traditional territorial or economic approach. It involves acculturation, symbolic negotiation and situated belonging. Art and social cartography, from decolonial and participatory frameworks, emerge as epistemic devices for representing and transforming these experiences. This study comparatively analyses the migratory experiences of two groups: people who migrate from rural to urban areas within Spain, and international migrants in an irregular administrative situation from Mali, Morocco, Senegal, Mauritania and Guinea. Through a qualitative approach combining semi-structured interviews, narrative analysis and social cartography, the motivations for displacement, expectations about the future, difficulties experienced and processes of identity reconstruction in the contexts of arrival are explored. The research reveals both similarities and substantial differences between the two groups. While internal migrants experience an "affective dislocation" in urban environments marked by precariousness and anonymity, international migrants in an irregular administrative situation face more structural barriers such as lack of documentation, racism and institutional exclusion. In both cases, art and cartography emerge as powerful languages for expressing, representing and re-signifying the migratory experience. These tools help to make memories, emotions and trajectories visible, while also facilitating processes of social and educational inclusion. Educational, social and methodological implications for promoting a more empathetic, participatory and humanely involved reception are highlighted. Overall, the study suggests that migration should be understood not only as a geographical or economic phenomenon, but as a transformative process that reshapes subjectivity, belonging and agency across unequal mobility regimes. By juxtaposing internal and international trajectories, the analysis highlights how arts-based and cartographic practices make these transformative dynamics visible without reproducing state-centred classificatory categories.

Keywords Migration · Cultural identity · Social adaptation · Artistic education · Social cartography

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Introduction

In recent decades, migration studies have incorporated critical perspectives that question dominant narratives about identity, belonging and citizenship. This article situates itself within this epistemic shift by analysing migrant subjectivation from a decolonial, feminist and situated perspective, within artistic and educational experiences developed by young migrants in local and transnational contexts (Deroo & McClure, 2024; La Barbera, 2020). We recognise that migratory experiences cannot be understood solely through binary categories (origin/destination, inclusion/exclusion) or universalist models of adaptation. Instead, we draw on Aníbal Quijano's theory of the *coloniality of power* (2000, 2023), which argues that modern structures of domination are shaped by a global colonial matrix that articulates race, gender, labour and knowledge. This perspective enables an understanding of migratory status not merely as administrative, but as constitutive of ontological hierarchies that shape subjectivities (Gaytán Zamudio & Pacheco Chávez, 2024).

From a decolonial feminist perspective, Lugones (2008, 2023, 2024) develops the notion of *gender coloniality*, describing how the modern/colonial project imposed a patriarchal and binary gender order that delegitimised other forms of existence. We also integrate Gutiérrez Rodríguez's (2010, 2013, 2018) concept of the *coloniality of migration*, which shows how policies and integration discourses reproduce classificatory regimes based on origin, skin colour, language and culture. These frameworks help decentre Eurocentric perspectives and foreground situated epistemologies that recover migrant voices (Gaytán Zamudio & Pacheco Chávez, 2024).

Regarding belonging, we draw on Yuval-Davis's (2011) multidimensional approach, which articulates three levels: social belonging shaped by power, emotional identification, and normative judgements about "who belongs." Recent research shows how fragmented belongings are negotiated across geographical and symbolic borders (Hogarth, 2016; Schiefer et al., 2025). Belonging emerges as a situated practice in tension between agency and structural regulation, aligning with the visual, spatial and affective dimensions mobilised in the artistic and cartographic practices examined in this study.

These conceptual frameworks allow us to analyse "difference within difference" at the intersection of migration, gender, race, class and legality (Binder et al., 2025). By juxtaposing irregular international migration and rural–urban internal migration, this study examines how different mobility regimes shape processes of subjectivation, expectation and identity reconfiguration. In both cases, migration entails a rupture with lived space and a symbolic recomposition of place and self (Liu, 2014; Poudel-Tandukar et al., 2024). In this context, art, narrative and social cartography consolidate their role as methodological and expressive tools for studying and representing these trajectories. Research has shown that these methods bring silenced memories to light, construct counter-narratives and enable expressive forms that transcend institutional or linguistic constraints (De Arriba et al., 2020; Jeffery et al., 2019). Participatory mapping, understood as a narrative and affective device, captures displacements, losses and resistances that constitute life in transit (Atzeni, 2020; Musiol, 2020).

At the same time, it is important to acknowledge that the experiences described throughout this article unfold within state-managed mobility regimes. Borders—both territorial and internal—operate as infrastructures of control that classify, filter and differentially value bodies in movement. For international migrants in an irregular administrative situation, these infrastructures materialise through surveillance, documentation regimes, relocation policies and chronopolitical forms of enforced waiting that actively produce experiences of non-belonging. Even though our analysis does not directly compare internal and international migration, recognising the role of the state is crucial for understanding why the latter is shaped by institutionalised forms of immobility and exclusion that have no equivalent in internal mobility. This perspective aligns with scholarship highlighting how legality, racialisation and territorial governance produce unequal conditions of movement and belonging.

We acknowledge that the categories of “internal “ and “international “ migration are not neutral. Following Brubaker (2004), we treat them as categories of practice and analysis while recognising their tensions. These classificatory regimes relate to processes of racialisation, legality and territoriality and may reproduce methodological nationalism—an issue we address through a relational and decolonial approach. Throughout this article, we use the expression “migrants in an irregular administrative situation” to refer to participants who lack legal residence status at the time of the study. We avoid treating “irregularity” as an inherent characteristic of persons and instead understand it as the outcome of processes of irregularisation produced by restrictive Spanish and European migration policies. From a decolonial perspective, irregularity is not a self-ascribed identity but an externally imposed legal condition that differentially distributes rights, recognition and mobility. In this sense, we conceptualise irregularisation as an active political process rather than a descriptive category. The study focuses on migrant subjectivation as the situated constitution of subjects at the intersection of legal frameworks, affective experiences and territorial hierarchies (Gutiérrez Rodríguez, 2010, 2018). Identity is approached as a relational and situated practice shaped by exclusion, precariousness and affective reconfiguration (Deroo & McClure, 2024; La Barbera, 2020).

Recent scholarship highlights the value of arts-based methodologies for capturing nuanced and marginalised migrant experiences. Visual storytelling, photovoice and participatory artistic practices foster empowerment and emotional engagement while producing counter-narratives that challenge stereotypical portrayals. At the same time, critical analyses underline the limits of these methods in addressing structural inequalities, calling for reflexive, ethically grounded designs attentive to representation. Recent methodological analyses emphasise both the transformative potential and constraints of participatory visual methods in migration research (Moralli, 2024a, 2024b).

In parallel, participatory and critical forms of social cartography map routes, attachments and everyday geographies of risk, care and belonging. Self-cartography and narrative mapping reveal affective and psychological dimensions of displacement while questioning technocratic representations that reduce migrants to data points. These studies stress the performative nature of co-authored maps and note that their transformative potential depends on negotiated participation and

context-sensitive facilitation. Research on self-cartography confirms that mapping supports resilience, symbolic reconstruction and affective grounding (Davanture & Derivois, 2020).

Collaborative artistic practices in educational and community contexts generate safe spaces for recognition, agency and collective symbolisation (Moralli, 2024a; Murrani et al., 2023; Sánchez-Ayala, 2024). These processes foster empathy, critical thinking and transformative action (Mocanu & Bibiri, 2023; Photiou & Meskimmon, 2021). This study is situated within a pedagogy of memory and territory, where the map represents not only trajectories of displacement but also acts of re-existence and the projection of possible futures.

