



November 2021

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Recommended Citation

Lara-Guerrero, Larisa (2021) "Responding to violence from abroad: The Mexican diaspora mobilising from Brussels and Paris through art-based strategies," *Peace and Conflict Studies*: Vol. 28 : No. 1 , Article 2. Available at: <https://nsuworks.nova.edu/pcs/vol28/iss1/2>

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Abstract

Over 150,000 people were intentionally killed in Mexico since 2006, after the Mexican government decided to openly combat organized crime. Against the backdrop of the security crisis, members of Mexican society have developed national and transnational strategies to contribute to the respond to the rampant violence in their homeland.

By introducing a transdisciplinary approach and peacebuilding theories, this paper argues that Mexican migrants living in Brussels and Paris have been able to orchestrate transnational art-based strategies to contribute to the violence alleviation in their country of origin. In particular, this empirical paper argues that Mexican migrants living in these two European cities have deployed artistic bottom-up strategies to reduce direct violence, transform relationships and build capacity from overseas.

Keywords: *conflict, Mexico, transnationalism, arts and violence*

Author Bio(s)

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Responding to Violence from Abroad: The Mexican Diaspora Mobilizing from Brussels and Paris through Arts-Based Strategies

Larisa Lara-Guerrero

Over 150,000 people were intentionally killed in Mexico from December 2006 through the end of 2015 after the Mexican government decided to openly combat organized crime (Open Society Foundations [OSF], 2016). Since the beginning of the so-called “war against drugs,” civilians have suffered killings, disappearances, torture, and countless human rights violations carried out both by cartels and by state and federal forces (OSF, 2016; Acosta, 2012; Grillo, 2011; Pérez-Armendáriz, 2019).

The “war” against organized crime has created a context of increasing insecurity and escalating violence, impunity, and corruption across the entire country’s government (Bosch, 2014; Anaya Muñoz, 2015; Estrello, 2011). Against the backdrop of the security crisis, members of Mexican society have organized national and transnational movements to denounce the government. Mexicans living in the United States, Spain, France, Belgium, Australia, New Zealand, and other places around the world have engaged politically to demonstrate their support for the victims and denounce the incapacity of the current state to either govern or recognize and respond to the rampant violence in the country (Bosch, 2014; Estrello, 2011; Maihold, 2012).

By looking specifically at the arts-based strategies developed by Mexican migrants living in Brussels and Paris from 2014 to 2018, this paper argues that Mexican activists have managed to create transnational efforts to contribute to the alleviation of violence in their homeland. In particular, this empirical paper argues that Mexican migrants living in these two European cities have deployed bottom-up strategies to reduce direct violence, transform relationships, and build capacity in response to the conflict affecting their homeland.

Transnational political initiatives organized by migrants have been studied predominantly from a political perspective which focuses mainly on electoral politics and transnational collective strategies developed by institutions and diasporic organizations (Adamson, 2012; Østergaard-Nielsen, 2003; Lafleur, 2013; Müller-Funk 2016). Nevertheless, by introducing a transdisciplinary approach, this paper aims to shed light on the individual initiatives organized by migrants interested in transforming the context of escalating violence in their homeland through arts-based strategies. Under this scope, I aim to place the individual at the forefront of the analysis and recognize their ability to create transnational initiatives to respond to the violent and fragile Mexican context from abroad (Wennmann, 2004).

In order to analyze transnational arts-based strategies orchestrated by migrants, I made use of the theoretical framework developed by Lisa Schirch (2004) that recognizes four categories to understand *what*, *when*, and *how* arts-based techniques contribute to peacebuilding (Schirch, 2004; Shank & Schirch, 2008).

With these four categories: 1) Waging conflict nonviolently, 2) Reducing direct violence, 3) Transforming relationships and 4) Building capacity, Schirch (2004) manages to unpack the complex nexus between art and peacebuilding by providing a holistic and systematic approach on how arts-based strategies contribute to the alleviation of conflict through different forms (i.e., music, painting, theatre) and at different levels (i.e., social, political, psychological, and economic).

I use these four categories derived from the peacebuilding literature for three main reasons. First, to demonstrate that there is a need to recognize the urgency to consider the particularities of violent democracies (Pérez-Armendáriz, 2019) in the studies of transnational migrant engagement. Second, to highlight the necessity of bridging analytical tools from multiple disciplines to understand transnational dynamics better. Third, by applying these four categories, I aim to shed light on the importance of studying non-institutional initiatives and highlight the original actions orchestrated by migrants from abroad.

The paper is organized as follows: I begin by presenting an overview of the Mexican violent context. In this section, I present the specificities of the Mexican case and the relevance of analyzing the violent and conflictive context in the country. Then, I present the theorization of transnational politics and the advantages of introducing a peacebuilding perspective to better unpack the arts-based strategies orchestrated by migrants to contribute to the violence alleviation in their host lands. In the third section, I introduce and analyze the empirical data I collected through participant observations and semi-structured interviews with members of the Mexican community living in Brussels and Paris. Ethnography seemed suitable to explore transnational mechanisms and initiatives since it can shed light on cultural conditions; reveal emotions and feelings in times of crisis; and focus on the migration and security experiences lived by the interviewees (Dauphinee, 2015; Lara-Guerrero, 2019). Lastly, I focus on a micro-level analysis of the strategies developed and implemented by migrants at the individual level.

