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“My guitar is my rifle”: Mexican migrants mobilising unconventionally through arts

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Abstract

Diasporas can create, transform, and exploit transnational networks to engage in political movements in their homeland and in their hostland, engaging in both electoral and non-electoral politics through political parties, political campaigns, and hometown organisations. However, the individual processes of subjectivation and its relationship with arts as a form of political engagement have been under-explored especially in contexts of violence and insecurity. This ethnographic paper sheds light on the micro-level of diaspora mobilisation by introducing the concept of “subjectivity” as a key term to analyse the transnational and unconventional political practices organised by migrants. As a result, this research aims to answer the following questions: (1) How are Mexican migrants becoming diasporic political subjects and creating spaces of transnational political activism in reaction to the context of violence in their homeland? (2) What makes them resort to art as a repertoire of contention against violence in their home towns? The paper introduces empirical examples collected in Brussels during 19 months of fieldwork with members of the Mexican diaspora, including semi-structured interviews with key informants and participant observation at political demonstrations, music rehearsals, charity concerts, gastronomic and artistic festivals, and political debates.

Keywords: Political transnationalism, Diaspora mobilisation, Arts, Mexican diaspora, Subjectivity, Violence

Introduction

Between 2015 and 2021, Mexico’s national homicide rate increased by 76.3%, with the average number of homicides per day reaching 94 in 2021 (IEP, 2021). Since President Calderón launched the ‘War on Drugs’ in 2006, violence levels have increased dramatically in Mexico, putting into question the capacity of the Mexican state to guarantee the rule of law and governance (Bagley, 2012). In 2018, the number of drug-related homicides rose to 33,341, representing a 15% increase from the previous year and a record high (Global Conflict Tracker, 2022). The context of violence and insecurity in Mexico is indeed alarming and include: reports of disappearances, extrajudicial executions, cases of torture, and human rights violations. According to the Mexican government’s National Registry of the Disappeared, 25,000 persons have gone missing between 2018 and mid-2021 (WOLA, 2021).

In recent years, the Mexican population has resorted both to institutionalised channels of political transnationalism as well as unconventional political practices to express disagreement to the way the Mexican government is reacting to the escalation of violence and insecurity in the country.

Yet, little is known about the ways in which migrants abroad are responding to the wave of violence in Mexico. This is surprising considering that historically the Mexican diaspora has been a recurrent case study to understand the dynamics of how states, institutions, hometown associations, and the profile of migrants shape electoral politics and institutionalised channels of political engagement (Lara-Guerrero & Vivas Romero, 2020; Lafleur & Calderón, 2011; Délano, 2014; Lafleur, 2013; Smith, 2003).

Diasporas can create, transform, and exploit transnational spaces to engage in political movements. Several authors have contributed to the better understanding of how diasporas navigate political and social structures at the local, national, and global levels in order to participate in politics (Østergaard-Nielsen, 2003; Levitt & Glick Schiller, 2004; Boccagni, Levitt & Lafleur, 2015). Accordingly, scholars have studied the role of states, institutions and global trends in shaping social movements at a macro level (Koinova, 2017a; Lafleur, 2013; Østergaard-Nielsen, 2003). Others have depicted hometown associations and kinship groups as meso-level catalysers of ideologies and spaces where diasporas find resources and opportunities to mobilise to engage in transnational politics (Bermudez, 2016; Itzigsohn & Villacrés, 2008; Moss, 2016; Müller-Funk, 2016). Last, at the micro-level, authors have focused on the role of diasporic leaders or entrepreneurs sparking transnational politics (Betts & Jones, 2016; Koinova, 2017b), and on determining the profile of migrants participating in transnational politics (Guarnizo & Chaudhary, 2014; Guarnizo et al., 2003, Lafleur & Calderón, 2011).

In the literature of transnational politics, arts have been identified as an original repertoire of contention available to migrants to engage in deterritorialised politics. Various studies on social mobilisation have suggested that artistic practices can be a key component of social movements in that: (1) they may create a collective consciousness and sense of belonging (Eyerman & Jamison, 1998; Lafleur & Martiniello, 2010), (2) lead to vitalising emotions (Danaher, 2010), (3) evoke memories (Martiniello & Lafleur, 2008), and/or (4) help ethnic minorities restructure post-colonial relations of domination and subordination (Godin, 2016). Regarding the study of artistic forms of political engagement, the concepts of “subject” and “subjectivity” manage to unpack the capacity of actors to construct their existence, to control their experience, and to be responsible and creative to engage in social movements (Glasius & Pleyers, 2013; Wieviorka, 2012).

Despite political transnationalism in Mexico having increasingly attracted scholarly attention, the way in which Mexican migrants use the arts as a form of protest remains underexplored in the literature. This article aims to contribute to a better understanding of diaspora mobilisation by introducing the concept of “subjectivity” to analyse the transnational and unconventional political practices organised by Mexican migrants in reaction to rising levels of violence in their homeland. More specifically, this paper addresses the following questions: (1) How are Mexican migrants becoming diasporic political subjects and creating spaces of transnational political activism in reaction to the context of violence in their homeland? (2) What makes them resort to art as a repertoire of contention against violence in their home towns? Evidence was collected through an

extensive ethnographic fieldwork with members of the Mexican diaspora living in Brussels, including semi-structured interviews with key informants and participant observation at political demonstrations, music rehearsals, charity concerts, gastronomic festivals, artistic performances, and political debates.