Building on this body of work, the present study makes three interconnected contributions to migration research. First, it juxtaposes two rarely analysed trajectories—internal rural–urban migration in Spain and irregular international migration from Mali, Morocco, Senegal, Mauritania and Guinea—within a single analytical frame, showing how identity and belonging are reconfigured across different mobility regimes rather than treating them as separate fields of inquiry. Second, it advances arts-based and social cartography methodologies by integrating participatory art therapy workshops, narrative interviews and mapping exercises, and by reflecting on their pedagogical and political potential in educational and community settings. Third, it offers a decolonial and feminist reading of migrant subjectivities that critically interrogates dominant categories such as “internal” and “international” migration, revealing how these labels are implicated in hierarchies of mobility, legality and racialisation. In doing so, the article contributes to current debates on belonging, identity reconstruction and the epistemic possibilities and limits of participatory research with migrants. Rather than treating internal and international migration as separate and siloed phenomena, this study aligns with recent calls to problematize segmented understandings of mobility. Adams and Bloch (2022), in their discussion of “siloed mobilities,” argue that tourism, migration and exile are often analytically separated despite being interrelated articulations of mobility shaped by unequal regimes of power. Building on this perspective, we approach rural–urban internal migration and irregular international migration not as isolated categories but as differentiated articulations within a broader mobility regime structured by legality, racialisation and territorial hierarchies.

Building on this framework, the article centres its analysis on the transformative processes through which migrants renegotiate belonging, agency and future expectations, and uses this focus to juxtapose internal and international mobility regimes without reproducing state-centred classificatory categories.

Materials and Method

Research and Educational Application Framework

Based on the above concepts, the University [BLINDED] has implemented a Service-Learning project in collaboration with an NGO that assists migrants who arrive in Spain in an irregular situation and are referred to an inland autonomous

community with very low population density (2.39 million inhabitants), characterised by an ageing population, continuous rural depopulation and uneven territorial distribution. The initiative is part of a national R+D+i project that addresses Sustainable Development Goals 3 (Good Health and Well-being), 4 (Quality Education), 10 (Reduced Inequalities), and 11 (Sustainable Consumption and Production Patterns) of the UN 2030 Agenda. Its objective is to understand the phenomenon of migration in order to develop an educational resource (the “A/Rtographies”) and a socio-educational intervention tool aimed at raising awareness of migratory grief and supporting the emotions associated with it, while promoting the inclusion of migrants regardless of whether their trajectories involve internal mobility within Spain or international mobility under irregular conditions.

This research compiles the results of two “A/Rtographies” carried out in collaboration with university students and migrants from the rural exodus and from irregular international migration from Mali, Morocco, Senegal, Mauritania and Guinea. To generate the cartographies, participants collaboratively created cartographic images (Fig. 1) around a shared symbol—the stone—understood as path, difficulty and burden. Each image incorporated a QR code providing access to a recorded narrative interview. The exhibition “Voices of Migration” (“Voces de la Migración”) was conceived with the participants, who selected visual symbols, chose the interview excerpts to display, and validated the final composition.

A horizontal methodology was promoted throughout the process. Strategies included role rotation, co-authorship in visual composition, and intercultural translation facilitated by the migrants themselves, who often acted as interpreters between peers and researchers. In practice, this involved working in small mixed



Fig. 1 “Voices of Migration” exhibition: Portrait with symbolic object (stone) and QR code. Source: Property of the authors. *The participant, a 24-year-old from Morocco, holds a stone representing the weight and resilience of his journey. The QR code links to his oral testimony in Spanish. Created through a participatory process, this visual cartography exemplifies how migrant subjectivation and memory are expressed through symbolic objects and digital media

groups around large sheets of paper, enabling expression through visual and embodied means rather than relying solely on verbal fluency. Participants decided autonomously when and how to comment on their images and maps, while the research team acted mainly as facilitators. These dynamics reduced communicative hierarchies, particularly for participants with limited literacy or language proficiency, and strengthened collaborative meaning-making.

Subject of Study and Research Questions

The study compares the migratory experiences of two groups: people who migrate within Spain from rural areas to cities, and migrants who arrive irregularly from Mali, Morocco, Senegal, Mauritania and Guinea. It seeks to understand and represent migration not only as a geographical or economic phenomenon but as a lived experience that transforms subjectivities, social ties and personal narratives. The research is structured around three questions:

1. What are the main motives, expectations and difficulties that drive internal migration (rural–urban) and irregular international migration from Mali, Morocco, Senegal, Mauritania and Guinea, and how do they differ in terms of personal experience and socio-economic context?
2. How are identities and senses of belonging negotiated and re-signified in rural contexts marked by dynamics of power, gender, race and legal status?
3. How can art and social cartography represent, compare and make visible the migratory trajectories of both groups, and what value do these tools have for understanding, expressing and transforming their experiences?

Study Design

The study adopts a transdisciplinary qualitative design grounded in social cartography as a methodological paradigm (Sánchez-Ayala, 2024) and arts-based research, understood as a participatory tool that makes migration trajectories visible, challenges hegemonic discourses, and fosters symbolic and cultural empowerment (Machado-Oliveira, 2024). Fieldwork was carried out with two groups of migrants—Spanish internal migrants from the rural exodus and international migrants in an irregular situation from Mali, Morocco, Senegal, Mauritania and Guinea—who now reside in the same territorial context: the city of Palencia, Spain.

Rather than establishing a strict comparison between homogeneous migratory categories, the study follows a situated juxtaposition aligned with decolonial approaches to illuminate resonances and divergences in identity construction and belonging. The groups were selected due to shared experiences of territorial rupture, symbolic uprooting and community reconstruction under conditions of structural vulnerability (Moralli, 2024a). The methodological design thus advocates a dialogical reading between local and transnational contexts, challenging dichotomies such as legal/illegal, internal/external and national/foreign. Art and social cartography function as epistemic devices that enable a rethinking of mobility beyond utilitarian

dimensions, fostering horizontal connections across diverse experiences, origins, languages and trajectories (Zeng, 2024). Artistic narratives allow for the reinterpretation of migration from emotional, creative and critical perspectives (Castaño-Aguirre et al., 2023; Murrani et al., 2023), situating this work within contemporary decolonial, educational and affective migration research (Sánchez-Ayala, 2024).

This perspective also prompts a problematisation of the categories “internal migrant” and “international migrant”, which, although useful for describing differentiated mobility conditions, should not be treated as fixed. They are relational positions shaped by legal frameworks and colonial logics of classification. By juxtaposing both trajectories through affective and narrative cartographies, the analysis reveals connections and grey zones often obscured by binary frameworks in migration studies.

The selection of these two groups is not arbitrary but grounded in their coexistence within the same rural territory, which simultaneously experiences depopulation and the arrival of irregular migrants. Their shared spatial context, together with their sharply differentiated positions within mobility regimes—internal, legal mobility versus racialised and administratively illegalised mobility—offers a unique opportunity to examine how distinct forms of displacement generate hierarchies of belonging and recognition. This juxtaposition does not assume homogeneity; rather, it enables a decolonial, situated reading of how divergent trajectories expose common tensions around identity, rootedness and agency.

Data Collection Techniques and Instruments

Semi-structured interviews, social mapping workshops and collective artistic creation were employed within a sustained art therapy framework over two academic years, fostering trust, ongoing engagement and safe spaces for expression (Sánchez-Ayala, 2024). This extended period enabled a synthesis of narrative verbalisation with symbolic, bodily and visual experiences, facilitating meanings beyond linear discourse (Machado-Oliveira, 2024). Interviews ($n=89$ Spanish internal migrants; $n=53$ international migrants in an irregular administrative situation) were integrated into participatory workshops using expressive materials to explore identities, trajectories and aspirations.