The article aims to contribute to the field of migration and peacebuilding studies by blending both literatures and thus providing new insights on how migrants engage with their homelands in times of violence and conflict. In addition, this article analyzes original empirical material to demonstrate the relevance of integrating a bottom-up approach to the study of migrant transnational political engagement. By presenting this micro-level analysis, it is

possible to shed light specifically on how migrants respond from abroad to times of crisis in their homelands.

Defining the Mexican Violent and Conflictive Context

Several academics and journalists have determined that the ongoing Mexican security crisis is a war because of the number of victims and human rights violations; the tactics and atrocities committed on the battlefield; the incapacity of the state to reduce violence; and the prevalence of impunity and lack of accountability in the country (Bosch, 2014; Anaya Muñoz, 2015; Estrello, 2011; Maihold, 2012). Nevertheless, neither the Mexican government nor the international authorities have recognized a real state of emergency in the country even though international organizations and think tanks have demonstrated that since 2007, the rise in the number of intentional homicides and the high level of violent criminality reveal that Mexico is indeed a conflict zone (Pérez-Armendáriz, 2019; UNODC 2013; IISS Armed Conflict Survey, 2017; Voronkova, 2017).

Mexico is characterized by a fragile political and social context where violence, impunity, and corruption prevail in many regions of the country (Bailey, 2014; Estévez & Vázquez, 2015; Ríos, 2015; Grillo, 2011, 2016; Rosen & Zepeda, 2017). Between 2007 and 2014, the Mexican drug war claimed more than 83,000 lives in a mix of firefights, ambushes, and executions (Grillo, 2016, p. 255).

The methods used by the drug cartels to achieve their goals are very violent. They include techniques arguably used by insurgents and militias such as car bombs, vigilante militias, kidnappings, beheadings, and torture (Langton, 2012; Nava, 2011; Grillo, 2016). Like any other conflict, the outcomes of the ongoing Mexican security crisis also include internally displaced persons and refugees fleeing the country to other countries, especially to the United States (Rosen & Zepeda, 2017).

Indeed, members of civil society, journalists, and civil servants have been affected by the wave of violence in the country. One of the most striking outcomes of the conflict has been the assassination of more than 2500 public servants, including 220 policemen, 200 soldiers, judges, and dozens of federal officials (Grillo, 2011, p. 110). Furthermore, according to Rosen and Zepeda (2017), from 2006 to 2016, 78 mayors in office were violently killed. Regarding the journalists, the National Commission of Human Rights (CNDH) has reported that since 2000, 123 reporters have been killed in the country. The number of disappearances, assassinations, and aggressions among the members of the civil society such as activists, human rights defenders, and students has also skyrocketed since 2006, when the war against drugs was

officially declared (RNDDHM, 2017), and 2017 marked the country's highest homicide rate at 24 per 100,000 people or over 29,000 murders in all (Pérez-Armendáriz, 2019, p. 3).

Another characteristic of the violent context in Mexico is the lack of accountability and impunity prevalent in the country. Scholars argue that the Mexican rule of law is weak because of three reasons: the high level of corruption; the infiltration of drug cartels in the legal system; and the constant violation of human rights (Rosen & Zepeda, 2017; Bailey, 2012; Estévez & Vázquez, 2015).

Mexican drug trafficking organizations have been characterized by their economic power, which they use to purchase arms, thus overwhelming the state's police system, confront its military forces, and bribe or coerce the governmental personnel at all levels of the political system (Bailey, 2014; Smith, 2012). Bailey (2014) argues that drug trafficking groups have successfully infiltrated the government, society, and economy in various regions of Mexico. In fact, because of the state rule's weakness, drug cartels have been able to intimidate members of the government and influence law making, law enforcement, and judicial decisions (Bailey, 2014, p. 477).

Besides the rising power and influence of drug cartels in Mexico's legal and political systems, the war against drugs has provoked a regression of human rights (Acosta, 2012). Both the members of the drug cartels and the Mexican military have committed a range of human rights violations. On the one hand, drug cartels carry out activities such as kidnappings, murders, and car bombings (Grillo, 2011). On the other, the Mexican military violated human rights as a result of anti-drug efforts (Freeman & Sierra, 2004, p. 289). The number of such violations has increased so dramatically during this period that Amnesty International described it as a "major human rights crisis" (Acosta, 2012, p. 267). It is important to note that most of these cases have not been investigated, and rarely have the culprits been prosecuted because of the weakness of the penitentiary and judicial systems in Mexico (Freeman & Sierra, 2004).

