
The Agency of Counter-Border Narratives

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Abstract

La Agencia de Narrativas Contrafronterizas (The Agency of Counter-border Narratives, or The Agency) is an ongoing community art project based in Barcelona that challenges the social construction of borders. Merging participatory social art practice with critical border research, the project treats creation as a form of knowledge co-production. At its core, a group of migrant women (The Agents) explore physical, mental, and emotional bordering experiences through speculative writing, artmaking (specifically kites), and actions in public space. In doing so, they reclaim visibility, disrupt dominant exclusionary discourses, and make their border experiences tangible. By centering the migrant gaze, The Agency opens paths for empathy, solidarity, and alternative futures, pushing back against the hegemonic narratives that violently define migration today.

Keywords

arts-based research, participatory social art practice, bordering processes, agency, collective imagining

Imagine yourself in catastrophic times. It is the year 2050 in Barcelona, a city in Southern Europe. Most countries have fallen under the control of ultra-nationalist, populist regimes—anti-immigrant, anti-ecological, and authoritarian in nature. One night, a counter-border agent is contemplating the stars when she sees an object fall from the sky. She sets out to locate the landing spot and investigate. The object appears to be made of some kind of shimmering material and threads; at first, it is difficult to distinguish the inside from the outside. It is too large to fully grasp. She reaches for one of the cords, and a breeze blows, lifting the object into the air. As it rises, images begin to reveal themselves.

She meets with the other counter-border agents, and they begin deciphering the object. It seems to come from a parallel world or alternate universe carrying messages about borders...

This prompt served as the driving force behind the stories and artworks generated by *La Agencia de Narrativas Contrafronterizas* (The Agency of Counter-border Narratives = The Agency¹), a community art project operating in the Raval neighbourhood of Barcelona.¹ At its core, a group of migrant women (The Agents) explored physical, mental, and emotional borders through storytelling, material experimentation, and actions in public spaces. The aim was to explore how collective imagining, artmaking, and embodied practices shed light on the complex realities of bordering processes in everyday urban life, and to glean insights towards envisioning more just futures.



Figure 1. *Graphic recording of the Agency's workshop. 2024. Drawing by Karime García.*

¹In this project, the term “agency” carries dual meanings. First, it refers to the ability of migrant women to craft their own narratives, hinging on personal and political questions of identity, power, and belonging. These narratives push back against hegemonic representations that seek to define them. Second, it denotes the creative entity established in October 2024: the laboratory where these stories were generated, inspired by adrienne maree brown’s assertion that “all organizing is science fiction” (brown, 2017, p. 114). The prefix “counter” points to both opposition and correspondence: resisting hegemonic accounts while making space for alternative imaginaries. The concept of “border” extends beyond geopolitical boundaries to encompass social processes (Newman & Paasi, 1998; van Houtum & van Naerssen, 2002; van Houtum, 2010, 2022; Newman, 2006), delving into cognitive, cultural, emotional, sensorial, and psychological realms.

Employing a social art practice approach, this research-creation project applied creative and embodied methods to expand on understandings of lived bordering experiences as sensed by The Agents. By “bordering experiences,” I refer to the often neglected “everyday cultural realities in which borders are (made) relevant and thus (re-)produced in and through practices, discourses or objects” (Wille & Nienaber, 2020, p.10). These experiences took shape through text, collective mapping, large-scale kite-making, and a performance engaging with an actual border context.



Figure 2. Collective mapping of the South Raval area. 2025. Photo by Giuliana Racco.



Figure 3. Agents working on a kite. 2025. Photo by Giuliana Racco.

Through writing and group discussions, we identified themes that were transformed into patterns and designs, which were collectively crafted into three kites, forming an allegorical, speculative account of the present. This account was represented by statistics juxtaposing border management budgets and migrant deaths entering Europe; the transition, the strategy for moving towards more just futures; and the future itself—represented by a phoenix rising from burning paperwork and the new world born from a flaming placenta. These kites were then flown in a public performance in Portbou, a historically and politically charged Spanish border town adjacent to France, where Walter Benjamin took his life in a failed attempt to escape Nazism.



Figure 4. Kites in flight. Sant Pol de Mar. 2026. Photo by Giuliana Racco.

In the collective imagination, kites evoke the desire to rise beyond obstacles and towards a freedom that remains connected to the ground, serving as a metaphor for the relationship between human agency and nature. This symbolic potential was powerfully conveyed in Refaat Alareer's widely circulated poem *If I Must Die*, first published online in 2011, which gained widespread attention after his assassination by the Israeli military during an airstrike in Gaza in December 2023. In the poem, the kite became an emblem of *sumud* (steadfastness). While this connection was not intentional at the outset of the project, it came to resonate with its development and spirit.



Figure 5. Agent raising a “messenger”, part of the third kite, depicting a Phoenix. Barceloneta, 2025. Photo by Giuliana Racco.

Although originally developed as military technology in Ancient China, kites have since traversed the globe, acquiring playful, symbolic, and spiritual significances, such as guiding the souls of the deceased skywards during *el Festival de Barriletes Gigantes* in Sumpango and Santiago Sacatepéquez, Guatemala. Instantly recognizable and approachable, the kites served as catalysts for collective agency, providing an accessible entry point that fostered collaboration and experimentation. When flown, kites can be seen from a distance, making them ideal for “carrying the messages” from the speculative parallel universe that drove the project’s narrative and performative dimensions.



Figure 6. Detail and test flight of Kite 02 (*The Transition*). Barceloneta, 2025. Photo by Giuliana Racco.

