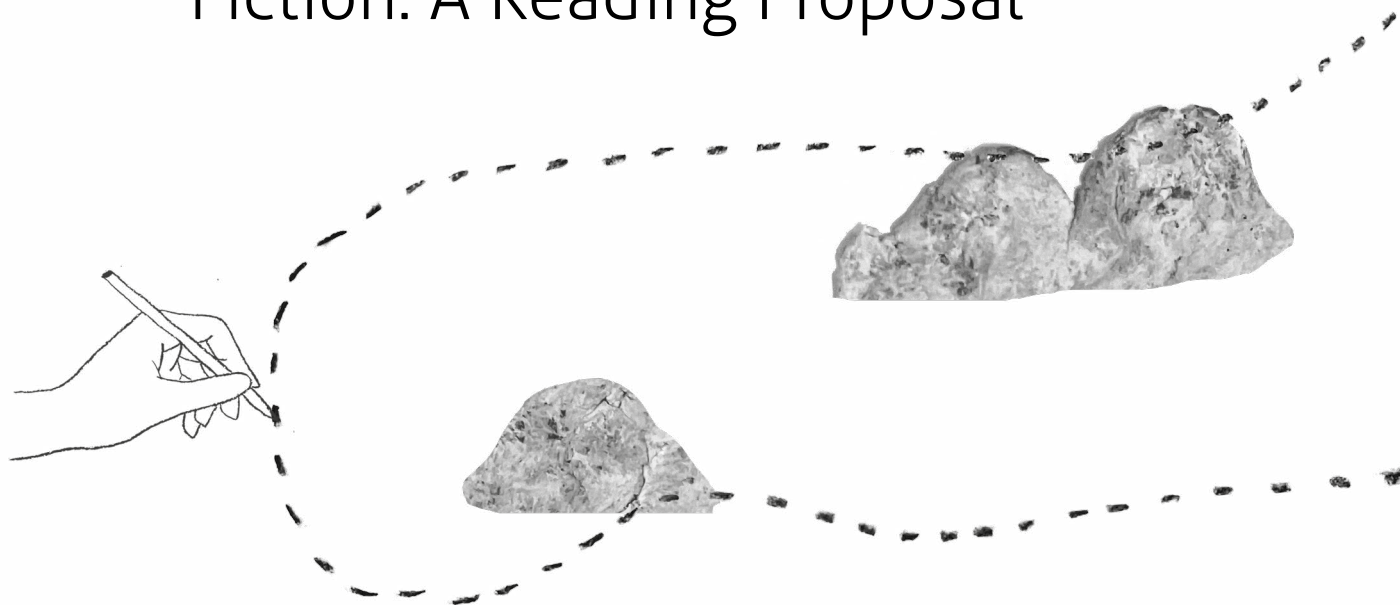


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Illustrations by Xanic Galván**

An Emotional Cartography Of Violence in Mexican-Canadian Fiction: A Reading Proposal



La *violencia más allá de los ríos* (Violence Beyond Rivers, 2023)¹ is a compilation of ten short stories portraying different scales of violence. Written in Spanish by Mexican-Canadian writers, each story is preceded by a brief author biography, allowing readers to appreciate their diversity of styles and professional trajectories. It is important to note that this is not a book of testimonial writing but rather one of fiction written from the perspective of authors who maintain a certain relationship to the Mexican context, as observed from Canada.

The book's prologue alerts us to the urgency of taking a stance in the face of violence through the practice of fiction. In this book, the stories evoke atrocious and everyday events unfolding in its writers' country of origin, Mexico. Despite the distances and rivers setting the two

countries apart, the authors' writing practice allows us to consider the nuances and effects of multiple violences as the writers map their devastations and reverberations, which transcend the bodies, connections, borders, and rivers between Mexico and Canada.

