



Volume 4

Article 35

2023

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Recommended Citation

Quesen, Mina (2023). "What Decays and What Stays: Understanding Gothic Violence and Colonialism in Silvia Moreno-Garcia's *Mexican Gothic*." *The Macksey Journal*: Volume 4, Article 35.

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What Decays and What Stays: Understanding Gothic Violence and Colonialism in Silvia Moreno-Garcia's *Mexican Gothic*

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Abstract

To what extent can a colonized genre be reclaimed? The 2020 novel *Mexican Gothic* follows Noemí as she navigates the decomposing home of the Doyles, a displaced English family in a Mexican mining town, and attempts to uncover the root of her cousin's recent bout of "madness." This paper takes into consideration the literary history of the Gothic, the studies on mad women, and the critical race theories that surround the colonial period. In reading Moreno-Garcia's text through the decomposers present in *Mexican Gothic*, I argue that although the text highlights a history of violence that remained on the perimeters of Gothic discourse, *Mexican Gothic* still suffers from the limitations of the genre.

Keywords: gender studies, Gothic, Mestizaje, Mexican Gothic

Discovering Decay: Introduction

“When Hiroshima was destroyed by an atomic bomb in 1945, it is said, the first living thing to emerge from the blasted landscape was a matsutake mushroom.”¹ In the ruins of nuclear attack, the mushroom still makes its way to begin the story of the regrowth. In her book, *The Mushroom at the End of the World*, anthropologist Anna Tsing recounts this Japanese legend she heard from Chinese matsutake traders. Although she is unable to track down proof of this legend, its existence even as an oral story nods to the larger understanding that mushrooms withstand and thrive where other lifeforms typically cannot — a continuation of a story thought to be ended. “If we end the story with decay, we abandon all hope — or turn our attention to other sites of promise and ruin, promise and ruin,”² Tsing writes. For Tsing, this is exemplified through the way industrialization moves through nations, depleting a region of both natural resources and jobs before searching for new opportunities to continue this cycle of ruin.

Yet this cyclical nature is not just rooted in industrialization, but also in the Gothic literary genre’s colonial gaze. We begin with a promise of a new story and a new reflection of the world, only to end in the ruin of an othered body and the perseverance of the imperial gaze that disgraces them. Lovecraft’s “outsider” enters “proper” society and realizes that they are in fact a monster, running off to the edges of Africa to live out their life. Frankenstein dies and his monster, othered and exiled, disappears after announcing his intention to commit suicide. Bertha Mason sets herself ablaze, and, dear reader, Jane Eyre marries Rochester. The Gothic stretches across a variety of narratives that encapsulate some aspect of decay and fear, and yet the ones who are consistently killed and forgotten are those who carry racialized, colonized, and monstracized readings in their bodies. These ruined bodies are never buried in the genre which continues to find new sites of promise, left to decay in plain sight. It is in this decay that Silvia Moreno-Garcia’s *Mexican Gothic* sprouts.

Mexican Gothic follows the Mexican socialite Noemí as she investigates the strange letter her recently married cousin Catalina sent. The letter accuses her husband of poisoning her and paints the picture of a haunted house that refuses to let her go. Noemí sets off to High Place, the gothic and decaying home of the Doyles and Catalina’s supposed prison. The Doyles’ strict household obscures a history of colonial mining, suspicious deaths, and an abused but powerful mushroom growing in the walls. Meanwhile, Noemí herself begins experiencing the madness Catalina wrote of in her letters. A golden woman haunts her dreams and various members of the Doyle household force her into submission in her nightmares. It is through Noemí’s hunt for the truth that layers of the Gothic genre peel back, revealing a decayed framework that continues to be re-used in modern revivals of the genre. In reading Moreno-Garcia’s text through the decomposers present in *Mexican Gothic*, I argue that although the text highlights a history of violence that remained on the perimeters of Gothic discourse, *Mexican Gothic* still suffers from the limitations of the genre.

Building a Colonial Gothic Foundation: Literary Review

¹ Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World*, 2021, 3.

² *Ibid*, 18.

