

Co-creating migration from a decolonial perspective through the arts: TransMigrARTS' applied arts workshop¹



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Our initiative consists of an applied arts workshop called *TransmigrARTS. Cuerpos y narrativas en desplazamiento* (*TransMigrARTS. Bodies and Narratives in Displacement*) at the department of Spanish at Aarhus University (AU) on the *Faglig dag* (November 2023). The workshop's target group were students, researchers and professors of the Spanish department at AU. Through the analysis of this workshop, we aim to explore decolonization strategies in Danish and Colombian university contexts. Indeed, practices rooted in a colonial worldview affect institutions of knowledge such as universities where, both in Europe and in America, habits such as epistemic violence (Castro-Gómez, 2002), hierarchization of knowledge and languages (Walsh 2010), and the invisibilization or marginalization of other forms of knowledge, often originating from Latin American universities, continue to persist. Thus, we propose that collective co-creation, non-hierarchical interaction, virtual collaboration and applied arts can function as strategies of decolonization, this is, subverting colonial tendencies, and promote fair and creative research practices across universities.

The workshop is framed within the research project *TransMigrARTS. Transforming Migration by Arts* funded by the European Commission (2021-2025). The main hypothesis of the project is that the

¹ This article is written in English because this is the only language both authors share with *Sprogforum*. Isabel Restrepo is a visiting researcher from Colombia at AU and does not speak any Scandinavian language, it was only fair that she should have access to the final version of the text.

arts can positively transform situations of vulnerability experienced by migrants. Through a research-creation methodology, TransMigrARTS works around the observation, evaluation, creation and implementation of applied arts workshops for migrant communities in the four countries involved in the project, Colombia, Spain, France and Denmark. TransMigrARTS takes the position that European universities can learn from Colombian universities, who have much more experience in applied arts workshops with communities, thus subverting the Eurocentric, colonial logic that knowledge comes from Europe and is disseminated to the rest of the world. Furthermore, the lingua franca of the project is Spanish and has English as a second language, which is not customary in EU-funded projects.

Face-to-face meetings have a strong importance in TransMigrARTS and are a fundamental part of the workshops. However, virtual exchange facilitates the engagement of different actors, culturally and geographically distanced, a practice that has been used in the last years in academia to implement online collaborations with pedagogical purposes (O'Dowd, 2018).

Contextualization of the workshop in the *Faglig dag*

The *Faglig dag* is an annual event organized by the Department of German and Romance Languages (Spanish) to provide learning, research, and networking opportunities for students in the Spanish program. Approximately 40 students and professors participated.

Isabel Restrepo, a visiting scholar from Universidad de Antioquia in Medellín, Colombia (UdeA), and leader of the research group *Hipertrópico*, which works with digital arts, explored the virtual exchange potential for the workshop to connect students of AU, mostly with Danish as their first language, with students from *Hipertrópico*, who have Spanish as their mother tongue. In this context, as we will show, virtual exchange provided a crucial layer for implementing interculturality in a

decolonial way through equal and non-hierarchical interaction between the knowledge of the Colombian partners and the Danish students.

As a starting point for virtual co-creation work, Restrepo took the TransMigrARTS logo. The visual development of the logo



Figure 1. TransMigrARTS' logo

refers to the concept of people in movement by means of visual generic silhouettes engaging in different activities, as you can see in Figure 1: A mother holding her child's hand, a man in a hat walking among passersby, and adults jumping playfully echo Restrepo's concept of silhouettes as avatars, like shadows or mirrored images, that help us recognize ourselves in interaction with others.

Methodology of the workshop

As mentioned above, we think that active participation and collective creation are key procedures for the decolonization of learning at the university, as they challenge the ontology of traditional academic research and teaching based on a single voice articulating a sustained argument (Graham et al., 2015: 11-12). Furthermore, co-creation breaks the traditional academic hierarchy in which knowledge is created in only one direction, namely from the researcher-teacher to the students. The joint creation of the logo silhouettes in this virtual collaboration allowed us to apply this idea of horizontal co-creation of art and knowledge. Five important roles were engaged in articulating horizontal co-creation: the physical and virtual space, the participants, the facilitators, the student assistants and the digital researchers.

1. The physical and the virtual space was the teaching room where the *Faglig dag* took place and it was adapted to provide empty space to facilitate the movement and activation of participants' minds and bodies. This way of working in space breaks the mind/body dichotomy criticized by decolonial theorists as a Eurocentric rationalization of knowledge (Walsh, 2010: 90; Castro-Gómez, 2019: 222).
2. Another key facilitator was the projection screen in the classroom, serving as a medium for real-time interaction. Applying Krueger's concept of a responsive environment (1975: 433), the screen connected participants in Aarhus with digital researchers in Colombia, who collaborated synchronously via Google Meet and WhatsApp.
3. Participants were students and professors from the department of Spanish at Aarhus University. They provided creativity and materials without which the workshop would not be possible.
4. Facilitators: Restrepo, whose role consisted of designing interaction devices that prioritized the feelings, sensitivities, and affective roots of the participants (Silva, 2021: 40). A second facilitator was Diana G. Martín, TransMigrARTS researcher and AU scholar, who was responsible for documenting the entire session with photographs.
5. Student assistants,² two students of the AU master program *Intercultural Studies*, documented the dynamics of the creative interactions through photography and sent images to the digital research team in Medellín.
6. *Hipertrópico*'s digital researchers in Colombia³ were responsible for creatively editing the material they received from student assistants in Aarhus.