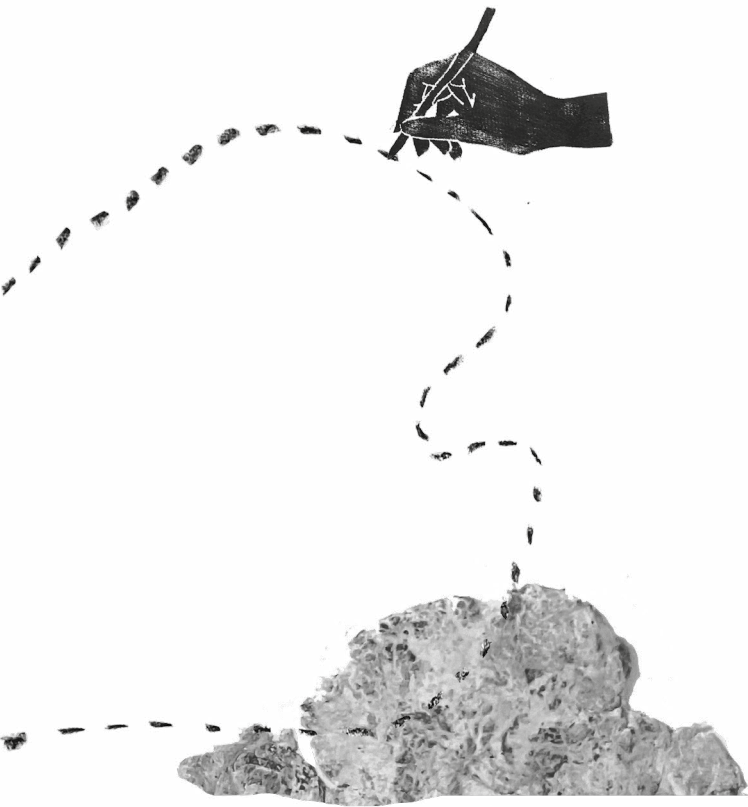
To Read in the Key of Emotion

Emotions are contingent, performative, and political. They are contingent because they correspond to a sociohistorical context. That is, they are situated within a specific social structure, they are not static, essential, or homogeneous. We could consider love, for example—and the romantic love of the sixteenth century is not the same as our contemporary idea of love.²

Emotions are performative in the sense put forward by Judith Butler (performativity) because they are socially constructed through the repetition of certain actions

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and their reiteration through language, making them specific cultural practices. And they are performed, in the sense exposed by Goffman (performance), according to the expectations and social mandates of the context at hand. For instance, we might ask: Which emotions are “authorized” according to gender? The phrase “men don’t cry” or the demand that women perform emotions tied to caring for and understanding others allows us to observe social mandates around how emotions should look according to gender identity.

Emotions are also political, as they transcend the individual and are present in everyday interactions, providing information on the relationships of power between social agents. Likewise, they may also rally people behind a cause or common public reflection. This is the case of grief, with certain social movements articulated around loss configuring political demands that seek the transformation of the political and social system, as rooted in collective emotion.³

From this perspective, emotions are not only psychological states but also judgments and cultural practices that extend in time. For instance, we know what fear is, and we can probably generally agree upon what it feels like, yet what it leads to is a social construct.

The concept of emotional work⁴ has been used to suggest observing how emotions are mediated by a conscious effort to change or manage them, that is, to evoke or to suppress them.

How may we observe emotional work in stories? It’s not only in what the characters say, but what they do in their specific environment. To construct emotions in literary texts, we play with causality, the gaze, and the narrative voice, which, in turn, are also in dialogue with an emotional system outside the text. This allows us to register how emotional and sensorial experience is signified through language. These stories evoke images of everyday life in a specific context, through descriptions motivated by the characters’ courses of action. These processes construct an emotional atmosphere through expressive literary devices.

Emotions shape characters as they adopt a given stance before a situation. For instance, sadness is a judgment built upon whether the object of emotion is favorable or an obstacle to the character’s course of action. This means that, in line with Sara Ahmed, emotions do not statically reside in the text or in the characters, but rather in the effects of their circulation: they move through action, across the judgments built around the object of the emotion, and in the characters’ adaptation to it. In other words, we need not name the emotion to build an emotional atmosphere: sadness may be evoked by describing characters’ actions or body language.

The characters represent current discourses within the emotional system of the context in which they were created, which is why they produce images about how a given emotion should look: these are effects of the senses that carry performative potential. Thus, through the action of their characters,⁵ stories can construct the localization of violence: in bodies, in the social structure, and in emotional ties.