Moreno-Garcia is fully aware of the Gothic's literary history and acknowledges it throughout *Mexican Gothic* by nodding to Catalina's favored Gothic and fairy-tale-esque stories. Furthermore, in an essay published on Crime Reads, Moreno-Garcia presents her own definition of the Gothic and highlights several of the tropes she interacts with. Particularly, she outlines the plotline of what she calls the "Female Gothic":

Most of these mid-century gothics tended to adhere to a simple formula that contained a young woman, a big house, and a dangerous yet exciting man.... The women encountered some mystery that needed solving and eventually found love with the dangerous-exciting man, who turned out to be misunderstood (rarely was he criminal).³

This plot summary has attracted the attention of feminist scholars since the publication of Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's book *The Madwoman in the Attic*, which brought together feminist and Gothic criticisms to highlight the role of femininity in horror stories and the ways in which women can explore the monstrous behavior shunned by social expectations.

Monstracizing women as a literary trope reflects the larger purpose of the Gothic. In his essay "In Gothic Darkly: Heterotopia, History, Culture," Fred Botting argues Gothic fiction was a dark representation of the "past" created to make the values of the "present" seem brighter.⁴ The "present" is the 18th-century European Enlightenment, which prided itself in its "modern" approach to life and reshaping of cultural values. Thus, the "past" is a medieval, feudal, and — for England — Catholic period that the then cosmopolitan society viewed to be barbaric, magic-ridden, and dark. As England used realism to promote Enlightenment values, the Eurocentric Gothic instead called upon a cultural fascination with dark horror to address the modern wave of neoclassicism. As Botting writes, this connection between both Gothic culture and literature marked the Gothic genre as "a trope of the history of the present itself, a screen for the consumption and projection of the present onto a past at once distant and close by." Even in contemporary writing, this projection becomes instrumental in shaping how I will read *Mexican Gothic*. As the Gothic genre itself acted as a mirror for a constructed past, *Mexican Gothic* also acts as a mirror for not only the genre but the multi-national colonial history in Mexico which has primarily been told through a colonizer imagination. Additionally, because Gilbert and Gubar focus on texts that Moreno-Garcia labels as the Female Gothic, I will extend their research by looking at how *Mexican Gothic* complicates this genre by adding — and emphasizing — supernatural elements that are deeply rooted in indigenous Mexican culture and that are appropriated by Spanish and English colonialism.

Furthermore, Botting's analysis of Eurocentric Gothic still applies to the reflection of contemporary Mexico and Moreno-Garcia's 1960s fictional Mexico. As a space of past and present, the Gothic provides the perfect place for authors to reckon with the violence upon non-white bodies and exclusion from Gothic literature. The rise of the Global Gothic offers opportunities to reclaim a genre that was previously exclusive to a white dominant lens and questions the glorification of wealthy, white men colonizing the bodies of racialized women. I narrow in on the importance of moving from a Global Gothic to the Latina Gothic present in

³ Silvia Moreno-Garcia, *Mexican Gothic*, 1st edition (New York: Del Rey, 2020), 318.

⁴ Botting, Fred, "In Gothic Darkly: Heterotopia, History, Culture" in "A New Companion to the Gothic," accessed February 24, 2022, <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/epub/10.1002/9781444354959>.

Mexican Gothic, specifically through the racial reproductive violence exacted in colonial Mexican history as well as in the novel. For example, Bertha Mason's status as a Creole (someone of European descent born in Latin America) from the Caribbean placed her in limbo between white and non-white to British audiences as her time in the Caribbean marked her as tropical and other. Mason's madness is carried in the body of Catalina (Noemí's cousin and the catalyst to the events in the novel) but is furthered to an explicitly non-white body through Noemí who, as a mixed-race heroine of Mazatec descent, would never have been present in Eurocentric Gothic literature as a protagonist.

Just as she reckons with the Gothic genre's history, Moreno-Garcia also builds upon a very real colonial history in Mexico. In "A Letter From the Author," Moreno-Garcia reveals her inspirations for the novel, primarily the abandoned mining towns left behind after the silver mining boom. One such town was Real del Monte, nicknamed "Little Cornwall" because of its founding in British, not Spanish, mining companies.⁵ Moreno-Garcia's *El Triunfo* is a fictionalized Real del Monte, established by the fictional British Doyle family during the silver boom and topped off with a mansion on a hill built beside an English cemetery. *El Triunfo* translates to the Triumph, which displays an ambition that failed to come true: the fictional town is run-down. The juxtaposition of hope and reality reflects how scholars like Robert W. Randall perceived the Real del Monte mining company's success in Mexico, despite the company losing five million dollars and failing to pay back loans before being run out of business.⁶ Moreno-Garcia highlights how despite the mining project's representation of the lasting effects of colonialism and failures, the town upholds the legacy with pride and neglects the violence that came with it.