The paper presents examples of deterritorialised and unconventional forms of political participation to demonstrate that migrants: (1) enhance individual processes of subjectivation, (2) detach themselves from state institutions, (3) develop and sustain creative forms of political mobilisation, and (4) create spaces for self-reflexion and self-awareness. Special attention is given to the impact of a context of violence triggering and shaping extraterritorial political mobilisation as it affects the activists' emotions as well as their sense of moral obligation with their homeland, inspires the form of their political activities, and accelerates the process of migrant political subjectivation by enhancing reflection and political awareness.

This paper proceeds as follows: First, it reviews the existing literature on transnational politics, diaspora mobilisation and social movements. It discusses the contributions and limitations of each body of literature regarding the study of diasporas mobilising in homeland politics through arts from abroad. Next, it describes the context of violence in Mexico followed by a description of the research data and methods used. Last, it presents the results obtained and concludes by discussing the results and suggesting new avenues of research.

Bridging transnational politics, diaspora mobilisation and social movement theories

Transnational politics and extraterritorial politics

For over a decade, the political dimension of immigrant transnationalism has gained a lot of attention from scholars trying to identify the actors, nature, causes, channels, and impacts of migrant communities engaging in homeland politics across borders (Lafleur & Martiniello, 2009; Østergaard-Nielsen, 2003; Boccagni, Lafleur and Levitt, 2015). Martiniello and Lafleur (2008) define "immigrant political transnationalism" as:

any political activity undertaken by migrants who reside mainly outside their homeland and that is aimed at gaining political power or influence at the individual or collective level in the country of residence or in the state to which they consider they belong. Such power or influence may be achieved by interacting with all kinds of institutions (local, subnational, national, or international) in the country of residence and/or the home country, by supporting movements that are politically active in the country of origin or by intervening directly in the country of origin's politics (653).

This definition is relevant for this study first because it recognises the diversity of actors involved in transnational politics. Second, it captures the idea that transnational political participation may be organised and sustained at the local, subnational, national, or/and international levels. Finally, this definition crystallises the deterritorialised transfers of ideas, behaviours, and knowledge involved in transnational politics. Overall, we can understand immigrant political transnationalism as any political activity organised by migrants who are interested in influencing politics

in their homeland and/or hostland politics, who navigate across different political, social, and economic structures in different countries.

Migrants can engage politically in their homelands through institutional and non-institutional channels. Institutional forms of transnational political participation include membership in political parties, contributions to political campaigns, and extraterritorial voting. (Guarnizo et al., 2003; Itzigsohn & Villacrés, 2008; Lafleur, 2013; Lafleur & Sánchez-Domínguez, 2014). Meanwhile, non-institutional forms of participation encompass membership in hometown organisations, contributions for development initiatives and membership in charity organisations (Bermudez, 2016; Guarnizo et al., 2003; Itzigsohn & Villacrés, 2008; Lara-Guerrero, 2020; Martiniello, 2006). Other forms of non-institutional forms of political participation less explored in migration studies include: boycotts, strikes, demonstrations, writing letters, traffic blockades (Constantino & Sabucedo, 1991), and artistic representations.

A number of studies have examined the drivers behind migrants' engagement in homeland politics through institutional channels (Guarnizo et al., 2003; Guarnizo & Chaudray, 2014; Lafleur, 2013; Lafleur & Sánchez-Domínguez, 2014, Lafleur & Calderón, 2011), stressing the role that political structures and the profile of migrants have in igniting these forms of political behaviour.

However, the existing literature on political transnationalism largely overlooks the ways in which the quality of governance or the context of violence in origin countries affects migrants' conventional and non-conventional political participation. Indeed, these theories focus on the analysis of the institutionalised relationship between the diaspora and governmental institutions therefore neglecting cases where such institutions are being contested by their diaspora.

Relatively little is known about what drives migrants to engage in non-conventional forms of transnational political participation, such as expressing their political views through artistic performances. Previous research on the transnational political participation of Mexican migrants has either focused on absentee voting or on the effects of transnational ties on homeland politics, with the Mexican diaspora in the United States as the main case study. For example, Waldinger and Soehl (2013) provided an overview of the factors inhibiting absentee voting among the Mexican diaspora in the United States, post-enfranchisement. Other studies demonstrated that Mexican households receiving economic and social remittances from migrants were more likely to have contacted public officials or the media, supported political campaigns, and/or engaged in protest than those without access to remittances (Pérez-Armendáriz & Crow, 2010). However, more research on the unconventional transnational political engagement of Mexican migrants is needed, especially as lower levels of confidence in homeland politics may encourage migrants to engage in more expressive and creative ways. Research from the United States has shown that Mexican migrants have a generally negative view of Mexican politics, which is repeatedly associated with corruption, violence, poverty, and incapacity to government (Alarcon et al., 2013:298), therefore by focussing on engagement through conventional political channels, we might be underestimating the extent to which Mexican migrants are actually invested in the social and political development of their homeland. This is the starting point of this article, which aims to contribute to the theorisation of

transnational unconventional forms of political participation initiated and sustained by Mexican migrants concerned by the context of violence in their homeland.

Diaspora mobilisation and transnational social movements

Diaspora mobilisation refers to the political activities undertaken by migrants from one country that target the domestic and foreign policy of said country. These activities might cross one or more borders and can be sustained by actors such as human rights activists, religious groups, or similar movements in other countries (Müller-Funk, 2016:354). Diaspora mobilisation aims to influence the political situation in one's perceived country of origin, in the host society or/and in the general public opinion.