The interview guides were structured around a small set of thematic axes aligned with the study’s analytical focus rather than exhaustive question lists. For international migrants, interviews explored (a) motivations and conditions of the migratory journey, (b) expectations and perceptions of the host country, (c) cultural and identity-related practices, and (d) experiences of legality, exclusion and belonging. For internal rural–urban migrants, the guide centred on (a) spatial memory and meaningful community places, (b) transformations of the rural territory, (c) collective and intergenerational senses of belonging, and (d) proposals for re-signifying neglected spaces through art and community engagement. These axes provided analytically comparable dimensions across both groups while respecting their contextual specificities. The full question-by-question guides are not included, as only the thematic dimensions are relevant for understanding how migratory trajectories intersect with

identity, belonging and symbolic reconstruction. Collective sessions refined emerging themes and reinforced dialogic, co-produced analysis, respecting cultural and linguistic contexts (Charmaz & Belgrave, 2018; Jayalath, 2023).

Artistic methods helped reduce communicative hierarchies by enabling visual, symbolic and embodied expression independent of linguistic proficiency, allowing participants to externalise meanings despite literacy or language barriers and facilitating collective interpretation of drawings, symbols and maps. Researchers participated alongside participants, favouring a horizontal dynamic over an extractive one.

We acknowledge that the interview guides differed in their analytical emphasis. For internal migrants, the questions centred on territory, spatial memory and community belonging because they were originally developed within a rural revitalisation project focused on socio-territorial change. For international migrants, the guide included dimensions related to cultural practices, expectations of integration and transnational trajectories, in order to capture symbolic ruptures, migratory decision-making and experiences of legal precarity. Although both guides were refined through participatory feedback, we recognise that these emphases may have shaped distinct narrative modes of expressing belonging and identity. This asymmetry is addressed as part of the study's methodological reflexivity.

The video-recorded interviews were edited into individual pieces and linked to QR codes embedded within collaboratively created final images. The stone—symbolising weight, burden, durability, malleability and connection to the land—was chosen by consensus as a central motif. Using participants' photographs, a map of the migratory exodus was produced (Fig. 1), integrating faces, journeys and emotions, thereby enriching narratives and enabling analysis of relationships between subjects and their territories of origin and transit (Machado-Oliveira, 2024).

Empirical material was analysed through two complementary approaches. Thematic analysis, informed by grounded theory principles (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Charmaz & Belgrave, 2018), inductively identified categories and relational patterns related to transiting, inhabiting and re-signifying places (McAuley, 2024). Narrative analysis examined participants' constructions of exodus, belonging and transformation, attending to narrative structure, emotional registers and symbolic silences (Adams et al., 2024a, 2024b; McAuley, 2024). Together, these approaches captured symbolic and affective dimensions of migration that are crucial for understanding identity formation from a decolonial perspective.

Analytical Approach

The empirical material was analysed through a multi-layered qualitative strategy combining thematic analysis, grounded theory principles and narrative analysis.

Thematic Analysis Informed by Grounded Theory

A reflexive thematic analysis was conducted (Braun & Clarke, 2006), informed by grounded theory principles (Charmaz & Belgrave, 2018). The analysis followed:

- Initial coding of transcripts, workshop notes and cartographic materials.
- Constant comparison across participants and data types.
- Focused coding to cluster recurrent patterns.
- Category development linking emotional, spatial and identity-related dimensions.

This ensured an inductive orientation while maintaining flexibility.

Narrative Analysis (Riessman tradition)

Narrative analysis followed Riessman's interpretative tradition, which views narratives as relational acts of meaning-making. This aligned with the multimodal data (interviews, artworks, maps) and the study's feminist and decolonial orientation.

The analysis examined not only *what* participants narrated but *how*, attending to:

- Narrative structure and temporality.
- Metaphors and symbolic devices.
- Emotional registers and silences.
- Subject positioning.

Multiple methods of narrative evaluation (Meraz et al., 2019) strengthened interpretive depth. Narrative, thematic and visual analyses were integrated iteratively.

Sampling and Fieldwork

Between September 2023 and April 2025, sampling and fieldwork were conducted in two contexts: rural municipalities in Palencia, Spain, affected by depopulation, and a humanitarian reception centre in northern Spain for international migrants in an irregular administrative situation from Mali, Morocco, Senegal, Mauritania and Guinea. For the first group, 89 Spanish internal migrants from the rural exodus were selected through intentional and theoretical sampling (Galán-Fernández et al., 2022; Lobato Becerra & Pérez González, 2025). Participants met criteria including age (over 18), residency (minimum ten years), and informed consent under the Declaration of Helsinki. The sample was structured by generation, gender and municipality size in order to represent contemporary rural socio-territorial dynamics (Table 1).

Table 1 Spanish internal migrants from the rural exodus

Generation (years)	Women	Men	Total
Older people > 81	5	4	9
Older (61–80)	6	6	12
Average age (36–60)	6	7	13
Young people (18–35)	30	26	56
Total	47	43	89

Table 2 International migrants in an irregular situation by age

Age range	Number of participants	Percentage
18	1	1.8
21	12	21.1
26–30	24	42.1
31–35	8	14.0
36–40	6	10.5
Total	57	100

Table 3 International migrants in an irregular situation by country of origin

Country of origin	Number of participants	Percentage
Mali	16	30.2
Morocco	16	30.2
Senegal	10	18.9
Mauritania	10	18.9
Guinea	1	1

For the second group, a census sample was used with all residents meeting the following criteria (Ruiz Olabuénaga, 2012): legal age, at least eight months of residence in the shelter, comprehension of Spanish or access to language mediation, and voluntary participation with informed consent under the Declaration of Helsinki. A total of 53 interviews were conducted with international migrants in an irregular administrative situation who had entered Spain by boat in the previous 12 months. All were in an irregular administrative situation at the time of the interview and temporarily residing in a humanitarian reception centre. Interviews were conducted in Spanish, French or Arabic, with support from intercultural mediators when necessary, and in several cases participants themselves acted as informal interpreters (Tables 2 and 3).

Access to participants was established through existing collaborations between the research team, local councils and the NGO managing the humanitarian reception centre. Initial contact was facilitated by social workers and cultural mediators who introduced the researchers and explained the project aims. Trust was built gradually through sustained presence, informal conversations, shared artistic activities and a commitment to co-authorship in the representation of their narratives. This relational approach helped create a sense of safety, reduced the asymmetry between researchers and participants, and enabled deeper engagement during interviews and workshops. Fieldwork was conducted through group art therapy sessions carried out over two academic years (Spanish internal migrants: September 2023–April 2024; international migrants in an irregular administrative situation: September 2024–April 2025). The process fostered horizontal and emotional bonds. Communication was facilitated by intercultural mediators and teachers of Arabic, Spanish and French; on multiple occasions, participants acted as interpreters for each other, bridging African dialects and the facilitation team. An ethic of care and recognition guided the process, including strategies to mitigate hierarchical relations: role



Fig. 2 Timeline and performative mapping. Source: Authors' own work. * The timeline recreates the emotional journey of migration (e.g., uprooting, loss, fear, courage) inspired by a subway map. In the public performance, participants wove red yarn between chairs representing key concepts and memories, co-constructing a collective cartography of exile

Table 4 List of workshop topics and activities

Workshop planning
Symbolic self-portrait: creation of a portrait using free materials that represent current identity
Drawn cultural map: representation of the place of origin from an emotional perspective, incorporating significant elements
Horizon line: exercise on continuous paper where aspirations are drawn above the line and necessary actions below, differentiating between what depends on oneself and what does not
Migration timeline: a graphic representation of the migration journey, using symbols, words and colours
Group performance "ID-shared identities": collective weaving of a symbolic network with names, people and experiences that have shaped identity
Cartography "Voices of Migration": creation of a collective map that captures the emotions of the migratory journey and the programme itself
Exhibition "Of Cayucos and Borders" and closing: ephemeral installation where the work carried out is shared and collectively reflected upon

Source: Authors' own work

rotation, collective review of materials, and participatory validation during the final exhibition. Story construction was negotiated to ensure respect for symbolic agency (Fig. 2).