1. Colonization in Decay: The Haunted House

The architectural setting of *Mexican Gothic* establishes the novel's binary between Euro-centric tradition and Latina modernism. The Doyles' house follows the traditional architecture of the Euro-centric Gothic architectural movements; however, Noemí's usual environment in Mexico City represents a more modern approach to architecture and recenters modernity in a Latina setting. Moreno-Garcia begins her description of High Place with the expected architecture:

The house seemed to leap out of the mist to greet them with eager arms. It was so odd! It looked absolutely Victorian in construction, with its broken shingles, elaborate ornamentation, and dirty bay windows.⁷

The house immediately becomes something "odd" and out of place in Noemí's world. Although "Victorian" can encapsulate several revival movements that happened during the Victorian Era in England, the building design is likely referring to the Victorian Gothic architecture — also known as Gothic Revival — movement. As England revived the medieval Gothic style and used

⁵ Moreno-Garcia, *Mexican Gothic*, 308.

⁶ Robert W. Randall, "British Company and Mexican Community: The English at Real Del Monte, 1824-1849," *The Business History Review* 59, no. 4 (1985): 622-44, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3114597>.

⁷ Moreno-Garcia, *Mexican Gothic*, 20.

it as a cultural aesthetic, the Doyles revived the Victorian Gothic in Mexico through High Place as a method of claiming a lineage of power.

The Doyles' revival of the Gothic not only introduces a colonial power, but also introduces the wrong colonial power. England was the center of colonial power and — for the Doyles — remains a symbol of strength. In imitating the Victorian-era Gothic, the Doyles recognize that the peak of British colonial power was during the Victorian era, and it is that lineage of power that they too claim and attempt to revive in Mexico. Yet, Mexico's primary colonial influence came from Spain, not England. Per Real de Monte's example noted in the historical context, British colonialism wasn't achieved on a massive scale in Mexico and is largely underrepresented. This leaves the Doyles upholding a legacy in a location where Britain never had a solid foundation in the first place.

Noemí furthers the juxtaposition of High Place and Mexico City by unveiling the deep roots of Spanish colonialism in her ordinary environment. One line after her first impression of High Place, Noemí notes that her normal architectural setting includes: “her family's modern house, the apartments of her friends, or the colonial houses with facades of red tezontle.”⁸ In using the word “modern,” we see a development of Mexico after the Spanish crown has left the country, yet its traces are deeply rooted in the background of her everyday life. Specifically, the “colonial houses with... red tezontle” not only reference the colonialism of the Spanish, but the use of tezontle also acknowledges and indexes the destruction of indigenous Aztec society. Tezontle is a native stone to Mexico that was used in Aztec architecture. Once the city was destroyed in 1521, the conquistadores immediately began to rebuild atop the remaining infrastructure to establish Mexico City, the city born after the “death” of Tenochtitlan.⁹ The Spanish repurposed the rubble into their own cities, leading to the colonial houses¹⁰ that Noemí grew up in and around. Noemí casually mentions Spanish colonialism as an everyday reality and the foundation of her modern lifestyle. Where Spanish colonial history has been normalized, English colonialism is a stark invasion that is now out of place.

Even when a civilization is destroyed to build another, the stone used in construction still carries the memory of both the city lost and the world before the city. Barbara Mundy in her book *The Death of Aztec Tenochtitlan, the Life of Mexico City* argues that Tenochtitlan should not be viewed as a city that died. Although she focuses on the cultural importance of lived space and evidence in the indigenous art and foils that carry on the indigenous presence into modern-day Mexico, she also points out the underlying Tenochtitlan infrastructure in modern-day Mexico City, including transportation networks, aquatic “plumbing,” and building foundations.¹¹ The infrastructure and the use of the aforementioned tezontle stone carry a memory in itself that suggests Tenochtitlan did not die. The stone exists with or without human influence, but now it is through the Spanish builder's vision that its existence has been reframed. *Mexican Gothic* carries these layers of civilization and thus acts to reframe how the

⁸ Moreno-Garcia, *Mexican Gothic*, 20.

⁹ Barbara E. Mundy, *The Death of Aztec Tenochtitlan, the Life of Mexico City* (Austin, UNITED STATES: University of Texas Press, 2015), 1, <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/princeton/detail.action?docID=3443767>.