Recent work has focused on the mobilisation of diasporas during critical periods of war-time violence and instability in their homelands (Koinova, 2017a; Koinova, 2017b; Betts, 2016; Müller-Funk, 2016; Bermudez, 2016; Godin, 2017). Building on theories on social movements, these studies: (1) examine the mobilising structures, practices and strategies used by diasporic entrepreneurs at the macro, meso and micro levels; (2) unpack the political opportunity structures and resources available for migrants for engaging in transnational politics; and (3) analyse the way in which framing processes are used for diffusing political messages and disrupt political structures.

Koinova (2017a) examines the mobilisation of conflict-generated diasporas and demonstrate that changes in the international system affect migrants' strategies and intensity of extraterritorial political activism. Although global "critical junctures" and "transformative events" can disrupt the transnational mobilisation of diasporas, Koinova (2017a) also theorises that the way diaspora entrepreneurs react to these global shifts depends on: (i) the position from which diasporas operate in transnational social fields, and (ii) the ability and resilience of migrant leaders to readjust to the new environment. Because of this, Koinova (2017a) suggests the need for integrating the transnational level of analysis in the study of diaspora mobilisation.

Along these lines, Manzano (2007) argues that through continuous interactions, migrants share their political grievances and concerns, articulate common views, and have access to human resources and social capital, which may boost their political activism and thus sustain transnational political movements.

Similarly, recent work by Müller-Funk (2016) demonstrates that personal networks play a crucial role in diaspora mobilisation. Through these nets, migrants create links that cross-cut different spaces and organisations, such as religious groups, hometown associations and kinship organisations, which can be exploited to engage in transnational politics. Müller-Funk also finds that in order to understand their degree and shape of political activism we should take into account diasporas' characteristics such as the time of residence, the size and its composition (immigrant generation).

Betts and Jones (2016), on the other hand, extend the analysis of diaspora mobilisation beyond diaspora membership itself. To capture the role and interests that elites have in fomenting transnational politics, they introduce the notion of "animators". Through the provision of resources, expertise and connections, these "animators" can encourage and guide migrants to become political actors with enough agency to engage in contentious politics (Betts & Jones, 2016). Betts and Jones (2016) thus emphasise the role of animators in providing resources to diaspora mobilisation. It

should be noted that only animators with enough money, skill, knowledge and connections are able to stimulate transnational political activism.

Previous research on the importance of emotions for social movement mobilization might help us better understand the transnational political engagement of diaspora as a response to violence and insecurity in the homeland. For example, Jasper and Poulsen (1995:498) emphasized the role of *moral shocks*, or events evoking such a strong sense of outrage in people that they become inclined to taking action, even in the absence of a network of contacts. Through his work on the Madres de Playa de Mayo in Argentina, Bosco (2006) demonstrated how affective bonds created between the mothers of disappeared children helped sustain the movement, even when disconnected from the physical spaces where it originated or despite the lack of formal organizers or coordinators.

Lastly, framing approaches understand the cultural narrative, discourses and ideology used by migrants when sustaining transnational mobilisations. Godin (2017) makes an important contribution to the study of diaspora mobilisation showing that diasporic Congolese women in Belgium and the UK adapt and exploit different discursive and narrative strategies to bridge, amplify and extend their political demands. In so doing, these entrepreneur diasporic women are able to become activists in different territories and public spheres.

Overall, the works reviewed above suggest that the profile of migrants, their kinship, their personal networks and their capacity to face global challenges, play a crucial role in the organisation and development of transnational social movements. Building on social movements theories, this body of literature portrays diaspora mobilisation as instrumentally based and sustained by political leaders who have the capacity and ability to use an array of political, economic, social and cultural resources in different territories. However, these studies have overlooked migrants' strategies of mobilisation, which are often characterised as horizontal, deinstitutionalised and lacking clear political objectives.

The existing literature on diaspora mobilisation, focusing largely on authoritarian regimes, fails to acknowledge the ways in which diasporas mobilise in democratic regimes with high levels of violence and criminality. Although Koinova (2017a) talks about conflict-generated diasporas, many countries like Mexico suffer from peacetime violence, in the form of drug-trafficking related violence. There, collusion between state and criminals is common, police institutions and the judiciary are corrupt, and levels of citizens' trust in authorities is low (OEA, 2015; Rios, 2015). According to public opinion survey data from 2021, Mexico is one of the Latin American countries with the highest levels of distrust in political institutions (Parra Saiani et al., 2021), with less than 50% of Mexicans reporting at least some confidence in the national government (OECD, 2022). Growing distrust towards state authorities may generate grievances among citizens at home and abroad (Moss, 2016) and therefore promote unconventional forms of mobilisation among the emigrant population.

To better understand the factors promoting diaspora mobilisation, in this paper, we examine the strategies used by Mexicans living in Belgium and mobilising against growing violence and criminality in their homelands.

Subjectivity and unconventional movements

Various authors contend that contemporary social movements are different in terms of the informality of their organisation, the nature of their demands, their relation with the formal institutions and the eagerness in which social movements actors use original and creative ways to mobilise (Glasius & Pleyers, 2013; Modonesi, 2017; Pleyers, 2016, 2017; Wieviorka, 2012). For Rebughini (2014), activist's subjectivity has become the spark that originates, leads, and sustains the new social movements. A political subject is a conscious individual with the freedom to decide how to act and how to engage in political activities. Through this personal subjectivation, the individual chooses their own fights and collective identity, and becomes the manager of their own political engagement, determining the nature, rhythm, involvement, and duration of their mobilisation (Wieviorka, 2008).