Workshops were adapted to each context while maintaining core principles (Table 4).

From a decolonial perspective, both shared and divergent dimensions among African participants were considered. Despite collective experiences of colonialism,

structural racism and forced migration, differences in ethnicity, language, religion and class influenced modes of expression and interaction. Workshops were therefore designed using multiple symbolic languages and a critical intercultural lens, avoiding simplistic multiculturalism and promoting horizontal dynamics attentive to internal hierarchies inherited from colonial histories. Researchers adopted a reflexive stance supported by internal triangulation, collaborative review and participatory validation.

These visual, cartographic and narrative materials subsequently formed part of the multi-layered analytical approach detailed in Sect. "[Analytical Approach](#)", including thematic analysis informed by grounded theory principles and interpretative narrative analysis inspired by Riessman.

Positional Ethics and Reflexivity of the Research Team

This study was conducted by an interdisciplinary team comprising university lecturers, doctoral students in education, and third-sector professionals. We acknowledge that our academic trajectories, life experiences, and positions in terms of class, gender, ethnicity, and institutional affiliation inevitably influenced all stages of the research, from gaining access to the contexts to interpreting the data. This awareness led us to adopt a reflexive and critical stance, recognising that epistemic neutrality does not exist in qualitative work, particularly when researching with historically subalternised groups. In this regard, we consider it essential to address both the structural and epistemic dimensions of marginalisation. As Vadiya (2018) cautions, the struggle against exclusion cannot be limited to transforming social structures; it must also question the legitimacy of the processes of knowledge production that have historically sustained it.

We proceed from the premise that participatory research is traversed by implicit power relations, even when horizontal methodologies are employed. For this reason, we conceive reflexivity not as a methodological appendix but as an ongoing practice aimed at generating an ethical and situated representation of migratory trajectories (Iosifides, 2018). We therefore concur on the need to deepen the methodological perspective from a decolonial approach. This entails paying attention to power asymmetries, positionality, and the co-production of knowledge, as well as critically reflecting on their limitations and challenges. Qualitative research in the interpretivist tradition offers a particularly fertile framework for this, as it allows the dynamic complexity of lived experience—such as that of migrants—to be captured, by emphasising the contextual and situated nature of perceptions and human agency (Morawska, 2018). Such sensitivity to local contexts and meanings aligns with the decolonial approach, as it questions dominant epistemological frameworks and opens up spaces for more inclusive and alternative ways of knowing (Amelina, 2024). In this vein, considering the testimony of the migrant as alterity constitutes the only means by which hegemonic communities might identify their own epistemic conditioning and limitations (Villarreal, 2023).

The building of trust with participants was a gradual process, grounded in sustained presence in the intervention spaces, active listening, cultural respect, and the constant validation of their voices and subjectivities, in line with Moralli (2024b).

In the workshops with international migrants in an irregular situation from Mali, Morocco, Senegal, Mauritania and Guinea, the facilitating team included art therapists, cultural mediators, and teachers of Spanish and French, which helped to mitigate language barriers and create a hospitable environment. On numerous occasions, participants themselves acted as informal interpreters between their peers and the team, fostering horizontal dynamics of intercultural mediation. The resulting materials—drawings, maps, and videos—were selected, edited, and presented with the active participation of the migrants, who collectively decided on the aesthetic, narrative, and symbolic aspects. For example, the choice of the stone as a central symbol was reached by consensus, owing to its ambivalent connotations of weight, resilience, and connection to the territory.

In conducting interviews with individuals in situations of marked vulnerability, we were aware of the tension between the use of direct questioning and our commitment to feminist and decolonial approaches. Following scholars advocating reflexive and care-oriented methodologies in migration research, we addressed this tension by reframing interviews as dialogic and co-constructed encounters rather than extractive moments. Questions were adapted to participants' comfort levels, emotional boundaries, and communicative repertoires, and meaning-making occurred collaboratively through artistic, narrative and visual practices. This reflexive stance allowed the research process itself to incorporate care, reciprocity, and attention to power asymmetries, mitigating the limitations of direct questioning while still enabling ethically grounded knowledge production.

Moreover, this reflexive positioning was particularly relevant for the interpretative narrative analysis (Riessman, 2008), which required attention not only to what was narrated but to how participants positioned themselves in relation to institutions, borders, communities and researchers.

Data Analysis and Triangulation Process

Interviews were audio-recorded (with consent), transcribed verbatim and integrated with visual and cartographic materials. Coding followed a logic of constant comparison across categories, attending to differences by gender, age, legal status and environment. Validity and reliability were strengthened through analytical triangulation, participant validation and external review (Tracy, 2021).

In line with a constructivist approach to grounded theory (Charmaz & Belgrave, 2018), categories emerged inductively from narratives, drawings and maps. Initial analytical labels (here referred to as “open codes” in a constructivist sense) were identified first, followed by axial grouping into broader dimensions, and finally selective integration into central categories illuminating identity trajectories under unequal mobility conditions. In this study, “open codes” do not refer to isolated technical tags, but to meaning-bearing analytic units that integrate participants' emic expressions with first-cycle interpretative coding. This iterative process enabled identification of thematic patterns as well as shared and divergent structural or affective tensions (Table 5).

Table 5 Coding and thematic structure

Initial Analytical Label (Open Code)	Axial Category	Core Category	Representative Quote
“They took away my documents “	Lack of legal recognition	Legal and emotional dispossession	“Without papers, you don’t exist—neither on the street nor in anyone’s mind.”
“They sent us far from the centre “	Spatial exclusion and relocation	Institutional marginalisation	“They send you where no one goes. It feels as though we are treated as disposable.”
“I miss the mountains “	Affective memory of place of origin	Situated and emotional belonging	“There are people here, noise... but it’s not my land, it doesn’t smell the same.”
“Now I draw things with more colour.”	Expressive and symbolic practices	Symbolic agency and identity reappropriation	“It’s like saying I’m here, even if they don’t want to see me.”

The column “Initial Analytical Label (Open Code)” refers to first-cycle interpretative labels grounded in participants’ emic expressions, rather than to purely technical coding tags

Categories were validated through analytical reports, participatory feedback and alignment with Yuval-Davis (2011), Quijano (2000) and Lugones (2008), enabling a situated, intersectional reading of migratory subjectivities. Visual and narrative materials were co-analysed with participants, who decided on synthesis, anonymisation and exhibition. Ethical approval was obtained (BLINDED, PI 23–3402 NO HCUV). Extended informed consent for public exhibition ensured participant control over framing and visual treatment, avoiding aesthetic instrumentalisation.

Results

Although the empirical material gathered through interviews, workshops and cartographies is extensive, the present article focuses on three interconnected analytical dimensions: (a) motivations and structural conditions shaping the decision to migrate; (b) affective and symbolic negotiations of belonging in the arrival context; and (c) future aspirations as expressions of agency. These dimensions were selected because they emerged consistently across both groups and because they allow for a relational, rather than exhaustive, comparison of internal and international mobility experiences. The analysis does not aim to cover all collected material but to highlight elements that illuminate identity reconstruction under unequal mobility regimes.