I will focus on six stories that I view as paradigmatic in terms of the three scales from which emotional work may be observed: the micro scale, which corresponds to characters’ biographies, bodily expressions, memories, and perceptions; the meso scale, which encompasses social

circles and ties to third parties; and the macro scale, which involves the laws, expectations, and impositions of the social structure.⁶ In these three scales, we may observe the circulation of emotion throughout the plots, which are intersected by the three features mentioned above: being contingent, performative, and political.

Micro Scale: "Libélulas" and "Las hormigas," or 'The Fireflies' and 'The Ants'

It is no coincidence that both of these stories use insects to explain the implications of violence that the main characters experience at the microlevel. "Labella's," (or The fireflies), by Claudio Palomares, constructs a chronicle about leaving one's country of origin due to its context of violence. The protagonist's emotional trajectory consists in evoking the contradictions of his departure, the hope of what is to come, the revindication of his ancestors, and his rage against that which has pushed him out of the country.

The memories that the protagonist seeks to evoke mainly serve to explain his departure as a consequence of a rift caused by family violence. This is all evoked from a bench in Coyoacán, a neighborhood in southern Mexico City where the narrator-protagonist and his grandmother reflect upon the violence that begun to take root in the late twentieth century: "It's the end of the century, after the blows of past decades, blows that knocked us down and left us so vulnerable, so terrible broken, all of us, but especially the women [...] they had to bear the blows of a country going to shit, economic blows, emotional blows, and blows to the body" (Palomares-Salas, 49).

"Las hormigas" (The ants), intersperses images of everyday grief with images of the indefatigable persistence of ants, which refuse to leave the protagonist's home. Told in the first person, this story navigates between a breakup, persistent ants that won't leave, gentrification, and the violence of organized crime in a seaside town in northern Mexico.

Every home that the main character, Eusebio, resides in, evokes the nostalgia of a town in transformation. The story also showcases Eusebio's ties to Carol, his romantic partner, though they eventually break up. The tale unfolds in interior spaces, from which the exterior and the past are narrated: "Eusebio loved to gaze at the mountain range, green with cacti, their pitaya fruit, and the prickly choyas.

'Gosh, many years went by like that, until someone bought everything up, they fired half of us, and it all went to hell.' In the estuary where marine falcons would fish and other migratory birds would stop as well [...] only luxury bars and yachts flourish now" (Mota, 56).

Little by little, the ants eat away at the begonia that Carol had brought to their beach residence when they started living together, "Eusebio, Carol, and the dogs moved into a second-floor apartment on the town's hill [...] Now, overcome by curiosity, he observes how the ants break apart every leaf to carry its pieces of it on their backs" (Mota, 56).

Through Eusebio's personal journey, this story builds a systematic suppression of grief in an environment of everyday violence, which, in this case, begins when the inhabitants of the beach town have to move to a place with more concrete, more businesses, and more blood: "He goes outside and strolls over to the store [...] He sleepily smiles at Doña Claudia and says hello, requesting the same cigarettes as always [...] When he approaches the store, he stops in shock and sees, right by to the door, a puddle of blood" (Mora, 59).

Meso Scale: "Morí venado" and "Cuenta sin borrón," or 'I Died a Deer' and 'No Clean Slate'

These stories localize violence against bodies given the structural violence against certain identities, which, at the same time, cross cuts and reconfigures ties of affection, solidarity, and grief.

"Morí venado" (I died a deer) begins in the first-person voice of the main character: "I shall begin with my death so as not to be defined by the violence by which I died" (Siqueiros, 33). Chronologically, from present to past, this is a chronicle of the discrimination against and stigmatization of the main character's gender identity, which is not in keeping with the expectations of his family and partner. "I put my all into painting and performance [...] my works were not a refuge, but a shop window from which I lived" (Siqueiros, 37).

The narrative portrays one of the character's critical moments: when the protagonist imitates the dance moves of a cheerleader on TV, his father has an outburst. As of that moment, our protagonist begins to blame himself for the aggressions aimed at him, "Only machines are

binary. This act turned into a structure of psychological confinement that afflicted me throughout my childhood, making it impossible for me to name who I was; and what isn't named, does not exist" (Siqueiros, 35).