In the so-called "new social movements" literature (Edwards, 2014), it is assumed that political subjects do not seek to establish a new political order or capture the state power. These subjects do not follow any specific manifesto but their autonomy, emotions, thoughts, and values catalyse and shape their political engagement (Pleyers, 2016). Current social movements do not have a clear opponent, instead they are political subjects being mobilised by a sense of personal responsibility and personal values as well as abstract demands of democracy, human rights, social justice, or human dignity (Glasius & Pleyers, 2013). These political subjects also create their own "spaces of experience", in which they can share their experiences, establish social links, experiment with alternative practices, and feed their politisation (Pleyers, 2016, 2017).

Besides the traditional repertoires of contention such as demonstrations or political gatherings, arts propel these processes of political subjectivity. Existing research has shown that arts play an important role in the mobilisation of migrants by: (1) creating sentiments of group belonging and cultural memory (Baily & Collyer, 2006; González, 2004; Lafleur & Martiniello, 2010; Nájera Ramírez, 1989); (2) expressing disagreement to the dominant culture and prevailing ideologies (Danaher, 2010; Eyerman & Jamison, 1998; Godin, 2016; Martiniello & Lafleur, 2008); and (3) supporting the recruitment of members and the visibility of existing social movements (Eyerman, 2002; Garlough, 2008; Martiniello, 2015). Thus, there is a nexus between the arts and the political mobilisation of migrants, in which the arts become a participative and collective form of making politics. Put simply, artistic practices are part of the collective strategies of contention to mainstream politics (Martiniello, 2015).

Subjectivation theories are a useful approach to examine the role that the arts play in the repertoires of contention used in unconventional forms of political participation. These theories assume that: (1) the individual is the core piece of social movements, since they make the decision on how, where, and when to mobilise; (2) political subjects detach themselves from state institutions and other formal organisations; (3) creativity, spontaneity and self-fulfilment are key elements in the conceptualisation and configuration of political mobilisation; and (4) activists create new spaces of experience where they forge links that further enhance their subjectivation. One of the peculiarities of contemporary social movements is that they are not restricted to any specific territory or ethnic group. Hence, it is plausible that social movements engage in political transnationalism, and they use the arts in their repertoires of contention. In what follows, we

will apply this framework to examine the case of Mexican migrants engaging in unconventional forms of political transnationalism from Brussels, Belgium.

Mexican migrants engaging in homeland politics through arts

The Mexican context: emigration, insecurity and antagonist movements

Mexico as a state has developed a solid political apparatus to engage with migrants living abroad (Délano, 2014). Through the Institute of Mexicans Abroad (IME) and specifically its Advisory Council (CCIME), the Mexican government has established an institutionalised channel of communication with members of the Mexican community living in the United States and Canada, who represent approximately 98% of the Mexicans living abroad (SRE, 2018).

Unlike those in North America, Mexicans living in Europe lack access to institutionalised channels of communication through which they can present their political demands or concerns to the government. Another difference with North America is that a large proportion of the Mexican population in Europe is highly educated. It is estimated that 28% of the Mexicans living in Europe are high-skilled professionals and 17% are students (SRE, 2018). This paper aims to shed light on the ways in which Mexican migrants living in countries other than the United States and Canada express their grievances focusing on the case of Mexicans living in Belgium.

In 2017 there were 1,572 Mexican migrants living in Belgium of the 119,030 registered in Europe (SRE, 2018). In the presidential elections of 2012, the Federal Electoral Institute (now Electoral National Institute) received only 134 votes from Mexicans living in Belgium (IFE, 2012).¹ Low levels of participation in the elections of 2012 may be partially explained by citizens' distrust in institutions, bureaucratic barriers as well as misinformation about the voting process from abroad (Lafleur & Calderón, 2011). Despite Mexican migrants living in Brussels having shunned electoral politics and being marginalised from other institutionalised channels of political engagement, we show that they have developed their own informal movements to engage in transnational politics. Moreover, we demonstrate that these forms of unconventional engagement have become more frequent since 2006, when the number of murders related to organised crime in the country skyrocketed.

In the past decade, violence has reached alarming levels, including the loss of more than 100,000 human lives, thousands of disappearances, feminicides, countless human rights violations and political refugees fleeing the country (OEA, 2015). As a result of the rampant violence and insecurity, the Mexican population started to mobilise to denounce the incapacity of its government in guaranteeing the security and human rights of the Mexican population. Some examples of these mobilisations include the protests against the violations of human rights and forced disappearances or the demonstrations organised to denounce the disappearance of 43 students of a rural teacher's school in Ayotzinapa kidnapped by the municipal police (Modonesi, 2017).

These movements were not contained in the national borders and Mexicans living outside of the country started to organise their own antagonistic mobilisations from abroad

¹ It is important to note that extraterritorial voting is low everywhere, even among Mexican migrants living in the United States.

(González Villarreal, 2015). For instance, in 2016, members of the Mexican community living abroad organised political demonstrations to commemorate the two-year anniversary of the forced disappearance of the students of Ayotzinapa (RA, 2016). Mexican migrants engage in transnational political activities for personal and strategic reasons such as moral obligations with their homeland and families, return intentions, and to bring outside pressure on their national government through what Keck and Sikkink (1998) identify as the “boomerang effect”. In other words, when activists find that their governments are unresponsive to domestic demands, they appeal to international institutions, organisations or allies to bring international pressure onto their governments (Smith & Fetner, 2010).