The results of the psychographic interviews are described below, with the aim of identifying and highlighting the narratives of the two groups participating in this study: internal migrants (Spaniards from the rural exodus) and external migrants (international migrants in an irregular situation from Mali, Morocco, Senegal, Mauritania and Guinea). These results are organised to answer the research questions that shape the object of study, following the grounded constructivist theory approach (Fig. 3).

Figure 3 synthesises the explanatory framework that emerged from the grounded, constructivist analysis. On the left, the diagram groups structural conditions—legal status, racialisation and institutional access—that shape unequal

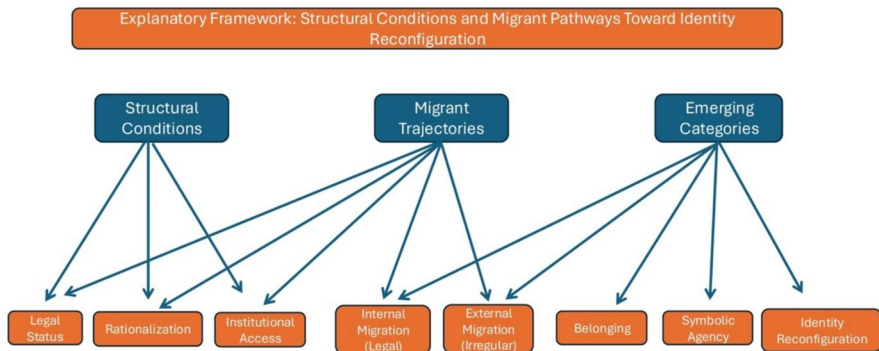


Fig. 3 Explanatory framework: from structural conditions to identity reconfiguration. Source: Authors' own work

regimes of mobility. In the centre, it locates the two migratory trajectories examined in this study (internal rural–urban migration and irregular international migration), understood as situated pathways through which these structural forces are experienced and negotiated. On the right, the figure presents the core categories that emerged from the data—belonging, symbolic agency and identity reconfiguration—as the outcome of migrants’ everyday practices of resistance, adaptation and meaning-making. The arrows between the three blocks highlight the relational and iterative nature of these processes rather than a linear, cause–effect model.

Migration Trajectories and Differential Mobility Regimes: Structures, Desires and Obstacles

This section presents the findings on the main motives, expectations and difficulties driving internal migration (rural–urban) and irregular international migration from Africa, and how they differ in terms of personal experience and socio-economic context. To this end, three central categories shared by both groups have been identified: (a) Structural conditions and migration decisions: agency in unequal contexts; (b) Symbolic projections of the future and expectation regimes; and (c) Regimes of mobility, exclusion and differential containment. In turn, the contrast between the experiences reveals significant differences in terms of contexts of origin, risks assumed and migratory imaginaries.

Structural Conditions and Migration Decisions: Agency in Unequal Contexts

In the case of internal migration, the reasons for leaving are mainly linked to the impoverishment of rural areas, the lack of job opportunities and the closure of public services. Added to this is a feeling of stagnation or isolation: "Here, there were no schools or doctors left, and I didn't want to spend my life looking after cows like my parents" (P12, internal migrant). Other testimonies reveal a generational and gender dimension: young people perceive that the city offers greater freedom and broader horizons: "My mother didn't want me to leave, but I felt that I couldn't be myself in the village. In the city there is more of a future, more people like me" (P8, internal migrant). In contrast, irregular external migrants cite reasons linked to survival, structural violence, extreme poverty and, in many cases, the desire to help their families. The decision to migrate is not voluntary but forced by: "I had no future in Mali. No job, no school. If I stayed, I would have starved to death. So I left" (P3, participant in an irregular administrative situation). "I saw my cousin die because he couldn't get medicine. Here at least I can try something, anything" (P17, participant in an irregular administrative situation). This narrative agency allows participants to reframe their decisions in terms of dignity, resistance or aspiration, breaking with victimising or deterministic interpretations.

Symbolic Projections of the Future and Regimes of Expectation

Rural migrants tend to imagine the city as a place of autonomy and personal development. Expectations are marked by access to education, employment and cultural life: "I came to study, to work, to do things I couldn't do in my village. I dreamed of having my own pottery studio" (P5, internal migrant). In contrast, in irregular international migration, expectations are built around survival and economic stability. Many report having idealised Europe as a place of endless opportunities, without having grasped the real barriers: "I thought that everything was easy here, that you could just arrive and start working. But that's not the case. Here you also have to fight hard" (P33, participant in an irregular administrative situation). "My brother is in France, and he told me that Europe was good. I thought Spain would be similar. Now I see that it's very hard, but I remain hopeful" (P9, participant in an irregular administrative situation). Despite the differences, in both groups migration is experienced as a gamble on the future, as a break with the past that allows new life stories to be constructed. However, far from representing only idealised desires, these projections constitute performative acts that express symbolic agency. The enunciation of the future—even if uncertain or conditional—constitutes a form of existential affirmation and subjective reterritorialisation, as evidenced in the cartographies where the paths travelled and dreamed of intertwine.

Regimes of Mobility and Exclusion: Visible and Invisible Barriers

Internal migrants point to job insecurity, the cost of living in cities and the difficulty of integrating into impersonal urban environments as the main obstacles: "The city swallows you up. Everything here is fast, expensive and competitive. Sometimes I miss the tranquillity of the village" (P15, internal migrant). "Urban loneliness" also emerges as a common feeling: "In the village, at least we knew each other. Here, I found it very difficult to make friends, to feel part of something" (P6, internal migrant).

On the other hand, one of the most recurrent findings among international migrants in an irregular situation was the experience of "waiting" as a chronic form of exclusion. Several testimonies describe prolonged situations of bureaucratic paralysis and lack of institutional responses: lack of documentation, lack of understanding of the language, racism, precarious housing conditions, and lengthy administrative procedures. Added to this is the trauma of the migratory journey, which leaves deep emotional scars: "We went three days without eating, hidden in a truck. Then the sea... I thought I was going to die. Sometimes I dream about it" (P22, participant in an irregular administrative situation). "Here I feel invisible. Without papers, you don't exist. You can't study, work, or do anything. It's like standing still, waiting in a timeless time" (P28, participant in an irregular administrative situation). This testimony reflects the type of legalised exclusion that Encarnación Gutiérrez Rodríguez identifies as part of the *coloniality of migration* (2018), where waiting is not a temporal void, but an active regime of dispossession.

Synthesis of Similarities and Divergences Across Trajectories

Across both groups, migration is experienced as a biographical rupture that triggers processes of identity renegotiation, affective displacement and future-oriented agency. Both internal and international migrants describe loss of rootedness, emotional ambivalence and the need to reconstruct belonging through everyday practices, social ties and symbolic expression. However, the trajectories diverge significantly in terms of structural conditions. While internal migrants face socio-economic precariousness, anonymity and affective dislocation within a legally protected mobility regime, international migrants in an irregular administrative situation confront legally enforced immobility, racialisation, institutional waiting and exclusion from formal rights. These differentiated mobility regimes shape not only material opportunities but also subjective horizons of expectation, temporalities of hope and modes of self-positioning.

Regimes of Mobility, Exclusion and Differential Containment

Based on migrants' narratives, both trajectories emerge as responses to displacement in search of a more liveable future, yet they unfold under profoundly unequal structural conditions. While internal migration within Spain takes place within a legally protected framework marked by precariousness and difficulties of rootedness, irregular international migration from Mali, Morocco, Senegal, Mauritania and Guinea involves crossing multiple borders without guarantees of rights, rendering mobility itself a risky and disempowering experience. This difference is also reflected in access to rights and perceptions of the future: "They [internal migrants] have ID cards, they can go to university, look for work. We have to wait for papers, sometimes for years. It's very hard" (P38, participant in an irregular administrative situation). However, both groups express the desire to build a dignified and stable life project. The testimony of a young female internal migrant sums up this shared longing: "In the end, we all migrate to live better. To be who we want to be. The hard part is getting to a place where that is possible" (P10, internal migrant). This difference configures what we might call "hope with papers" *versus* "waiting without rights".