In addition to these crimes, the assassinations of journalists represent one of the most symbolic cases of impunity in the country, with 99.7% of them still unsolved (CNDH 2017). Anaya Muñoz (2015) argues that the Mexican authorities are neither able to investigate properly nor incarcerate the perpetrators of the hundreds of crimes, disappearances, and feminicides committed in the country.

Even if Mexico has not been formally recognized as a conflict zone, the sustained levels of violence over the past eleven years; the number of human rights abuses and disappearances; the unprocessed investigations; and the unpunished crimes, reveal the inefficiency and

incapability of the Mexican state to protect its citizens. In sum, the political context in Mexico, as well as the rampant violence permeating society, reveal that the country faces similar challenges to countries in conflict.

Theorizing Transnational Politics and Peacebuilding Efforts in Violent Contexts

Migration scholars have prioritized the study of the transnational initiatives organized by diasporic groups, institutions, and hometown organizations (Østergaard-Nielsen, 2003; Lafleur, 2013; Morales & Pilati, 2013). These studies highlight the institutionalized and organized efforts developed by migrant communities to engage in homeland politics, predominantly in peaceful times. Indeed, these studies provide important insights to understand the role of emigration states influencing how migrant communities engage in transnational politics, for instance, in electoral politics or development initiatives and overlooking the particularities in violent democracies (Pérez-Armendáriz, 2019).

Scholars have also made important contributions to better understand transnational engagement in conflict zones. In short, this body of literature introduces the notion of the diaspora to capture the dispersion, nostalgia, and homeland orientation that triggers the transnational engagement of organized migrant communities in times of war (Van Hear, 2011). This approach presents diasporas engaging in conflict with their homeland as either peacemakers or peace-wreckers (Smith & Stares, 2007). This dichotomy presents a simple way to analyze diasporas as either negative agents perpetuating war or as positive individuals looking for resolution of the conflict, committed to peace and state-building (Cochrane, 2015; Roth, 2015; Koser, 2007; Bercovitch, 2007; Van Hear & Cohen, 2016).

As war perpetrators, it has been argued that diasporas have the power to raise funds for weapons or to lobby in support of political and violent objectives (Adamson, 2005; Cochrane, 2015). As peacemakers, diasporas have been portrayed as political mediators or economic agents aiming to send remittances to surpass the state of emergency and advocate for the termination of the conflict (Van Hear & Cohen, 2016; Smith & Stares, 2007).

In fact, the analysis of diasporas engaging in conflict situations is more complex than this dichotomy. Diasporas are not homogenous groups, and as such, their interests, motivations, and levels of engagement with their homelands in periods of conflict vary. Diasporic engagement depends on their capacity and desire to develop extra-territorial networks (Koser, 2007) and on the specificities of the conflict (Cochrane, 2015; Roth, 2015; Koser, 2007; Bercovitch, 2007). Indeed, both the intensity and the stage of the conflict determine the ability of migrant communities to engage with their homeland societies in war and to have direct access to the field.

Scholars have explored the role of diasporas in post-conflict and peacebuilding efforts (Kahl & Puig Larrauri, 2013; Welch et al., 2015; Brinkerhoff, 2007). Peacebuilding is a very complex concept which encompasses economic, social, and political efforts implemented by national and international actors aiming to: negotiate and consolidate peace; alleviate suffering and protect the victims of the war; strengthen governmental institutions; and ultimately reconstruct a democratic state (Christie, 2013; Call, 2008; Bush & Duggan, 2014; Barnett et al., 2007; Wennmann, 2004).

As argued by Langer and Brown (2016), conflict societies are immensely complex. They require not only the reconstruction of the physical damage caused by the violence but also the rebuilding of social relations as well as the healing of psychological traumas (Langer & Brown, 2016, p. 4). The multi-disciplinary nature of the challenges that conflict and post-conflict societies face makes it very hard for policymakers to develop integral policies capable of including all sectors of civil society and parties involved in the conflict. Furthermore, the specificities of each conflict make it very difficult to standardize the measurement, evaluation, and monitoring processes to assess the impact of the peacebuilding programs and policies.

One way to start unpacking the complex dynamics and actors involved in transnational peacebuilding processes is to analyze bottom-up initiatives. For instance, some of the actions undertaken by migrant communities for peacebuilding include: early response and sharing information programs; programs fostering contact and collaboration between stakeholders involved in the conflict; and programs aiming to promote peaceful and pro-peace policies (Kahl & Puig Larrauri, 2013; Welch et al., 2015; Brinkerhoff, 2007).

In particular, the impact of arts-based strategies as a transnational peacebuilding strategy developed by migrant communities has been understudied until relatively recently. Godin (2016) uses theories on social movements to study the role of theatre and photography as two artistic strategies developed by Congolese women aiming to raise awareness and challenge dominant discourses regarding gender-based violence (SGBV) in war. As a result, she concludes that through art, Congolese migrant women have been able to become transnational political actors by engaging in homeland politics from Belgium.