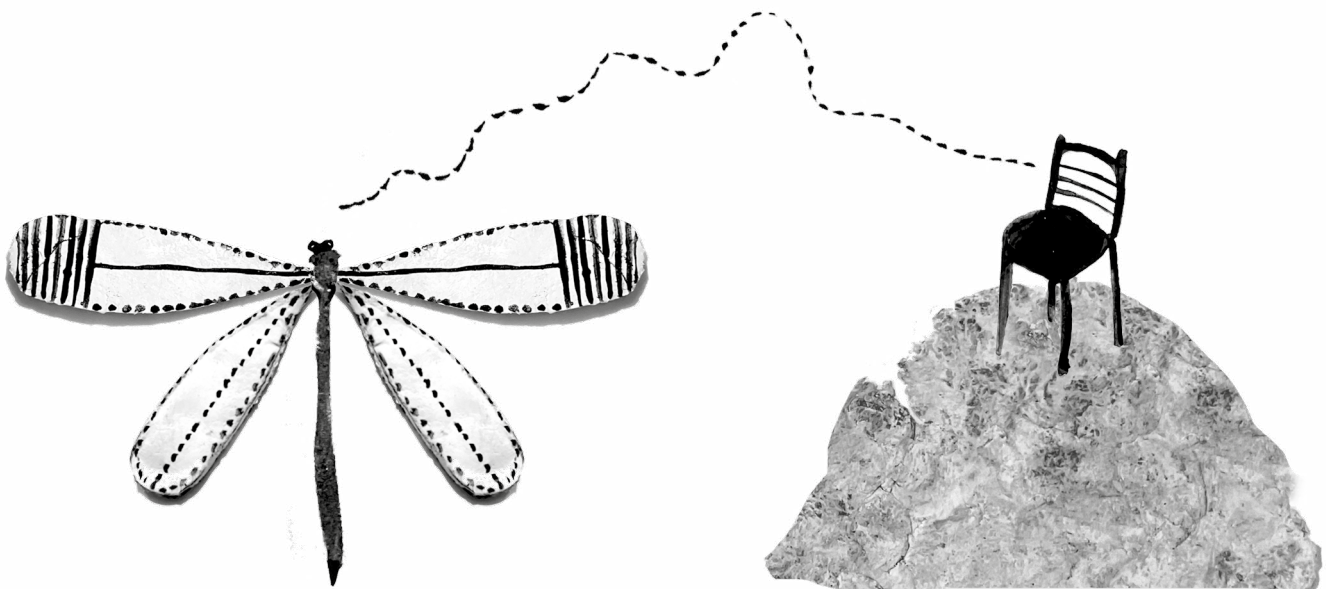
While the social circle that the protagonist occupies, that of art, shields him from certain aggressions, hostilities grow in his relationship with his partner: "I am not sure how I got to a point in which I felt responsible for Darío's actions [...] 'The more macho, the less homosexual' was now his implicit mantra [...] My existence was proof that renouncing the precepts of masculinity prescribed by Mexican society was possible. But our relationship was the elimination of Darío's manhood. And his only option was my destruction" (Siqueiros, 34).

The articulation between structural violence and relationship violence that the protagonist experiences is made clear in the crisis that sexual preference generates in terms of the performativity of gender, that is, around how a man should look in the Mexican context. The protagonist's dissidence lies in performing an "effeminate" masculinity that is an affront to the manhood of his father but also of his partner. His expressions question the emotional work of keeping up a masculinity based on strength and the avoidance of vulnerability: an emotional work that suppresses emotional nuance so that only an evocation of rage exists.

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"Cuenta sin borrón" (or No clean slate) focuses on the obstetric violence that the main character experiences. The way in which this violence unfolds in the story is quite relevant: we read fragments with no apparent continuity, thus appealing to bodily sensations as the protagonist simultaneously narrates her past, going back twenty-four years thanks to the bodily sensations of her present at forty-one. Our protagonist is situated in the present, in a hospital in Canada, where she is about to give birth. Multiple sensations detonate memories of a traumatic past: "And nobody told you two that condoms exist? Seems you're old enough to have sex, but not to keep it safe. Look at your face. I bet you weren't wincing like this when you had him between your legs" (Bátiz, 74).