Taken together, these narratives show that the distinction between "internal" and "international" migration does not map neatly onto a simple opposition between safe/unsafe or voluntary/forced mobility. Internal migrants also experience forms of structural dispossession—such as territorial neglect, precarious employment and spatial marginalisation—while international migrants in an irregular administrative situation are channelled into highly visible regimes of control and waiting without rights. Rather than two separate phenomena, the data point to differentiated positions within the same unequal mobility regime, where legal status, racialisation and territorial hierarchies organise who can move, under what conditions and with which horizons of expectation. This comparative reading allows us to problematise the apparent neutrality of internal/international labels and to understand them as effects of broader colonial and state logics.

Migrant Subjectivity and Policies of Belonging: Reconstructing the self in Unequal Contexts

The analysis of the interviews allows us to identify the ways in which migrants—both those who migrate internally from the countryside to the city in Spain and those who migrate irregularly from Africa—reconstruct their identity and sense of belonging in new contexts. In both cases, the migratory experience activates processes of self-transformation, which are constructed through contact with new social, cultural and emotional realities. However, these processes are mediated by structural, symbolic and affective factors that mark significant differences between the two groups. Three main subcategories emerge from the analysis: (1) Performative negotiation of the migrant self in contexts of uprooting and reconfiguration; (2) Migrant subjectivities and *gender coloniality*; (3) Practices of rootedness and situated belonging: affections, languages and networks; and (4) Structural conditions and everyday resistances in the dispute over belonging. Through these categories, life stories are analysed and fragments of discourse are extracted to illustrate the complexity of these processes.

Performative Negotiation of the Migrant Self in Contexts of Uprooting and Reconfiguration

Migration involves a break with the environment of origin which, in both cases, mobilises a subjective reconstruction. For internal migrants, this transformation is often experienced in tension between nostalgia for rural life and the need to adapt to a more impersonal urban environment: "In the village, everything had a rhythm, a logic. Here, at first I felt lost, as if I had to invent another version of myself" (P14, internal migrant). "I haven't stopped being who I was, but I feel like I'm someone else here. I've learned to move differently, to speak differently, even to dress differently" (P6, internal migrant).

In the case of international migrants in an irregular administrative situation, identity is strongly marked by forced uprooting and the experience of exclusion, but also by a deep resilience: "After everything I went through on the way, I know I am strong. I am not the same person who left Senegal. Here I am learning to be someone new" (P33, participant in an irregular administrative situation). "In my country, I was a son, a friend, a student. Here I am a migrant. But I want to be many more things again" (P25, participant in an irregular administrative situation).

In both cases, identity becomes a relational, situated construction that responds to the demands of the new environment while remaining anchored in memory and origin. These narratives not only show adaptations to the new environment, but also strategies of self-definition and symbolic resistance. Participants construct meanings of belonging, make their knowledge visible and reorder the boundaries of identity from their place of enunciation.

Migrant Subjectivities and Gender Coloniality

From the outset, it is important to emphasise that the experiences narrated by the men who participated in this study are shaped by an intersectional configuration of power, in which gendered hierarchies, racialisation and irregular legal status intersect to produce a specific and qualitatively new form of marginalisation. As R. W. Connell's theory of gender regimes (1987) reminds us, gender structures do not concern only women, nor do they operate in isolation: they organise social relations for everyone, albeit in different and uneven ways.

Although the group of international migrants in an irregular administrative situation was composed exclusively of men, their narratives show how the modern/colonial gender system described by María Lugones (2008) positions racialised migrant men within subordinated masculinities. This does not imply an equivalence with the experiences of racialised migrant women; rather, it highlights how coloniality differentiates masculinity internally, assigning devalued or non-sovereign masculine positions to those who enter Europe under precarious legal and racialised conditions.

This is clearly reflected in testimonies that reveal how the normative expectations associated with masculinity—autonomy, economic provision, mobility—were disrupted by the lived reality of institutional dependency and legal dispossession: *“Without papers, you are like a child; you cannot do anything on your own”* (P47, participant in an irregular administrative situation). Such experiences illustrate how gender operates in conjunction with racialisation and irregularity to erode masculine agency and produce a condition of enforced vulnerability. Importantly, these forms of devaluation did not appear in the narratives of internal migrants, who—despite describing frustration or uprooting—did not experience racialised surveillance, legal invisibility or dehumanising interpellations. Reading these accounts through the lens of coloniality and gender regimes therefore allows us to understand how migrant masculinities are reconfigured, not as fixed identities, but as positions negotiated within unequal and interlocking systems of gendered, racial and legal power.

Practices of Rootedness and Situated Belonging: Affections, Languages and Networks

In both internal and international migration, a sense of belonging is not automatic. It is a progressive process that is constructed through affective experiences, social networks, common languages and shared spaces. For internal migrants, belonging is reconstructed through participation in urban life, access to opportunities and encounters with like-minded groups: *“Here I signed up for a sewing workshop. There I met people and started to feel part of something”* (P7, internal migrant). This tension between expression, language and belonging emerged frequently in the interviews: *“I speak Spanish now, but sometimes I feel mute inside. My words don't come out the same here.”* (P36, participant in an irregular administrative situation). *“When I started working and paying my rent, I felt like I was part of this. Like I had a right to be here”* (P11, internal migrant).

In the case of irregular migrants, the process is more arduous and conditioned by multiple barriers, although some recount how small gestures or community spaces

can trigger a sense of belonging: "When I play football with other kids in the neighbourhood, I feel like I belong. For a while, I'm not 'the foreigner, I'm just one of the team' (P16, participant in an irregular administrative situation). "Here in the centre they help us, they listen to us. That makes me feel that I'm worth something, that I'm not just a number" (P22, participant in an irregular administrative situation).

In both groups, art appears as a privileged way of weaving this sense of belonging: "By drawing, I was able to tell my story. And others listened to it. I felt seen" (P38, participant in an irregular administrative situation). "When I held the stone, I felt that it represented my people. It was in my hands, I hadn't lost it" (P4, internal migrant).

Structural Conditions and Everyday Resistance in the Struggle for Belonging

Factors that facilitate integration are related to institutional reception, support networks, access to work and training, and spaces for symbolic expression. Language, for example, is a key barrier for international migrants in an irregular administrative situation, while for internal migrants the obstacle is often more cultural or economic in nature. "No one here speaks French. I have trouble understanding. I feel stupid" (P19, participant in an irregular administrative situation). "The hardest thing was paying the rent and looking for work. Without help, I wouldn't have been able to stay" (P2, internal migrant).

The testimonies also highlight the role of racism, xenophobia and social exclusion as structural barriers that erode the construction of identity and belonging: "Sometimes people look at me badly in the street, as if I shouldn't be here. That hurts, it makes you feel like you're always on the outside" (P45, participant in an irregular administrative situation). Such statements reflect what Nira Yuval-Davis (2011) conceptualises as *policies of belonging*, where symbolic and emotional recognition is mediated by institutional hierarchies and criteria of racial, cultural and legal legitimacy. Belonging is not, in these cases, a subjective choice, but a constant struggle for the right to be recognised as a political and emotional subject. However, there are also stories that highlight migrant agency and the ability to build community even in hostile contexts: "We got together with the students from the faculty and made a mural, drawing the horizon line. People saw it and spoke to us for the first time. It was like opening a door" (P30, participant in an irregular administrative situation).