The literature on peacebuilding has contributed to the understanding of how arts-based strategies impact societies in conflict. For instance, Shank and Schirch (2008) documented how local arts-based strategies such as music, painting, theatre, yoga, and sculpture have helped individuals recover from conflict in Sri Lanka, Venezuela, and Palestine. These arts-based initiatives constitute a novel way to communicate and channel emotions, ideas, and feelings,

which in the long-term help to alleviate the societal traumas derived from the conflict (Shank & Schirch, 2008).

In order to better understand the nexus between arts-based strategies and peacebuilding, they developed a typology based on four categories: waging conflict nonviolently; reducing direct violence; transforming relationships; and building capacity (Schirch, 2004; Shank & Schirch, 2008). These four categories are useful to classify the different forms of arts (music, photography, dancing, etc.) and the multidisciplinary angles (social, psychological, political, and economic) where they may have an impact on the society during conflict.

In this article, I borrow these categories to specifically shed light on how Mexican migrants living in Brussels and Paris have developed arts-based initiatives to create transnational strategies to respond to the rampant violence in their homeland. With this theoretical framework, I aim to bridge the gap between migration and peacebuilding theories and recognize that migrants are agents with the capacity to develop creative strategies to contribute to the transformation of their homelands affected by important levels of violence.

Transnational Artistic Initiatives Developed by Mexican Activists from Brussels and Paris

Research Design and Data Collection

Mexican migrants living in Brussels and Paris have organized arts-based strategies to participate in the reduction of the rampant violence of their homeland from abroad. To address the main research question, this ethnographic study analyzes four sets of original data collected between November 2014 and July 2018. During this period, I conducted 41 semi-structured interviews (23 women and 18 men) with Mexican political activists who participated in the organization of transnational political events and in particular, artistic initiatives. Most of the people I interviewed (88%) hold a bachelor's degree and moved to Brussels or Paris for either family reasons or for educational opportunities.

In addition, I attended 55 events as a participant observant, including music rehearsals; concerts; gastronomic festivals; artistic performances; and planning meetings. During the data collection phase, I had the opportunity to follow the daily activities of my interviewees, who invited me to their homes and their personal events.

Ethnographic methods allowed me to interact repeatedly with my interviewees and to observe their personal interactions and motivations. Through our repeated interactions, my interviewees felt comfortable sharing the impressions and emotions catalyzing their artistic strategies. In addition, they were able to share their personal experiences related to the context of violence in their homeland (Dauphinee, 2015; Jean, 2009; Bayard De Volo, 2009).

I conducted this ethnography through an interpretive approach (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2012), which allowed me to adopt a bottom-up approach to discover the key activists creating and sustaining arts-based initiatives. Interpretive research recognizes the agency of the participants and thus valorizes their capacities, abilities, and skills. Indeed, according to Schwartz-Shea and Yanow (2012), in interpretive research, human beings are understood as agents as opposed to passive individuals or victims.

During the data collection process, I was able to participate not only as a mere observant but also as a musician, photographer, co-organizer, and cook, in the different events organized by the members of the Mexican community in Brussels and Paris (Lara-Guerrero, 2019). These strategies enabled me to be at the forefront of the organizing and creative processes behind the multiple artistic events developed by my interviewees.

The data collection was not always a smooth process, mainly because of the general skepticism of the Mexican community linked to the transnational state repression and the context of violence in their homeland (Moss, 2016; Lara-Guerrero, 2019). Some of my interviewees expressed their concerns about their security since they have experienced different forms of threats, surveillance, and suspected hacking attempts. These challenges were openly acknowledged and discussed with my interviewees, and as a result, I used pseudonyms to protect their identities.

While conducting the semi-structured interviews, I complied with the ethical research standards in ethnography (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007) for all participants involved in this research by ensuring their voluntary participation, consent, and freedom to interrupt the interview if they found it necessary.

Lastly, during all the stages of the data collection, I reflected upon my positionality and multi-layered identity as a Mexican, educated, middle-class, mix-raced woman from Mexico City. As a result, I analyzed how my presence affected the interactions with my interviewees and the actions that I undertook in the field.

Waging the Mexican Conflict Nonviolently from Brussels and Paris

Peacebuilding actions with the purpose of waging conflict nonviolently refer to civil-based actions with the aim to “raise public awareness and sympathy, increase understanding of how groups in conflict are interdependent, and balance power by convincing or coercing others to accept the needs or desires of all involved” (Shank & Schirch, 2008, p. 220). At the transnational level, this peacebuilding approach accentuates the role of activists aiming at gaining support to transform the political, economic, and social structures challenging the reconstruction of their homelands. Through these artistic actions, activists can spread their

political messages against the dominant discourses and to raise awareness about the dynamics of the conflict and other structural problems such as poverty, corruption, violence, and impunity.

Members of the Mexican community around the world have expressed indignation and disapproval of the rising violence, impunity, and corruption prevailing in Mexican society (Turati & Rea, 2012; González, 2015). Mexican activists living in Brussels and Paris were not the exception since they organized multiple political events accompanied by documentary screenings, art installations, and plays to denounce the inefficiency of the Mexican authorities to respond to the ongoing crisis.