The Mexican community in Brussels has also reacted to the context of violence and insecurity in their homeland by organising deterritorialised political mobilisations in order to denounce the systematic violations of human rights and impunity in Mexico. To better understand how Mexican migrants have become diasporic political subjects that engage in unconventional forms of political transnationalism through art, the following analysis uses the concept of subjectivity, which as explained above, depicts the individual as the core catalyser of social movements. We demonstrate that through art, Mexican migrants have managed to: (1) enhance individual processes of subjectivation, (2) detach themselves from state institutions, (3) focus on creative forms of political mobilisation, (4) create of new spaces for reflexion, political engagement and socialisation.

In sum, this case study aims to contribute to the literature on migration studies and social movements by analysing unconventional and non-institutionalised forms of transnational political participation initiated and sustained by Mexican migrants in Europe, a population largely studied in North America but overlooked in this geographical region. Although the analysis focuses on the micro-level, it is important to recognise that the context of violence in Mexico triggers self-reflexions, feelings of moral obligations and emotions that spark transnational political activism among migrants. In addition, it will be argued that Mexican migrants opt for unconventional forms of participation because they distrust their national institutions and they prefer to create autonomous channels and spaces to diffuse their political messages.

Research design and data collection

To address the above claims, this ethnographic study analyses two sets of original data collected between August 2016 and February 2018. During this period, 23 semi-structured interviews (15 women and 8 men) were conducted with political activists who participated in the organisation of transnational political events. Most of the people that were interviewed (74%) hold a bachelor's degree and moved to Belgium for family reasons. In addition, one of the researchers attended 42 events as participant-observer, including: political demonstrations, music rehearsals, charity concerts, gastronomic festivals, artistic performances, planning meetings, and political debates. During the data collection process, the researcher also followed the group of Mexican migrants in their daily activities, visited their homes and attended personal events when invited to do so. Ethnographic methods enabled the researcher to: (1) have repeated interactions with key political actors and thus, to have access to their everyday practices, memories, motivations and political opinions; (2) focus on the microfoundation of collective action; (3)

map the multiple layers of power involved in the political mobilisation and social interactions; (4) observe the personal interactions among the group of activists; and (5) track the personal impressions, thoughts, concerns and emotions involved in the process of subjectivation of the Mexican activists (Bayard De Volo, 2009; Lara-Guerrero, 2019; Wedeen, 2010).

Respondents were identified through (1) online searches, where activists identified themselves as organisers of political events; (2) contacts made during the public events and (3) referrals made by other activists (Moss, 2016). The ethnographic study was carried out through an interpretive research design (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2012). This allowed the researcher to adopt a bottom-up approach to discover the key political subjects creating and sustaining transnational political activism in the field. Interpretive researchers recognise participants' agency and conceive them as actors constructing their polities, societies, practices, and organizations (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2012:46).

This research design allowed the researcher to participate in different forms in the events organised by the Mexican activists. Interpretive methodology recognises that in the case of participant observation, the researcher needs to decide the degree and form of participation in the events taking place. Consequently, the researcher was able to participate not only as mere observant but also as musician, photographer, co-organiser, and cook in the different events organised by the Mexican activists. In general, these strategies provided opportunities to observe from different angles the unconventional political activities Mexican migrants were engaging in as well as appreciate the power relations and social interactions from the perspective of the research participants. During the data collection process, the researcher reflected upon: (1) the positional differences across research participants, (2) their positionality and identity, and (3) the impact of their physical, cognitive, and emotional presence in the field (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2012). It should also be mentioned that several challenges were encountered when accessing the field and interacting with some members of the Mexican community. These were tackled with honesty, patience, and repetitive interactions, as well as the researcher's continuous self-questioning on their positionality and intersectionality as a Mexican, educated, middle-class, mix-raced, woman from Mexico City.

The individualisation of transnational social movements

One of the main characteristics of current social movements is the individualisation and subjectivation of political actors (Pleyers, 2017). These social processes can be observed in the attitude Mexican migrants display while organising transnational political movements. Indeed, activists describe their individual beliefs, commitment and self-recognition as key elements that determine the nature and duration of their political mobilisation.

The main motivations mentioned by interviewees to initiate and engage in political activities from abroad were their personal emotions, their inner moral obligations (Stekelenburg & Klandermans, 2010) to their homeland, and their sense of responsibility towards their families. The context of violence and insecurity in Mexico not only fuels their concerns and commitment with their homeland and families but affects their will to engage in politics and impacts the form of their political strategies.

For example, Carmen, a graphic designer in her late thirties has organised several cultural events to raise awareness about the critical situation regarding violence and insecurity in Mexico. She moved to Belgium nine years ago and she believes that it is important to share what is happening in her country of origin with her Belgian friends. When asked about what motivated her to organise political events to denounce the context of violence in Mexico, Carmen replied:

How can I explain? I can't resist doing it. It would be to go against my own interests and convictions, not to mobilise myself for the tragedies going on in Mexico. Today, I think it is important. It helps even if it doesn't solve the problems. [...] I think I have an inner conflict with myself to know that Mexico gave me all: my studies, my family... (Semi-structured interview, 08 February 2018).

The need to denounce the injustices in Mexico can be explained by her own values and sense of commitment created by her experience, memories, and ties that she maintains with her homeland. Carmen feels that she owes her family, education and identity to her homeland and these sentiments of commitment and obligation trigger her political activism.