Taken together, these trajectories show that belonging is continuously negotiated within the same unequal mobility regimes identified earlier, where structural constraints, racialisation and agency intersect in everyday identity reconstruction.

Art and Social Cartography as Languages of the Migratory Experience: Representation, Comparison and Transformation

Building on the identity and mobility dynamics described above, the role of art and social cartography emerges as a complementary language for expressing, comparing and transforming migratory experiences. Through these expressive tools,

participants have been able to narrate, compare and re-signify their experiences. Three main categories emerge from the analysis: (1) Art as an emotional and symbolic mediator of the journey; (2) Social cartography as an exercise in memory and localisation of experience; and (3) The pedagogical and transformative value of graphic expression in migratory processes.

Art as an Emotional and Symbolic Mediator of the Journey

In both groups, art has functioned as an alternative language that allows complex emotions, which are difficult to verbalise, to be expressed. Migrants use it as a resource to connect the past and the present, as an affirmation of identity and as a visual account of their experiences. This symbolic work did not remain confined to the workshop space but culminated in a public exhibition where portraits, QR-coded testimonies and collective cartographies were spatially arranged as an immersive installation (Fig. 4), allowing migration narratives to be encountered as embodied and relational experiences rather than abstract categories.

For those who migrated from the countryside to the city, art appears as a way of preserving rural memory and re-signifying their roots: "In my story, I leave a path between oak trees, like the one that led to my house. Although I now live here, that landscape is always with me" (P12, internal migrant). "When I held the stone, I remembered my grandmother's hands. Every night she would say to me: 'May God watch over your hands and protect you always.' It's like bringing her with me to this place where no one knew her" (P4, internal migrant). Several participants also described how visualising their trajectory transformed their understanding of what they had endured: "When I drew my route, I realised I had survived everything on that paper. Seeing it made me believe I could keep going." (P29, participant in an irregular administrative situation).



Fig. 4 Exhibition display of the collective cartographies in the “Voices of Migration” Project

In the case of international migrants, drawing and music appear as spaces for catharsis, denunciation and hope: "I drew a boat at night. Just water and a moon. That's what I remember from the journey. The fear, the darkness, but also that we arrived" (P22, participant in an irregular administrative situation). "I often hum a song my mother used to sing. No one here understands it, but when I sing it, I feel like myself again" (P38, participant in an irregular administrative situation).

These testimonies show that, despite these structural conditions of vulnerability, participants deployed forms of *symbolic agency* through their maps, drawings, and stories, reconfiguring meanings of identity and belonging from an active position. "On the horizon line, I drew my house in Morocco and a tree with my roots in Palencia. It's not the same, but now I have roots here too" (P 47, participant in an irregular administrative situation).

Such expressions can be read as a form of what Aníbal Quijano conceptualises as *epistemic re-existence*, as practices that challenge hegemonic ways of naming, representing and classifying migrant subjects (2000). Artistic and visual languages emerge here as tools for visibility and political subjectivation, since art not only generates emotional relief, but also allows us to construct a narrative that others can see, hear or interpret. Art thus becomes a bridge: between cultures, times and subjects.

Social cartography as an Exercise in Situated Memory

Looking at social cartography, we can see that this technique has made it possible to represent in a concrete and visual way the life journeys, places of transit, emotions associated with each stage of the journey, and links with the territory. Far from technical maps, these representations form affective and symbolic maps. Beyond verbal testimony, the visual compositions themselves constitute analytical material. As illustrated in Fig. 4, recurrent visual patterns emerge: in maps produced by participants in an irregular administrative situation, borders were often represented as closed doors, fragmented lines or enclosed spaces, while roots and trees symbolised processes of re-territorialisation and fragile re-anchoring. In internal migrants' cartographies, paths, mountains, village houses and rural landscapes appeared as affective anchors, evoking memory, continuity and attachment to place. These visual motifs reveal how belonging and displacement are materially, spatially and symbolically encoded within differentiated mobility regimes. "On my mental map, my village stands out, and then this city. I chose colours to represent my own life: green for my childhood, red for my adolescence... It's like a line that isn't straight, but it brought me here" (P9, internal migrant). "My map is like a collage: photos of my childhood, drawings of the city, phrases I heard here. All mixed up, like I am inside" (P13, internal migrant). "My journey begins in Mali, passes through Mauritania, the desert, the sea, and arrives in the Canary Islands. I drew it all. Each place has a symbol: a cross where a friend died, a place where someone took us in and we slept safely" (P17, participant in an irregular administrative situation). "On my map, every border has a closed door. But I also put open windows, because I found help. The map is my story, with the good and the bad" (P31, participant in an irregular administrative situation).

These representations not only supported participants' processes of reflection and re-signification, but also enabled educational and community teams to grasp the layered complexity of migration beyond administrative classifications.

The Educational and Transformative Value of Art and Cartography

The data show that the use of engaged art and social cartography in educational and reception processes not only enhances individual expression, but also promotes empathy, mutual recognition and the creation of spaces for dialogue. "When we showed the drawings and maps in the classroom, our classmates started asking us questions. It was the first time I felt listened to" (P10, participant in an irregular administrative situation). "The comparison we made with the maps of the two groups was very nice. I saw that, although we come from different places, we are also similar" (P8, internal migrant). "Before, I thought I was the only one who felt out of place. Then I saw the drawings of the children from Africa, and I understood that we all carry a story with us" (P6, internal migrant).

In both national and transnational contexts, art and cartography make the invisible traces of migration visible: memory, loss, courage, desire, becoming a pedagogical and political device, since cartographies and graphic representations are not mere illustrations, but spaces for emotional and political elaboration. By deciding what to draw, how to narrate and what symbols to incorporate, participants assert their right to tell their stories in a non-stigmatising way. This practice therefore constitutes a form of aesthetic and epistemic agency in accordance with Yuval Davis' concept of belonging (2011), by enabling a pedagogy based on experience, which does not impose categories but starts from the situated narrative of those who have migrated. Thus, in accordance with Quijano's concept of *epistemic re-existence* (2023), it may be affirmed that the use of art and cartography enables migrants and their communities to reconfigure their subjective position through a logic of agency and resistance, thereby destabilising dominant narratives of passive victimisation.

In this sense, the artistic and cartographic practices discussed in this section do not constitute an additional theme but a mediating language through which the unequal mobility regimes and contested belongings analysed in Sects. "[Migration Trajectories and Differential Mobility Regimes: Structures, Desires and Obstacles](#)" and "[Migrant Subjectivity and policies of Belonging: Reconstructing the self in Unequal Contexts](#)" become visible, negotiable and, to some extent, transformable. By juxtaposing the maps and images produced by internal and international migrants, the study further unsettles the apparent divide between "internal" and "international" migration, foregrounding instead shared pathways of loss, re-rooting and identity reconfiguration.

Discussion

This study broadens the understanding of the migratory phenomenon from a juxtaposed perspective between internal migration in Spain (rural–urban) and irregular international migration from Mali, Morocco, Senegal, Mauritania and Guinea,

revealing contextual, socioeconomic and emotional specificities (Belanche et al., 2021; Perry, 2023). From a theoretical perspective, the findings confirm that the motives for migration cannot be analysed from a single interpretative framework, as they respond to structurally unequal realities (Kraly et al., 2024). While the categories of “internal “ and “international “ migration are necessary for the design and analysis of this research, they also reflect processes of state and institutional codification that may reproduce the very frameworks one seeks to critique (Brubaker, 2004). Our results echo critical work linking these classifications to the *coloniality of power* (Quijano, 2000) and migration (Gutiérrez Rodríguez, 2018), revealing how racialisation, legal-administrative classification and territorial control produce unequal forms of mobility and belonging. These findings highlight that state infrastructures of border control do not merely regulate entry; they shape migrants’ emotional landscapes, producing institutionalised forms of non-belonging through waiting, surveillance and relocation practices. These dynamics, rooted in colonial legacies yet not reducible to them, manifest in chronic waiting, peripheral relocation and public stigmatisation, aligning with analyses of border temporalities and chronopolitics (Stierl & Tazzioli, 2025; Vanyoro, 2024).