Further on, the protagonist narrates that her first pregnancy was the product of a rape at school: "They said I deserved it, that I had to understand what a real man was so that I'd stop my hanging around the fag, that they were



doing me the favor of making me less of a butch, straightening me out" (Bátiz, 75). These memories stand in contrast with her present: "'We're getting everything ready for you' [...] How kind for someone to explain what is going to happen to you, what to expect, instead of just leaving you there" (Bátiz, 75).

The emotional work is detonated through the characters' sensations and bodily expressions. The atmosphere is built upon the descriptions of systematic aggressions against the bodies of the protagonist and her best friend, Juan. "My dear friend Juan, who really dreamed of becoming Yvette one day [...], whom everyone called '*mariquita*, fairy, *putito*, *maricón*, cocksucker, *soplanucas*, mother-fuckingfag'" (Bátiz, 74).

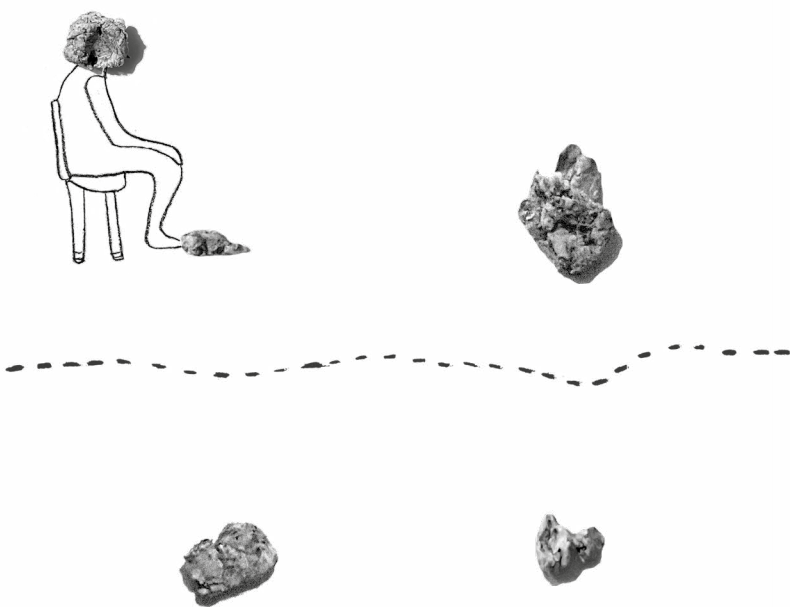
The rape, obstetric violence, and stigmatization in this story reside in a social conviction based on contempt for certain identities, leading to the systematic control of bodies via the emotional management of the guilt and shame that both characters feel. This management is undertaken as much by the State as by social agents.

Macro Scale "Un pez azul" and "Pedazos de cuerpos por todas partes," or 'A Blue Fish' and 'Body Parts Everywhere'

The macro scale allows us to observe simultaneous forms of violence, the fragmentation of the social fabric, and, consequently, the fragmentation of the subject. We may also observe rage become a weapon of hope as emotions acquire a collective and political dimension.

These stories localize the everyday consequences of the disappearances of women. Like an irreversible butterfly effect, when a loved one disappears, there is no path toward restoration, especially in the characters' inner lives. "Un pez azul" (A blue fish) simultaneously intersperses narratives of Teresa and Harriet's quests as mother and grandmother tirelessly search for their daughter and granddaughter, respectively. The first, in Veracruz, Mexico, and the second, in Alberta, Canada.

Teresa's journey is witnessed by her granddaughter, a girl who looks for blue fish as the rain falls, a fantasy that keeps her afloat: "Teresa would have crossed the world over with all the miles she's walked, from office to office, from registry to registry. She's worried about leaving Lucía



alone for so many hours [...] Her granddaughter is all she has left of her disappeared daughter" (Blanco-Sarlay, 83).

Both quests are drawn together by the itineraries of their characters' seemingly aimless comings and goings: "Another useless hearing,' Harriett tells herself. Three hours to get to the capital from the reservation to give a statement on what has already been stated time and time again: that her granddaughter, Faith, sixteen years old, was last seen thirteen years ago, when she asked for a ride on the highway along High Level, Alberta" (Blanco-Sarlay, 83).