¹⁰ “Colonial” houses in this context refers to the Spanish Colonial Architectural style.

¹¹ Mundy, *The Death of Aztec Tenochtitlan, the Life of Mexico City*, 9.

readers read the Gothic genre. Reading *Mexican Gothic* through its architectural setting then initially establishes the cycle of colonization and the possibility to view an unearthed history that the cycle attempts to erase, finally returning us to the Gothic home which represents English colonization, as well as the genre that perpetuated its violence.

Both the physical and theoretical foundation of the Gothic haunted house lies in the structure of High Place, but Noemí's reaction to the estate creates less a sense of horror and more a sense that the home has been abandoned. What makes the place look "Victorian" to Noemí is not the original construction of the house but rather the details. In Noemí's description, wedged between "broken shingles" and "dirty bay windows" is "elaborate ornamentation." "Victorian" would typically be defined by the ornamentation, but by placing it in the midst of ruin, the ornamentation is seen as not as important as the first and last detail. Instead, the evidence of neglect associates "Victorian" with ruin. Yet Noemí does not display any fear of the house. Instead, she directly criticizes how it fails to live up to the traditional haunted home:

It might have been foreboding, evoking images of ghosts and haunted places, if it had not seemed so tired...

*It's like the abandoned shell of a snail, she told herself, and the thought of snails brought her back to her childhood, playing in the courtyard of their house, moving aside the potted plants and seeing the roly-polies scuttle about as they tried to hide again.*¹²

The excerpt moves from what High Place should be — "foreboding" and "haunted" — into a childhood memory that undermines any horror that may have come from the architecture. Moreno-Garcia contrasts High Place as both not homely — because an abandoned home is no home at all — and also a place where Noemí can reminisce about childhood. In decay, Noemí thinks of life. Her reaction disrupts what we expect to find uncanny about the haunted house and places Noemí in opposition to the Doyles. This opposition is furthered by High Place's representation as a snail and Noemí's opening embodiment of "Spring."¹³

As a snail, High Place bears three defining characteristics: vulnerability, a shell home, and decay. Homes, especially haunted homes, represent the inhabitants within and their relationships with each other. The Doyles are displaced colonial figures who, in the process of subjugating the land and people, lost their wealth and status during the Mexican Revolution. Despite this, they cling to their legacy. The slowness of a snail reflects their inability to move forward and adherence to familial tradition. The snail shell is a permanent piece of the snail's anatomy. Unlike a hermit crab that migrates from shell to shell, the snail's shell grows with the animal. High Place is not even the snail as an animal, but rather just its "abandoned shell." An abandoned shell is the husk of a dead snail. Whether killed by a predator or dead by other natural causes, the snail's traits (read: High Place's traits) were not enough to allow for the snail's survival. This brings me to the final trait of the snail: the ability to decompose. Snails are decomposers, but an abandoned shell no longer houses a decomposer. The house itself is in a state of decay and remains a reminder of a failed colonizing process, one that lacks the

¹² Moreno-Garcia, 20–21.

¹³ Moreno-Garcia, 14.

grandeur of Gothic Horror. But, if the shell of a decomposer is in a state of decay, who caused *that* decay?

The answer lies in the root connection between the Doyle patriarch and the fantastical mushroom. The patriarch, Howard, first came to Mexico to find a tribe rumored to have a cure not only for a fatal disease in his youth but for eternal life. The name of the mushroom is lost to history — a consequence of Howard's lack of interest in the indigenous language — but after violently stealing the fungus, he planted it in the cemetery of High Place, rooting his ambition for eternal life in a place of death.¹⁴ This mushroom too, like stone, preserves the memory of indigenous history and has grown beyond the confines of colonial power. Furthermore, Howard's objectification and abuse of the mushrooms directly reflect his treatment of the indigenous tribe, and this mirror of indigenous violence will be expanded upon in the following section.

Howard bastardized the power of the fungus by tying it to his bloodline and connecting his family through what Francis calls the gloom — a mental space where the Doyles and all those in contact with the gloom are connected by a shared memory. Howard utilizes the gloom to possess the body of his descendants and escape death entirely, allowing him to exact eternal control over the Doyles and manipulate their thoughts and actions. He manipulates the power of the mushroom so that it decomposes the minds and freedom of those in its reach.