The differences in interview emphases also shaped how each group articulated belonging. Internal migrants tended to narrate it through spatial anchors and community ties, while international migrants did so through cultural references, expectations of integration and biographical ruptures. This methodological asymmetry, acknowledged in the Methods section, does not represent a bias but reflects the distinct research contexts; however, it highlights how interview design influences the narrative construction of identity.

The practice of sharing personal stories through artistic expression fosters collective healing and resistance by placing multiple narratives in dialogue, disrupting the isolation of silenced experiences and creating shared moments of emotional release (Juárez Mendoza, 2020; Tao, 2015). These findings resonate with arts-based migration research showing how creative practices co-produce migrant narratives and generational subjectivities (Nunn, 2017) and with analyses of the transformative potential and ethical limits of participatory visual methods (Moralli, 2024a, 2024b). Our results confirm the affective and narrative relevance of arts-based work, while extending this literature by contrasting how internal and international migrants reconfigure identity under different mobility regimes.

The research adds to studies that view migration as a vital and relational experience involving continuous identity reconstructions. From the notion of the “politics of belonging “ (Yuval-Davis, 2011), it becomes clear how integration processes depend not only on residence or employment but also on recognition and symbolic inclusion. This study reinforces critical theories on acculturation (Berry, 1997) and transnational identities by showing how migrants deploy resilient, selective and adaptive strategies to negotiate multiple belongings (Panicacci, 2019; Selimos, 2018). Moreover, belonging must be understood not only as inclusion but also as *non-belonging*, a dynamic shaped by tensions between recognition, exclusion and state-mediated categorisation. Recent scholarship highlights how belonging is often *disputed* or *imposed*, rather than merely experienced, producing forms of “un-belonging “ rooted in unequal mobility regimes and hierarchical citizenship

(Sharma, 2020; Tulbure, 2022). These perspectives strengthen our analytical lens by situating migrants' narratives within broader structures that differentiate who is allowed to belong, under what conditions, and with what emotional and political consequences. Rather than supporting a linear, assimilationist understanding of acculturation, our findings illustrate patterns closer to integration and separation strategies, whereby participants maintain strong attachments to their places of origin while actively engaging with new social fields and relationships. At the same time, by situating these strategies within unequal mobility regimes and racialised legal frameworks, the study extends Berry's model through a decolonial lens that foregrounds structural power and the *coloniality of migration*—dimensions that remain largely implicit in classic acculturation theory. Language, memory and recognition emerge as determining factors for emotional and social integration (Mocanu & Bibiri, 2023).

From a methodological point of view, this research reaffirms the value of qualitative approaches with creative and visual tools for analysing migration (Moralli, 2024a). Techniques such as social mapping, artistic creation and autobiographical narratives generated contextualised insights into migratory trajectories (Atzeni, 2020; Musiol, 2020). Our findings align with research using participatory mapping and self-cartography with migrants and refugees, which shows that mapping practices can reveal affective geographies of displacement and support processes of resilience and symbolic reconstruction (Davanture & Derivois, 2020). By including both internal and international migrants, this study expands such work, demonstrating that these affective and spatial negotiations are not exclusive to forced or cross-border mobility.

The study contributes to the consolidation of interactive and participatory methodologies that link research and action (Murrani et al., 2023). The collective construction of maps, identity performances and self-expression exercises encourages active involvement, transforming participants into epistemic subjects rather than objects of study (Massari & Molho, 2024). This methodological integration represents migration as a bodily, spatial and emotional experience (Macaya-Ruiz, 2017) and contributes to the development of decolonial and critically engaged research (Moise, 2021).

At a practical level, these results have implications for public policy, educational programmes and community intervention (Photiou & Meskimmon, 2021). Inclusion policies must attend not only to material needs but also to symbolic and affective dimensions (Molli & Ambrosini, 2024). Artistic and cartographic practices in educational and community settings facilitate narrative reconstruction and agency (De Arriba et al., 2020; Jeffery et al., 2019; Moralli, 2024a). Internal and international migration require differentiated yet coordinated approaches (Kraly et al., 2024): while internal migrants experience “silent uprooting”, international migrants face “visible forced displacement” (Cirillo et al., 2022; Kirsch et al., 2024). Educational contexts emerge as key spaces for promoting well-being, recognition and community networks (Gomis, 2022; Yuval-Davis, 2011; Zhang et al., 2023), particularly when grounded in cooperative learning and community art (Perry, 2023) and when recognising migrants' own capacities and knowledge (Taghavi et al., 2024).

Conclusions

This research has explored the migratory trajectories of people displaced from rural areas in Spain and irregular migrants from African countries such as Mali, Morocco, Senegal, Mauritania, and Guinea. Using a qualitative and participatory approach that combines narrative interviews, artistic practices and social mapping, the work has shown how different forms of mobility are traversed by differential regimes of legality, racialisation, gender and belonging. Far from assuming a symmetrical comparison between the two groups, the analysis has sought to highlight the multiple forms of exclusion and agency that shape migratory experiences in unequal contexts. The introduction of an intersectional and decolonial lens has made it possible to problematise and overcome traditional analytical categories—such as 'internal migrant' and 'international migrant'—by showing their relational, situated and often insufficient nature in capturing the internal heterogeneity of the participating groups. This research contributes to critical studies on migration on three fronts: it emphasises the performative and situated nature of migrant identities, adopts an ethical and decolonial perspective in qualitative research, and promotes participatory methodologies that restore narrative agency to those who live in exile. These findings invite us to rethink not only geographical but also epistemic boundaries that have historically delimited ways of knowing, representing, and experiencing human mobility. In this sense, we find the need not only to establish differentiated approaches to address the multiple forms of mobility, but also the transformative potential of participatory and visual methodologies in the study of migration.

Limitations and Future Directions

Several limitations inherent to this study should be recognised. Focusing on two groups—internal migrants from rural Spain and international migrants in an irregular administrative situation from Mali, Morocco, Senegal, Mauritania, and Guinea—privileged qualitative depth through a situated, relational analysis, yet excluded other migratory trajectories that might enrich understandings of belonging and exclusion. Although an intersectional lens was adopted, the absence of international migrant women limited exploration of gendered dimensions, despite insights from *gender coloniality* theory highlighting women's specific vulnerabilities in migratory contexts. Active participant involvement informed key phases of design, validation, and interpretation; however, logistical constraints and participants' precarious circumstances, particularly among irregular migrants, prevented co-design from the outset. These tensions underscore challenges of participatory methodologies in highly vulnerable settings. Finally, while visual tools like social cartography have epistemic and expressive potential, they raise intercultural, ethical, and academic transferability issues. Such constraints invite reflection on the possibilities and limits of research pursuing epistemic and social justice. Moreover, we acknowledge the inherent tension between the use of direct

interviews and our decolonial, care-oriented stance; although mitigated through reflexivity and collaborative meaning-making, such tensions are unavoidable when researching with highly vulnerable populations.

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Declarations

Ethics Approval This study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki and was approved by the Ethics Committee of the University of Valladolid (PI 23–3402 NO HCUV) and approved in December, 2023.

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