Both Teresa and Harriet also share their grief. Teresa grieves with the *Madres Buscadoras* (or 'Searching Mothers,' a group of mothers seeking loved ones who have disappeared due to structural violence in Mexico, either because of kidnapping, trafficking, assassination, or other reasons). Meanwhile, Harriet grieves alongside other indigenous women who have lost their daughters, sisters, mothers, or nieces. In both cases, their only hope is the possibility of making their pain collective, leaning on other mothers and grandmothers who, given the State's omissions, will have to conduct their own searches for their disappeared women. In a mirror image, Harriet sunbathes and watches a frozen lake thaw, agonizing as she sees blue fish swimming in its depths—fish much like those that Teresa's granddaughter would chase after during



door,' my child said, so I went to open the door, and then I saw them: they looked as if mushrooms had cropped up from the earth, but they were body parts, little feet, little hands, right there, at the entryway, between the houses, as if there had been a massacre [...] You can hear them, alright; they're out there" (Mancilla, 71).

Final Thoughts

What does it mean for authors of Mexican origin, situated in Canada, to write fiction in Spanish about the violence of their country of origin?

Writing is a form of inhabiting. By building fictional scenarios that allow violence to permeate their plots, we may understand the structural character of violence while gleaning its nuances. In the stories, we may observe how, while violence is transversal, the way in which it is expressed and perceived across the various plots is quite heterogeneous. Institutional violence is not the same in Mexico as in Canada, and we may trace its nuances through the characters' trajectories, considering how these characters develop in the face of circumstances that put ethics and wellbeing into question.

Violence is neither univocal nor homogenous. Its effects are simultaneous and permeate different scales—they are both the detonators and the backdrops to this collection of plots. **MM**

Notes

- 1 Estivill, Alejandro; Ángel Mota and Antolina Ortiz, eds., *La violencia más allá de los ríos*. Colección de relatos de escritores mexicano-canadienses (México: Bonilla, 2023).
- 2 I would like to thank the Dr. Paulina Sabugal from the Department of Political and Social Sciences at UNAM for her seminar "The political culture of emotions. Love and new ways of relating."
- 3 In her conference "Grievable Lives" (Mexico 2015), Judith Butler developed the political potential of grief and the effects of collectivizing this feeling: <https://vimeo.com/157081525>.
- 4 Hochschild, A. R., (1979), "Emotion Work, Feeling Rules, and Social Structure," in *American Journal of Sociology*, 85(3), 551-575.
- 5 Corpus: Bátiz, Martha, "Cuenta nueva sin borrón"; Blanco-Sarlay, Dafne, "Un pez azul"; Siqueiros, Damián, "Morí venado"; Palomares-Salas, Claudio, "Libélulas"; Mota B. Ángel, "Las hormigas"; Mancilla, Alma, "Pedazos de cuerpos en todas partes".
- 6 I am working with the three levels that researcher Olga Sabido outlines in her research. See Sabido, O. (2021), "El giro sensorial y sus múltiples registros," in *Etnografías desde el reflejo: práctica-aprendizaje*. Mexico, UNAM, 243-276

the downpours many miles south—while her granddaughter cries inconsolably at a local government office.

"Pedazos de cuerpos en todas partes" (or Body parts everywhere) addresses disappeared people from the perspective of the social horror of living on the mass grave that Mexico has become. In this story, the body parts of thousands of disappeared persons acquire lives of their own, creeping out of the open sewage—the kind of sewage in any town in Mexico—to torment the inhabitants of a neighborhood who live on the edge in every sense.

The neighborhood is surrounded by a landscape of concrete and dust, with weeds and unpaved paths. The stench of sewage cuts across the entire story: "It's because of the open sewage. Because of all of the dirty water running through it, everything the water drags along. You can smell it when you're on your way, on the bus: even from far away you know you're heading to the neighborhood of La Puerta. *La Puerta*, or the Pig, some call it" (Mancilla, 65).

It's a half-built place: "We're people who don't matter. Only people like me live in this neighborhood" (Mancilla, 64), factory workers with a mortgage they're still paying off. In this story, people disappear one by one, and their remains appear, faceless and nameless, little by little. These bodies cannot be mourned. They represent the horror of infinite grief, with bodies never found, so many of them all around us: "Mama, there's something at the