The different roles involved in the workshop were intended to interact in a horizontal position, where the creativity and knowledge of participants and facilitators was considered of equal value. Indeed, the facilitators did not supervise nor modify the result of the participant's creations, but rather facilitated a sensitive space that fostered creativity and confidence. The emphasis was then on the interrelationships between all roles and what they were able to create together (Berraquero Díaz et al., 2016; Mendoza and Morgade, 2018).

² These students were Bent Mariager Cortés and Natalia Struve Araya Rodríguez.

³ The digital researchers were Óscar Mazuera, Carlos Mario Sánchez, Arney Herrera and Laura Giraldo Mira.

A *didactic creative sequence* structured in six moments was developed, which involved activities in both physical and virtual spaces:

- Moments 1 and 2: (Aarhus 5:30 - 5:35 pm // Medellín 11:30 - 11:35 am). Opening: Greeting with assorted sweets passed around among the participants. Introduction to the workshop. GDPR consent to take photographs.
- Moment 3: (Aarhus 5:35 - 5:45 pm // Medellín 11:35 - 11:45 am). Warming up: Stretching exercise and activity of body postures on migration.
- Moments 4 and 5: (Aarhus 5:45 - 6:10 pm // Medellín 11:45 - 12:10 am) Circulation of written testimonies on migration in the form of passports⁴, as you can see in figure 2 and 3. And creation of group postures in relation to the passport narratives and facilitator assistants documenting and sending the pictures to creative researchers in Colombia (Figure 4).
- Moment 6: (Aarhus 6:10 – 6:30 pm // Medellín 12:10 – 12:30 pm) The results of the Mentimeter were displayed on the projection screen.



Figure 2. Passport narratives

⁴ In this workshop we departed from testimonies resulted from TransMigrARTS previous workshops in Colombia and Spain.



Figure 3. Sharing and reflecting about the passport narratives in groups of 5.



Figure 4. Creation of group postures



Figure 5. Inviting to share ideas

At the same time in Medellín, backstage, student assistants received the photographic materials. Participants were invited to share ideas in Mentimeter, the interactive presentation software, answering the following questions: What concepts do you think can be associated with the work on migration from the arts? What idea or recommendation would you have for the implementation of a workshop on migration in Aarhus? (Figure 5).



Figure 6 and 7. Participants' answers

Then, digital researchers in Medellín appeared on the screen via virtual conference and introduced themselves to the Aarhus participants. They explained that the session was synchronous and that the final silhouettes were co-created through virtual exchange. Finally, the joint results of the digital silhouettes were then displayed on the screen. The image in figure 8 shows the flyer made after the workshop with the results.

Reflections on the workshop outcomes

Finally, we delve into the resulting creations of the workshop which, in our opinion, contributed to a decolonial approach to migration. Migrants are often portrayed in subaltern and racialized ways in the

various media, including academia (Sebastiani et al., 2020: 4), where even in foreign language learning subjects we likely reproduce discriminatory stereotypes (Fernández, 2022). We believe that the exercise where participants embodied the passport's testimonies through their corporal work helped to internalize the stories as one's own, rather than as those of the stereotypical other. Moreover, if we look at the content of the testimonies in figure 2, many of them reflect the need to tell their life stories from another perspective where pain alternates with humor and laughter, challenging the conceptual map about migration created by the participants, where the idea of migration as an experience that generates vulnerability based on terms such as fear, loneliness, anxiety, scars, is reinforced (figure 7). In this way, the stereotypes of catastrophe, suffering and victimization often used to undervalue migrants were rethought in words like inclusion, community, compassion, new beginning, added by participants.

Finally, the way the logo silhouettes were created in this workshop, in our view, contributed to stress the importance of the local *place* from a decolonial vision. Indeed, the silhouettes were co-created from an intersected specific context, the *Faglig dag* in Aarhus and *Hipertrópico* in Medellín, November 13, 2023, so that the particularities of each individual were left visible and thus modified the general logo of the TransMigrARTS project. This emphasis on the local production of knowledge (Castro-Gómez, 2019: 219) helps to prevent abstract generalizations and pre-conceived, universalizing ideas that present a homogeneous image of the other.



Figure 8. Flyer made after the workshop with the results

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