Previous research on the role of emotions in protest and social movements distinguish between affective (e.g. loyalties) and reactive (e.g. responsive to external events) emotions, both of which are expressed by Carmen when explaining her motivations for organizing the events. The moral obligations and emotional ties with their homeland are key elements to understand what stimulates migrants to organise extraterritorial political activities. In addition, the emotions and impressions generated from their experience participating in transnational political events may also persuade them to keep raising political awareness from abroad. By participating in collective activities, migrants revalue their personal contributions as activists in transnational movements. For example, Carolina, a pianist and artist who lives in Brussels since 2002 realised that she could get more involved in transnational politics after participating in several activities organised by other Mexican activists, in particular a demonstration in front of the European Parliament to denounce the rampant violence in Mexico. She had the initiative to organise a meeting in her house to discuss with other migrants how they could organise new political and artistic activities. She explained that she participates in transnational political movements because otherwise she feels “politically helpless”:

I am motivated because I feel that my voice is heard. The political event at the European Parliament was very emotional. We went there to ask for justice. To be heard and to feel that we are in a democracy. For each citizen to say something... To feel that they are listening to me, that I am valuable, that they are asking for my opinion, that I am someone and I have a voice. (Semi-structured interview, 20 October 2017).

Another interview with Antonia, who explains her motivations for organising political events to raise awareness about state-sponsored violence in Mexico, further emphasized the role of personal values and beliefs, such as the moral obligation to take action:

I see all the horrors of the disappearances, the feminicides...The moment you realise that students are disappearing, that women are being murdered, and that kids are

raped, the moment you realise that you are not watching a Hollywood movie but that it is happening in real life, in that moment there is no going back. Either you do something, or you become their accomplice. And you must act wherever you are. Either here or there. You cannot stay with your arms crossed (Semi-structured interview, 27 April 2018).

As we can observe, the context of violence in Mexico plays an important role in triggering and shaping migrants' participation in unconventional activities from abroad. Furthermore, it can be concluded that migrant political engagement is based on the one hand on their convictions, political ideals, and personal values. On the other hand, their experience living abroad and being exposed to other forms of political participation may reinforce their political agency which in turn fuels their political engagement and self-fulfilment purposes. Last, the fact that Mexican migrants choose to protest in front of European political institutions illustrates their will to bring a domestic problem into global politics. This strategy of protest exposes their interest in diffusing their political messages at the European level and expose the lack of governance and accountability in Mexico.

Deinstitutionalisation and informal organisation of the transnational activism

According to Pleyers (2017), the social movements organised from 2010 onwards are characterised by political subjects that are distant from state institutions with a preference for movements with no clear hierarchy. Moreover, political subjects replace formal institutions with interpersonal relations and informal networks to organise concrete projects (Pleyers, 2017:94). In the case of the Mexican activists in Brussels, we could observe a similar pattern in which migrant activists privilege interpersonal relationships to organise and diffuse their political messages. Three main elements may explain the preference to engage informally in transnational politics: (1) the absence of institutionalised channels between the Mexican state and its emigrant population in Belgium, (2) the lack of trust in the Mexican state authorities and institutions partly because of the dire situation of criminality and violence in the country, and (3) the self-consciousness and subjectivity of activists themselves.

One of the interviewees, Natalia, illustrated migrants' distrust towards Mexican state institutions as well as their preference for interpersonal relations rather than resorting to formal channels to convey their political messages. In November 2017, she decided to organise a political event to raise signatures in support of an independent candidate for the 2018 presidential election. She invited her friends and acquaintances to the organisation of the event, which included the screening of three short-documentaries, piñatas, Mexican food, and a small concert of Mexican traditional music. During the whole process, the organisers were receptive to the other's ideas and contributions to the event. The organisation included the exchange of several emails and two short meetings to divide the tasks according to the availability and capacities of each organiser. Natalia used her personal contacts and friends to put the event together in two weeks. She also used social media to invite other friends to the event, which took place on December 2th, 2017. This example highlights the relevance of subjectivity in the analysis on the way current social movements are organised. In this case, all the organisers were free to decide how and when to collaborate for this specific event. The organisation of this event

was very informal, smooth and based on the voluntary and flexible participation of the activists.

With a strong link to artistic performances, Antonia, another interviewee, also exemplifies the reliance on informal networks to organise transnational political events. Antonia is an actress who arrived in Belgium more than 15 years ago. Her political interest started in Mexico when she was a teenager and when she joined a group of young and independent artists. In Belgium, she organises concerts in her house to raise funds to support specific political and development projects in Mexico. Whenever she organises a concert, she invites her closest friends and acquaintances with whom she discusses Mexican politics. She has tried to organise bigger events with other Mexican activists but according to her, it has been quite difficult because “sometimes people do not get along with each other”. Ever since Antonia had an uncomfortable situation when trying to organise an event with a larger group of activists, she prefers to stick to her group of close friends to coordinate private concerts or small political gatherings. Interpersonal relations are a key component in how political activities are organised. In general, Mexican activists contact like-minded people with whom they share similar political values and interests to avoid power struggles or confrontations.

These two examples illustrate the importance of personal affinities and personal networks to organise transnational political events. The political subject is thoughtful on how and with whom they want to organise political activities. Migrants have shown that for the organisation of events, they prefer to rely on people that they already know because of their closeness, compatible way of working and effortless communication. Although often limited to personal networks, mobilization takes on a more sustained and regular character, especially in response to moral shocks in the homeland. Migrants would reach out to others they had met at cultural or political events whenever they sought to take action on a specific issue. For example, they mobilized their network to provide support to victims of the 2017 earthquake, as illustrated by the following post on a Facebook thread:

“Hello colleagues, it is very important to get organized. We need to speak about this to take concrete action. It is very important that you collect evidence from your contacts in Mexico (videos, pictures, testimonies). What is happening is very serious and we must denounce it.”