In this decaying framework, however, Noemí willingly enters as a symbol of life, which turns this site of expected Gothic uncanny (a haunted house that should be in formidable ruin) into an un-homely uncanny where the expected site of the uncanny is no longer what's being unveiled. Instead, what should have been hidden is Noemí's brazen heroine status, now coming to light. Upon arriving to start her investigation, she immediately infantilizes the house by associating it with a childhood image of life. From the first chapter, Noemí shows she does not belong in the decaying High Place. At the opening costume party, she attends as "Spring," and she is acutely aware of the changing scenery on the train as the landscape moves from lush green to dark, ravine-cut land.¹⁵ Moreno-Garcia sets up a Persephone's-descent-to-hell narrative, but Noemí's agency in the descent allows her to enter as an opponent and not a victim. However, her vitality and fertility become desirable characteristics that subject her to the sexualizing, domination, and silencing executed by the "strange men" in High Place.

2. A Loud Lover: Silence, Violence, and Illusions of Desire

Despite the "strange-man" being the primary Gothic love interest, Moreno-Garcia challenges the romanticization of this archetype by exposing the violence these characters exact not only on their female counterparts but also on the marginalized characters around them. These strange men throughout the genre are almost always white, affluent men, a category of character that is never seen as the "other." Because this character type is not othered, their female counterparts will interpret their violence as desire, creating a vampiric relationship between the victim and abuser. The trope is exemplified by three men in *Mexican Gothic*: Howard the patriarch, Howard's son Virgil, and Howard's nephew Francis. Howard and Virgil

¹⁴ Moreno-Garcia, 206–7.

¹⁵ Moreno-Garcia, 15–16.

most clearly represent this archetype as they execute sexual, physical, and mental violence against the women in High Place. By the end of *Mexican Gothic*, these men are clearly labeled as the villains in the narrative who seek Noemí as an object in their larger plans. Their “romantic” interest in Noemí is transactional: she has both the reproductive and financial capabilities that the family needs.

Howard demonstrates his position of power by controlling speech in the house and demeaning Noemí’s racial background. He overtakes the house rule of silence at dinner and instead engages in a conversation specifically with Noemí. Howard’s control of voice includes a racial power dynamic as he attempts to “other” Noemí through a conversation about eugenics and asserting his dominance; however, this conversation also serves as an opportunity for Noemí to “other” Howard as an invasive threat. Howard highlights Noemí’s dark skin as a catalyst for his eugenics discourse. He learns of Noemí’s Mazatec ancestors on her mother’s side and refers to “superior” and “inferior” races intermingling to create a “bronze race,” otherwise known as Vasconcelos’s Cosmic Race. Howard implies that the “superior race” is the white lineage he is from, while Noemí comes from the “inferior race.”¹⁶ As the only brown person at the dinner table, Howard isolates her and challenges her to defend her own race against a claim of inferiority. He creates a hierarchy that places Noemí alone at the bottom, since not even Catalina is indigenous. Initially, the conversation is successful in establishing power over Noemí as she reaches a point of “not wish[ing] to share more than a single word.”¹⁷ She nearly silences herself, but when faced with being othered at the table, she responds, “I once read in a paper by Gamio in which he said that natural selection has allowed the indigenous people of this continent to survive, and Europeans would benefit from intermingling with them [...] It turns the whole superior and inferior idea around, doesn’t it?”¹⁸ Noemí doesn’t make a claim of her race being equal to the Doyles’. Instead, she draws a clear distinction that she and the indigenous population are in fact different from the Europeans. Not only are they different, but the indigenous people have also been given the natural ability over generations to survive on the continent that the foreign Europeans have not. Through retaining her power to speak at the table, Noemí asserts a claim that the Doyles stand against: the indigenous people belong in Mexico, the Europeans do not.

The discourse, however, doesn’t end with Noemí’s remark, and Howard pushes the conversation forward with sexual and vampiric undertones. Howard ensures he has the last word in the conversation by giving Noemí a “compliment” about her reproductive prospects:

“Mr. Vasconcelos makes it very clear that the unattractive will not procreate. Beauty attracts beauty and begets beauty. It is a means of selection. You see, I am offering you a compliment.”

“That is a very strange compliment,” she managed to say, swallowing her disgust.

¹⁶ Moreno-Garcia, 30.

¹⁷ Moreno-Garcia, 31.

¹⁸ Moreno-Garcia, 30.