The Agents reflected on borders not only as lines between states, but as processes that shape their everyday lives in the city, for example through bureaucratic systems that regulate residency, work permits, degree recognition, housing, and employment. These “paper borders”² reproduce geopolitical inequalities within the urban fabric, reinforcing precarity, exclusion, and invisibility. At the same time, a generalized focus on integration, rather than exchange, was widely perceived as lacking empathy and curiosity towards migrants. Complicating matters, in the nationalist context of Catalonia, the region with Barcelona as its capital, language is socially and institutionally framed as a tool for inclusion, yet it is often sensed as exclusion. This cultural and linguistic hegemony marginalizes Spanish-speaking migrants and perpetuates an “us vs. them/here vs. there” discourse, which mirrors broader European nationalist trends.



Figure 7. Agent during the performance. *Portbou*, 2025. Photo by Brunella Greco.

Integration was reframed through the lens of hospitality and exchange, with new figures proposed—“threshold” or “exchange” agents—who would work in border administration, schools, and public institutions, beyond standard culture mediators. These agents would be tasked with helping newcomers feel welcomed and valued, not just as subjects to be integrated into a fixed culture, but as contributors who can shape a local shared culture. This shift in narrative resonates with artworks such as Sandi Hilal’s *Hospitality Room* (2016–ongoing) and Tania Bruguera’s *School of Integration* (2019–ongoing).³

² van Houtum (2021) speaks of “paper walls guarded by pencils and computers” acting as “line(s) of defence of states” (p. 35), referring to visa procedures prior to movement, or rather, to procedures that block or regulate access to a state. Here, however, The Agents speak of the paper borders encountered while navigating daily life in the city where they already reside, epitomized by the derogatory term *sin papeles* (without papers), used to refer to undocumented migrants.

³ *4 Hospitality Room* is an ongoing project by artist Sandi Hilal that proposes refugees have the “right to host,” not simply to be hosted. *School of Integration*, by Tania Bruguera, inverts local-migrant dynamics by offering a series of



Figure 10. Agents with Kite 01. Portbou, 2025. Photo by Brunella Greco.

The Agency provided a temporary space and the material and relational conditions for the Agents to co-create stories around personal and political questions. In doing so, they activated their agency to question, resist, and envision alternative worlds into which they could inscribe their own bodies. This project fostered collective articulation and resilience, exploring the tensions created by bordering processes in everyday urban life. It promoted mutual care, solidarity, and emotional containment in the face of structural inequalities and systemic discrimination, while pointing to new understandings of both borders and more desirable futures. The Agency also functioned as a platform for sharing knowledge across generations, prioritizing the collective over the individual.



Figure 11. Agents during performance. Portbou, 2025. Photo by Brunella Greco.

The work hinges on collective embodied artistic research, engagement with public space, and knowledge-making through practice. By amplifying often-silenced voices and foregrounding migrant perspectives, the project embraces subversive play, collective imagining, and the transformative power of storytelling and performance, relying on the evocative device of the kite as both medium and method. The collective artistic vision was literally projected into the sky, breaking out from the exclusive spaces traditionally reserved for art. Through ludic, poetic, and symbolic action, The Agents claimed visibility and offered new insights in response to the urgent and violent realities produced by bordering processes



Figure 12. Kite 03 in flight. Sant Pol de Mar, 2026. Photo by Giuliana Racco.

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ⁱ The long-duration Francoist dictatorship (1939–1975), compounded by less-than-stellar economic performance relative to other Western European countries, meant that Spain was, until recently, a country of emigration rather than immigration. Over the past two decades, however, this trend has reversed, and both “regular” and “irregular” migration to the country have increased. According to a report by CEAR (the Spanish Commission for Refugees), between January 15 and November 2023 alone, 46,862 migrants in irregular situations reached Spanish territory. Although many of these migrants aim to move on to other countries, Spain is increasingly becoming a permanent destination, especially for those departing from its former colonies. The 2025 migration reform, introduced by the PSOE-led government, is expected to enable the regularization of approximately 300,000 migrants annually through legal residency and work permits under the new Immigration Regulation. While the reform has been

Acknowledgements

This project involved a group of nine adult women participants, the Agents, from Argentina, Bolivia, Colombia, Congo, Peru, and Venezuela who are co-authors of the works. The project was developed in collaboration with *Asociación Cultural La Quinta Pata*, a migrant women-led cultural association generating socio-cultural projects through gender, intercultural, and decolonial perspectives. Based in Barcelona, it supports the empowerment of citizens in their everyday lives via various platforms and using multiple perspectives and approaches. *The Associació Barcelona Estels* is a cultural sports association that promotes the world of kites.

Author Biography

Born in Tkaronto and currently based in the Mediterranean region, I, Giuliana Racco, am an artist who explores the cultural and social construction of boundaries, identity, in/exclusion and desire. My videos, photography, installations, and drawings have been featured in international museums and foundations. I am a PhD candidate at York University, in Environmental & Urban Change, studying participatory social art and border aesthetics.

criticized for not fully covering all vulnerable groups, including some asylum seekers, it aims to incorporate migrants into the formal economy while addressing labour shortages and Spain’s aging population. Sources including the Banco de España indicate that the foreign-born population contributed significantly to Spain’s GDP growth between 2022 and 2024. Additionally, Barcelona has become a world-renowned LGBTQI+-friendly city, presenting a unique pull factor for many queer and trans migrants from around the globe who are seeking greater freedom and escaping persecution. At the same time, there has been a rise in nationalist anti-immigration discourse, represented by the ascent of the far-right Vox party and others over the past decade, in tandem with the broader rise of ultra-nationalist, anti-immigrant far-right populism across Europe, as reflected in recent European elections and the rebordering of the Schengen Area. It is within this broader context that *The Agency* unfolds.