Engaging in transnational politics through creativity and spontaneity

Another characteristic of the new forms of political engagement is the prevalence of creativity and spontaneity enhanced by political actors through their subjectivity. The subjectification of an individual allows them to develop and express their own creativity to construct their own existence (Rebughini, 2014; Glaisius & Pleyers, 2013). Through creativity and spontaneity, political actors remain open and resilient to adapt the nature of their political activities depending on their available resources, social capital, desires and objectives. Moreover, political actors value creativity as an element of their activism because it enables them to create new repertoires of contention, gain the attention of people in an innovative way, express their emotions freely and reaffirm their identity as unique subjects.

For instance, Julian discards that a real political and social change will occur in Mexico through institutions, political parties or traditional ways of protest. Julian is originally from Veracruz, where he completed his bachelor's degree in anthropology. He moved to Belgium nine years ago and today he works as a technical assistant in local theatre productions. He is concerned by the insecurity and levels of violence in Mexico and he is very disappointed with the political leaders there. However, he believes that there is a possibility to change the situation at the local level. With this bottom-up approach in mind, Julian decided to organise a *Son Jarocho* workshop in Brussels to teach how to play this regional folk musical style from the Huastec coast in Mexico. Every Monday, a group of musicians, most of them of Mexican origin, meet to play and sing *Jarocho* music.

Julian values the music rehearsals because it is a creative way to talk face to face to people and to approach a political problem from a different perspective:

Son Jarocho is political, original and alternative. I think it is important to keep this Mexican tradition alive and to create spaces for music. I use music as a channel to inform the people in Europe about what is happening in Mexico. This is the least that I can do for my country. Music and art are weapons for the future and we can use them for our benefit. Through art, it is possible to raise awareness, more so than with a political banner [...] I think my jarana [type of guitar] is my rifle, I see it that way" (Semi-structured interview, 06 September 2017, Brussels).

Through music, members of the Mexican diaspora have managed to create original ways of contention including the reinterpretation of traditional songs or lyrical drift (Rolston, 2001) and the creation of a small musical workshop, where members have the chance to participate when they have capacity and availability to do so.

Another example depicting the relevance of creativity and spontaneity in politics, are the portraits of the 43 missing students from Ayotzinapa, made by a Mexican artist used in a demonstration in front of the European Parliament. Miguel is almost 50 years old and has been living in Belgium for 23 years. He lives in a small town with his family and regularly commutes to Brussels. He is constantly creating new drawings, paintings and ceramics often inspired by Mexico. He reacted to the specific case of Ayotzinapa because he was concerned by the fact that in Mexico, students are in danger of being kidnapped by state agents. Following this tragic event, he decided to paint the 43 portraits of the missing students and attend a political gathering organised at the European Parliament on the October 30th, 2014.

The first demonstration [in relation to the Ayotzinapa case] was organised at the Place du Luxembourg in front of the European Parliament. The first time, I went without knowing any other Mexican. I arrived there, and I started distributing the portraits of the missing students. It had an impact because they measured 90 cm x 70 cm. That is how I engaged politically. I learn to paint murals in Mexico. [...] I have always liked it and I believe that it has an important political function. For this occasion, I had the opportunity to use a skill that I have. Making simply decorative art would be mediocre. I was very satisfied to see that my participation worked. We appeared on the newspapers in Paris, London, the Netherlands and Mexico. Even my family and friends in Mexico called me to congratulate me and tell me that it worked. It worked because we were received at the European Union [...] I couldn't

stay in my comfort zone, I had to react and do something. That was the minimum that I could do (Semi-structured interview, 02 September 2017, Brussels).

Miguel used painting as a vehicle for his own political mobilisation. He had the need to express his anger to the situation of violence in Mexico and against the Mexican government and he successfully managed to raise awareness and mobilise others through art. At the individual level, he felt satisfied first, because he used a Mexican painting technique which has historically been used to promote social and political messages. Second, he managed to meet and engage politically with other Mexican migrants living in Belgium. Third, his original take on creating large paintings received attention from the international media. Finally, he felt satisfied and proud to have been able contribute to a political cause from abroad. Miguel adapted his knowledge and painting skills to enhance the diffusion of a political event and raise awareness among the Mexican diaspora, European authorities, the international community and people in his homeland.

Previous research on transnational political engagement has often focussed on how diaspora members seek to influence the socio-political institutions of their homeland. However, in a context where migrants associate homeland politics with violence, corruption and bad governance, participation is likely to be channelled through non-institutional forms. Detachment from homeland politics was indeed expressed by several interviewees, for example, Viviana described how her experience of Mexican democracy (counting votes at a polling booth) contributed to her rejection of institutionalised politics:

I have no trust in any sort of politician. I have absolutely no respect for Mexican politics. The 2012 elections were the last time I voted, and I will never vote again in my life (30 March 2018).

Nonetheless, interviewees such as Viviana were very much active in organizing and attending events expressing outrage with moral shocks through artistic performances. Therefore, as will be further emphasized in the next section, the detachment from politics seems to be key in explaining the emergence of more creative and expressive forms of transnational political participation, as well as the apparent disconnect of mobilization from socio-political institutions in the homeland.