Activists and artists make use of the stage to channel their anger and frustration against the government and Mexican institutions. They are aware of their privileged position to communicate and raise awareness among a Mexican and European audience, as reflected by Ana, a Mexican activist, who stated:

I have to use music and singing to denounce. If I remain silent, I become part of those bastards [Mexican authorities] [...] If an artist does not use the artistic platform to denounce, they are a waste. The stage is an undeniable space to denounce.

Ana has lived in Europe for more than 20 years and performed in France, Italy, Belgium, and other countries. She follows the Mexican news very closely and is deeply concerned by the insecurity problems in her country of origin:

The cases of femicide in the country is madness. I have sisters and nieces in Mexico. I suffer a lot. Today, I was crying because they found the dead body of a 13-year-old girl in Guerrero. I am very sad about what is happening. What I can do is to keep talking about these issues among my networks. As a singer and actress, as a public figure... denouncing these problems has been one of my distinctive features as a singer.

Regardless of the distance and time spent abroad, Ana still worries about the context of violence in her homeland and organizes events to inform European citizens about the rampant violence in Mexico.

In particular, Ana has managed to express her discontent and concern about the violence and impunity in her homeland through music. She regularly reinterprets traditional Mexican songs and changes the lyrics with political messages to denounce the human rights violations and crimes happening in Mexico. When she goes on stage, Ana prefers to use colorful outfits and Mexican decorations, such as ornaments on her head. These cultural artifacts and

references are key components that she uses to raise awareness among Mexican migrants living in Brussels and members of European society. Attracted by the tradition of Mexican folklore, both Mexican migrants and Europeans attend her concerts, where they end up being exposed to political messages.

Matías is a Mexican painter who has lived in Belgium for the past 22 years. He also uses the arts to express his concerns and to raise awareness about the insecurity and violence in his homeland. During this study, Matías organized two public events, where he invited the members of the Mexican diaspora to jointly paint murals to denounce the context of violence in Mexico.

On August 28, 2016, Matías summoned the Mexican community into a public space in the center of Brussels to paint a mural in honor of the 43 missing students of Ayotzinapa who suddenly disappeared on September 26, 2014 (González, 2015). This activity triggered creativity among the attendees, who contributed at different stages of the painting. About 20 Mexicans collaborated in the painting of the mural, which caught the attention of people walking by, who stopped to get more information about the images. On various occasions, Mexican migrants were interrupted while painting by people from Europe who were interested in the rationale behind the mural.

Since this first mural was quite successful in raising awareness about the conflict in Mexico, Matías decided to organize a second one on July 2, 2017. On that occasion, he also invited the members of the Mexican community living in Brussels through social media to denounce the political actions undertaken by the former president, Enrique Peña Nieto, in relation to foreign policy, intelligence, and security. Once again, the mural portrayed criticism of the inefficiency within the policies trying to reduce violence and impunity in Mexico.

Matías values this arts-based initiative since he believes that they are relevant to raise awareness internationally:

I think that it is important to sensitize the Belgian people and the tourists that pass by [...] The mural is to denounce the censorship against journalists in Mexico who have been killed. We also want to raise awareness of the oppression against the Mexican people. It is very important that the Belgian people and the European Union realize this situation. Especially because Brussels is key for European politics, I think that being far from Mexico, we see the things that are happening from far, which is worse. We have the responsibility to inform the Belgian population and sensitize them.

Matías has also used his creativity and skills to raise awareness about the violent Mexican context among Europeans. He is aware of the symbolic and political weight that Brussels represents in global politics (Lara-Guerrero & Vivas-Romero, 2020). Therefore he feels obliged to keep informing the Belgian society about what is happening in his homeland.

The arts-based initiatives presented in this section constitute two examples of transnational strategies to engage in a context of violence for two main reasons. First, through these activities, both Ana and Matías have managed to raise awareness among the residents of their host land about the political situation and insecurity affecting their homeland. Second, through these activities, these two artists have managed to create interpersonal relationships and political alliances with local actors in Brussels. These political alliances have helped them to raise awareness about Mexican politics in Europe and, in particular, within European institutions.

Reducing Direct Violence Transnationally

Members of the Mexican community living in Brussels and Paris have also made efforts to reduce the level of violence—prevent and relieve the immediate suffering of the victims in their homeland. For instance, this category of peacebuilding strategies includes the transformation of the legal and judicial system, military intervention, ceasefire agreements, and support to refugees (Shank & Schirch, 2008).

In particular, the Mexican community in Paris made efforts to pair arts-based initiatives with lobbying strategies to reduce the current level of violence in their homeland. For instance, from April 1-9, 2017, a group of Mexican activists organized several artistic and political activities to denounce the ongoing security crisis in Mexico. These public activities consisted of documentary screenings, plays, political discourses, and the opening of an art installation with special guests from Mexico, including María de Jesús Tlatempa Bello, mother of José Eduardo, one of the disappeared students from Ayotzinapa.