Creating spaces of experience through arts and politics

Pleyers (2016, 2017) also argues that today activists aim to create spaces of experience where they experiment with new practices, build social ties and express their subjectivity. In fieldwork, the researcher encountered attempts by Mexican activists to create spaces for political protests where they give priority to autonomy and fraternity. In these spaces, Mexican migrants use artistic performances such as painting, singing and theatre to raise awareness of the political context in Mexico.

One of the most emblematic cases were the ones orchestrated by Miguel on the 20th of August 2016 and again on the 2nd of July 2017 in Brussels. Miguel organised an event via social media and invited his contacts to participate in the creation of a collective mural using street-art techniques. The first event aimed to raise awareness on the case of Ayotzinapa whilst the purpose the following year was to denounce the impunity and violence in Mexico with a focus on the role of president Peña Nieto. In

both events, Miguel emphasised the importance of keeping the memory of the victims alive through painting and to occupy assigned spaces for street art in Brussels to express their inconformity through arts. After living in Europe for more than two decades, Miguel finds that it is important to advocate for the protection of human rights. Both events were attended by at least 50 people including second-generation Mexican children. On both occasions, the space was occupied for ten hours by Mexican activists who engaged in the painting of the murals and who sang and danced at the rhythm of Mexican traditional music. By occupying a public space, activists managed to convey their political messages and create channels of reflexion for both participants and observers of the activities. By creating spaces of political engagement, activists offered the possibility to other people to express their own concerns and engage in political activities at their own rhythm.

Another example that illustrates how these new spaces of protest are created through the arts is the event co-organised by Laura, an undocumented Mexican migrant who has lived in Europe for more than 20 years, along with a local NGO and a group of Colombian activists on the 5th of November 2016 in Brussels. The purpose was to celebrate the Day of the Dead. This event included several artistic activities for kids and for adults. The place was decorated with engravings of two Mexican painters. In the room, there were also two other stands, one selling Latin-American food and the other offering books on Latin-American politics and history.

The most creative and participative part of the event was a theatre play organised by Laura. She wrote the play to commemorate the victims of the insecurity in Mexico and to pay homage to the political activists that have disappeared in the past decade. Laura invited members of the audience to sing and dance with her on stage. This event enhanced political activism through arts because it raised awareness among the attendees about the injustices in Mexico in an original way. Laura managed to re-adapt a traditional celebration in Mexico by including elements of social and political demands aiming to raise consciousness among the public and create social exchanges while sharing Latin-American food. In this space, attendees decided to which extend they engaged the social protest by singing, discussing and reflecting upon the security context in Mexico and in other Latin-American countries characterised by rampant violence and corruption such as Colombia. With support from a cultural centre in Brussels, the Day of the Dead celebration first organized in 2016 was established as a regular event, which although primarily a cultural event, provided a platform for speaking out against corruption and violence in the homeland through artistic expressions.

Miguel and Laura had the initiative to create political spaces to boost the artistic expression and critical thinking of the people that attended both events. Both artistic activities portray the will of political actors to create spaces for reflexion and political engagement. In addition, both examples show that the context of violence in Mexico triggers and shapes the political strategies and messages diffused by migrants. In both cases we can observe that arts were exploited as vehicles to create and send political messages at three different levels: to the artists who organised the activities, to the participants who engaged directly in the painting, singing or dancing and to the observers at the events.

Conclusion

By examining the case of Mexicans living in Belgium and mobilising against insecurity in their home country, this paper has examined unconventional forms of political transnationalism and studied an overlooked case study of diaspora mobilisation in the world. The analysis demonstrates the need to introduce the notion of “subjectivity” in the field of political transnationalism to understand the motivations, forms and duration of transnational movements and shows the importance of reflecting upon the nexus between violence in the home country and transnational political participation. The context of violence in Mexico has triggered and shaped the transnational political activities of Mexican migrants from Brussels in three different ways: (1) by enhancing their emotions of commitment and moral obligations, (2) by inspiring the form of their artistic movements and content of their political representations and (3) by accelerating their process of self-reflection, self-consciousness, and self-empowerment, thus their process of becoming diasporic political subjects.

It has been shown that the context of violence in Mexico is one of the factors pushing these migrants to resort to unconventional forms of transnational political engagement to express their grievances against the state. We illustrate that artistic representations are one way in which Mexican migrants have become diasporic political subjects in reaction to the context of violence in their homelands. Last, we have demonstrated that migrants’ political engagement through the arts enhances their commitment to their homeland and helps to create autonomous spaces of self-reflexion.

This paper also contributes to the study and conceptualisation of unconventional repertoires of contention by highlighting the creative forms of political activism developed by Mexican migrant activists in Brussels. Besides the instrumental and bonding effects that the arts have on political activism, this paper illustrated that they also affect migrants’ subjectivity. Through the arts, migrants may create innovative and original forms and spaces for political engagement and invite people to engage in transnational politics independently, at their own rhythm.

Overall, we believe this paper makes an important contribution to the study of diaspora mobilisation by expanding on the previous studies focusing on political opportunity structures, resource mobilisation theories, and framing approaches. This research focuses on the mechanisms of transnational political engagement, however future research could expand how and to what extent they have an impact on policy making and in the public opinion.

Abbreviations

IME	Institute of Mexicans Abroad
CCIME	Advisory Council of the Institute of Mexicans Abroad
IFE	Federal Electoral Institute

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Author contributions

The author presents a contribution to migration studies, in particular regarding transnational politics and social movements. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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Availability of data and materials

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