The presence of María, a testimony of the ongoing security crisis, was particularly important to confer legitimacy to the advocacy and lobbying activities (Kaldor, 2003; Stewart, 2004) organized by the members of the Mexican community in Paris. Testimonies are especially relevant when people advocate in favor of human rights since they fuel the grievances, moral shocks, and emotions that sustain social movements and mobilizations (Stewart, 2004; Estrello, 2011). The presence of María de Jesús in private lobbying meetings organized by the members of the Mexican community in France with international authorities, such as the member of the Committee of Enforced Disappearances of the United Nations High

Commissioner, was highly valued for the symbolic and political weight she represents as a victim of the ongoing conflict.

Besides the lobbying efforts to reduce the level of violence undertaken by Mexicans from abroad, I observed that Mexican activists organize cultural activities to collect funds and send remittances to Mexico to alleviate the immediate danger related to conflict and violence (Van Hear, 2011).

For instance, Antonia, an actress living in Belgium for the past 20 years, admitted organizing private concerts in her house to collect resources and send them to support victims of the violence in Mexico:

I started participating in events since the case of Ayotzinapa. In the beginning, it was for the families of the 43 students, but now it is also for other causes. I started organizing private concerts in my house, it is not very big, but we can host around 40 people. What I have noticed is that people have shown solidarity, especially the artists playing music in our house for free. The events are very social, and people love them. Besides socializing and having a good time, people always get informed about the situation in Mexico.

Antonia and her family have managed to contribute to the violence relief in Mexico transnationally through art. Through the collaboration of friends and her personal network, Antonia has been able to collect funds to sustain specific causes in her homeland through remittances.

Jimena, a Mexican artist living in Belgium for the past 11 years, developed specific initiatives to help her brother, who was imprisoned unjustly in Mexico. Together with her closest friends in Brussels and her family in Mexico, she was able to advocate for the liberty of her brother through arts-based strategies.

After getting some experience on how to organize artistic performances in Brussels, Jimena decided to travel to Mexico to help her family with the same practices that she learned in Belgium:

I decided to go to Mexico to release my brother out of prison. We contacted the media, and we made a lot of noise. At different moments of the process, we were asked to pay bribes, but we did not. [...] In Mexico, it is quite difficult to find honest lawyers. We had 28 lawyers before finding the good one. Besides the legal material, I had the idea to do something visual. We are in a visual era; if you do not integrate visual material, nobody cares about you. Thus, for each trial, I also prepared a sort of performance. I had all the experience from my

performances in Belgium, and we had the media. [...] We decided what to include in the performances from drawings that my brother made from prison. The first performance that we organized included balloons. We made the allusion that my brother escaped from the prison with balloons. The second performance included butterflies. We asked people on the street to draw butterflies, and then we pasted them on the fence of the prison. Everything was covered with butterflies, and people approached us to ask: “Why are there butterflies all over the fence?” and I replied, “Ah! Well, this is because of my brother...” Exactly as we did here in Brussels.

The case of Jimena’s brother showcases that corruption and impunity are two of the main structural problems in violent democracies (Pérez-Armendáriz, 2019). As a result, Jimena decided to organize a bottom-up initiative to help her brother and defy the prevalent impunity in her homeland. Thanks to her arts-based strategies, Jimena managed to get the attention of the media, which in turn put pressure on the Mexican authorities who eventually released her brother.

Whenever Jimena organized the performances in Mexico, she insisted on the fact that she was motivated by her previous experience advocating through art from Brussels. Inspired by drawings of her brother in jail, she managed to create performances that raised awareness about his case not only among the people passing by but also among the Mexican society at a national level since she managed to gain mass media attention in a creative way.

The three arts-based strategies analyzed in this section showcase Mexican migrants in Europe that have been able to make efforts to reduce the level of violence and relieve the immediate suffering of victims in Mexico. By including art as a tool of their transnational engagement, Mexican activists have managed to send remittances and create effective advocacy strategies to support specific victims of violence back in their homeland.

Transforming Relationships from Abroad

The third type of peacebuilding and arts-based strategies deployed by activists include long-term efforts aiming to transform relationships and address trauma, transform the conflict, and do justice (Shank & Schirch, 2008, p. 224). At a personal level, this means that activists and artists try to heal the personal and/or collective trauma caused by the conflict and manage to transform the negative energy of the conflict into a more positive one.

One example that crystallizes the effort of Mexican activists in Europe attempting to heal their personal and collective traumas from the context of violence in their homeland is a group of women called *Bordamos por la Paz París*. At an early stage of my fieldwork, I met a

group of women, most of them highly educated, who gathered in parks or coffee shops to embroider the names of the disappeared and victims of the Mexican conflict in France.

These events help address the social trauma in several ways. Women canalize their anger and sorrow by knitting colorful and original designs. Furthermore, during the process of embroidering collectively, women share their experiences and emotions regarding the Mexican context of violence. The meetings last between two or three hours and are usually accompanied by deep reflections, personal anecdotes, striking stories from the newspapers, and from time to time, jokes and informal chatting.

Once the embroideries are completed, the artists have the option to display them in political events and meetings organized by other members of the Mexican community in Paris. The fact that the embroideries are exhibited helps the artists because they feel they are honoring the victims, their families, and raising awareness about the context of violence in their homeland from Europe. The pieces of embroidery materialize the alleviation of sadness of the women who knitted them and, at the same time, create a sense of fulfilment to participate in an effort to denounce the rampant violence in Mexico.

During my fieldwork, I met Andrea, a woman in her fifties living in Paris, who told me how much she loves embroidering and how meaningful it is for her to do this activity. After showing me multiple portfolios filled up with more than 200 embroideries carefully ordered by themes (i.e., the students of Ayotzinapa; feminicides; murdered reporters; etc.), she explained to me that embroidery is a powerful experience because of its symbolism and introspection.

In her experience creating handkerchiefs, she was particularly touched by the case of the victims of the ABC daycare center in Hermosillo in 2009:

It was particularly hurtful because we read the story of every single child who died in that nursery. We cried a lot doing them. We also personalized each embroidery by referring to specific things that they liked, for example, this one has a ladybug, this one a car, this one a princess...

Through embroidering, Andrea and other women involved in this activity have managed to reflect upon the security issues in Mexico. As a result, they have been able to express their pain and their discontent with the Mexican authorities. Indeed, this arts-based technique has enabled them to discuss hurtful and complex issues such as impunity, corruption, and violence affecting their homeland. Together, they have built a small group where they feel comfortable to talk about these issues while at the same time honoring the victims. As a participant observant, I realized that embroidering sessions provide a space for migrant

Mexican women living in Paris to analyze their emotions regarding the context of violence in their homeland.

In Brussels, I met Fernanda, a Mexican migrant in her late thirties who initially moved to Europe to study and nowadays works as a freelance designer. Fernanda's creativity can also be showcased in the way that she denounces the violence in her homeland from Brussels. When I met her after a small concert organized by Mexican migrants, she showed me a small notebook where she created original lyrics to accompany traditional Mexican songs; this technique is known as lyric drift (Rolston, 2001).

In her lyrics, she expresses her concern about the Mexican conflict and violence. In addition, she refers to her situation as a migrant in Belgium, and she denounces the Mexican state for not guaranteeing the security of its citizens, as translated below:

[...] I am migrant of the world
I crossed the sea, of this fertile land
To fight
Without borders
The dreams
I give my life [...]

Today we are reunited
Form the heart [...]
Show them now! [the students]
We want Justice for Ayotzinapa now!
It was the state, Ladies, and Gentlemen,
It was the state who killed them
Organize yourself and fight along with this rhythm

They took them alive; they took them without any remorse
And we yell; Justice with all our love!

Fernanda's lyrics portray how she feels about the context of violence and insecurity in Mexico. Indeed, writing lyrics triggers a self-reflective process through which she manages to reflect upon her perceptions and feelings derived from the conflict in her country of origin.

The cases presented in this section analyze the efforts undertaken by Mexican migrants living in Paris and Brussels aiming to transform the conflict in their homeland, including the transformation of relationships and trauma release. Through arts-based initiatives such as

embroidering or songwriting, Mexican artists living abroad have started self-reflective and healing processes in relation to the context of violence in their homeland.

Arts have enabled them to release the negative feelings such as sadness, anger, and frustrations that they have accumulated by reading about cases of violence, feminicides, or human rights violations while living abroad. In addition, through these arts-based initiatives, they have also managed to honor some victims of the Mexican conflict and express their political demands in a creative form.

Building Capacity from Brussels and Paris

The last way to classify peacebuilding initiatives is building capacity, which focuses on education, training, research, and evaluation efforts to support a sustainable culture of peace in the long term (Shank & Schirch 2008, p. 26). Members of the Mexican community living in Belgium have undertaken some initiatives to raise awareness among children and present in a ludic way the insecurity and violence that Mexico is facing.

For instance, during the celebration of the Day of the Dead (*Día de los Muertos*) on November 5, 2016, Ana presented an original play accompanied by two musicians and children of Mexican origins. The interactive play made references to Mexican traditions and celebrations, but it also highlighted the number of disappeared and murdered persons in the country.

According to Shank and Schirch (2008), plays are effective social forums to address social injustice, educate, and engage in bottom-down solutions for community conflicts. The play for kids presented in Brussels materializes an important initiative to educate the younger generations about the current situation in Mexico. By making references to the Mexican conflict, Ana managed to honor the victims, preserve a millenary tradition (Zarauz López, 2016) overseas, and raise awareness among the young members of the Mexican community in Europe.

Capacity-building activities include long-term efforts aiming to educate and raise awareness about the impact of conflicts. Another relevant initiative organized by Mexican activists in Belgium was during a political event held in a small cultural center on December 2, 2017. This event included the screening of three short films presenting some of the structural problems in Mexico related to violence. The short films were commented upon and explained by a Mexican activist who made special emphasis on the systematization of human rights violations in Mexico. This activity was important because attendees understood some of the dynamics and implications of the violent Mexican context. In addition, they were able to engage in an open dialogue moderated by a human rights activist.

Similarly, during my fieldwork in Paris, I also witnessed an important artistic-based effort to raise awareness about the violence in Mexico through an art exhibition by a Mexican sculptor called *Huellas de la Memoria* or Memory Footprints, inaugurated April 1, 2017. This art installation included the exhibition of 40 pairs of shoes of victims of the Mexican conflict whose soles were carved with messages to honor them.

The exhibition was a powerful strategy to pay tribute to the victims and also to present their personal stories in an original way. Through these messages and pieces, attendees were able to humanize the victims of the Mexican conflict. Indeed, by reading about the circumstances of their disappearances, attendees were able to better understand the wave of violence and impunity affecting the country. The exhibition was also accompanied by large information boards with figures and details about the size and implications of the Mexican conflict.

The exhibition triggered important processes of reflection among the public. During this event, I observed how attendees were shocked to learn about the rampant violence in Mexico. In addition, they were also emotionally moved after reading about the personal stories of the victims and how some families are affected by the disappearance of their beloved ones. Lastly, with this art exhibition, the visitors were able to understand that Mexican institutions are weak and are not sufficiently accountable to either provide security to their citizens, conduct criminal investigations efficiently, or solve cases of human rights violations (Pérez-Armendáriz, 2019; UNODC, 2013; IISS Armed Conflict Survey, 2017).

The three arts-based strategies presented in this section address how Mexican migrants have developed creative strategies to educate and build capacity regarding the conflict in their homeland. Through these activities, Mexican activists in Europe have been able to present information about the dynamics and victims of the violent context in their country of origin to the younger generation of Mexican living in Europe and to other members of their host land societies.

Bridging Migration and Peacebuilding Theoretical Approaches

Even if Mexican authorities have not declared a real state of emergency in the country, the number of victims, fighting strategies, and the prevalence of impunity and corruption suggest that there is an ongoing conflict in Mexico. In response to the level of violence and dissatisfaction with the government's response to the security crisis and rampant violence, members of the Mexican community abroad have developed transnational arts-based strategies.

This paper has argued that the actions undertaken by Mexican migrants in Brussels and Paris have helped, to a certain extent, transform the conflict, reduce direct violence, and build capacity (Shank & Schirch, 2008) to improve the security situation in their homeland. By applying a framework developed by Schirch (2004), this paper contributes to the study of conflict and migration in three ways.

First, by providing empirical evidence that migrants are able to engage in conflict resolution initiatives even if they do not reside in the same country where the conflict is taking place. Indeed, Mexican migrants living in Brussels and Paris have been capable of developing political, social, and cultural activities to denounce the Mexican situation and contribute to the conflict alleviation.

Second, this article sheds light on how artistic practices have the potential to raise awareness about a conflict among a larger public and even find new allies to advocate. Through these arts-based practices, artists manage to attract people and raise awareness about particular political issues. They also create spaces where people are invited to overcome the potential psychological traumas resulting from conflicts and violence.

Finally, this empirical article introduces a transdisciplinary approach and peacebuilding theories to better understand how arts-based strategies contribute to the economic, social, political, and psychological alleviation of violence. In sum, migrants are capable of engaging in homeland politics in contexts of violence by developing bottom-up strategies.

This article is an effort to bridge the theories developed across multiple disciplines, particularly the migration and peacebuilding literature. By doing so, this paper aims to demonstrate that there is a need to further explore how migrants engage in violent contexts or violent democracies, as pointed out by Pérez-Armendáriz (2019).

In addition, by borrowing elements from the peacebuilding literature, this article demonstrates that it is possible to study original bottom-up initiatives orchestrated by migrants from abroad who are still attached to their homelands regardless of the distance and time spent overseas. The aim of this article was not to measure the impact of the transnational efforts orchestrated by Mexican migrants living in Europe but rather to recognize the relevance of exploring non-institutionalized forms of transnational political engagement in contexts of violence at the micro-level.

Exploring and adapting tools from multiple disciplines is relevant in social sciences to address both theoretical and empirical gaps and to realize that further research needs to include a critical analysis of violent contexts. In particular, attention should be given to violent

democracies as many countries in the so-called developing world—short of experiencing a full-fledged conflict, face violence, impunity, and corruption.

Concretely, by bridging migration and peacebuilding theoretical approaches, this article aimed to demonstrate that transnational political practices orchestrated by migrants cannot be reduced to formal political initiatives. Furthermore, in times of crisis, migrants do not exclusively engage in homeland politics to contribute to the conflict alleviation or political reconstruction of their country of origin. Migrants are agents with their own capacities and interests, capable of developing artistic initiatives from their host lands to enhance multi-disciplinary peacebuilding efforts.

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