“You should take it, Miss Taboada. I don’t hand them out lightly. Now, I am tired. I will retire but do not doubt this has been an invigorating conversation.”¹⁹

Howard shifts the conversation from talking more broadly about racial “intermingling” and instead makes it a direct comment about Noemí’s own position in the system. Although he calls Noemí a “beauty,” this trait becomes the means to “procreate” and thus “beget beauty.” She becomes an object to breed more beauty, and it is thus her womb that Howard “compliment[s].” Howard becomes a predator looming over Noemí, waiting to infect her like a vampire. This reproductive motive is important to keep in mind as we continue to pick apart the strange-man, especially since insemination is only one form of potential infection in the book.

The theory Howard refers to is Jose Vasconcelos’s theory of Mestizaje which promotes a new Mexican race born from the mixing of white, indigenous, and Black communities. Intended to bring further equality,²⁰ the use of the language of eugenics implying Black and indigenous communities carry undesirable traits shows the inherent hierarchy of racial power.²¹ Vasconcelos’s theory becomes a key influence on Howard’s perception of Noemí, who he needs to force into submission before he can move forward. This submission then nods to the most relevant concern with promoting Mestizaje is the fact that Vasconcelos (and scholars who drew from his work such as Gloria Anzaldúa) remained mostly silent about the violence that led to racial mixing in the first place. As critical race theorist Juliet Hooker writes:

Vasconcelos’s silence about gender and sexuality is partially explained by the imperatives of a theory that wished to situate Latin American Mestizaje as indicative of racial egalitarianism. This required erasing both the sexual violence of the colonial era, as well as glossing over the continuation of colonial racial hierarchies into post-independence Latin American societies.²²

Moreno-Garcia’s interest lies in exposing the erased narratives in Mexico, which leaves the sexual violence of racial mixing an open target. Howard’s fascination with Mestizaje is largely concerned with an interest in preserving his bloodline. After incestuous relationships have proven to make the Doyles physically weak (Francis’s key physical description is his frailty and sickliness), Mestizaje provides a potential solution for Howard to strengthen his future. This very interest seeks to maintain immortality at any cost, ultimately causing Howard to pursue the very means of sexual violence that Vasconcelos remains silent about.

At first, the dinner conversation serves to be a disquieting introduction to the patriarchy, but in the larger context of the novel, it becomes the first step in the Doyles’ attempts to “infect” Noemí. By infection, I refer to two different theoretical corruptions. The first is an act of whitening through insemination. Already, Howard’s conversation about Mestizaje has highlighted the superior and inferior dichotomy in which his family’s white background would make Noemí’s children more desirable. This form of infection seeks to erase the negative

¹⁹ Moreno-Garcia, 31.

²⁰ Ben Vinson III, *Before Mestizaje: The Frontiers of Race and Caste in Colonial Mexico* (Cambridge University Press, 2017), 31.

²¹ Juliet Hooker, *Theorizing Race in the Americas: Douglass, Sarmiento, Du Bois, and Vasconcelos*, Reprint edition (Oxford University Press, 2019), 164.

²² Hooker, 174.

qualities of her indigeneity while preserving the native genetics that may allow the Doyle bloodline to survive. The second infection is through the fantastical gloom, a mind-space created by the spores of a magic mushroom. Although much of this infection happens simply through breathing the air of High Place, the final piece that inducts Noemí is a forced kiss from Howard while the rest of the family hold her down: “And then [Howard] pressed his lips against hers. Noemí felt his tongue in her mouth and then saliva burning down her throat as he pressed himself against her and Virgil propped her in place.”²³ This infection, too, is an act of sexual violence as Doyle’s gloom-infected saliva transferred to Noemí. Both insemination and the gloom are rooted in sexual violence and seek to assimilate Noemí as a reproductive tool for the colonial family.

By reading colonization as an act of war and understanding that rape is a tactic of war, the inclusion of sexual violence in *Mexican Gothic* reveals how sexual assault is used to exert power and control beyond just a sexual context. In the essay “Rape as a Tactic of War: Social and Psychological Perspectives,” Milillo argues that sexual violence did not just create stigmas for women but was also an act of reproductive violence:

Often, the motive for halting women’s family security is part of the larger goal of “ethnic cleansing.” Ethnic cleansing plays on the reproductive roles of women as the carriers of culture. By harming or shaming women out of marriage and motherhood, a conquering group may believe that they are working toward the eventual elimination of that social group while impregnating them with more “desirable” genetic material (Renzetti & Curran, 1999).²⁴

This whitening is a vital point in understanding Mestizaje across Latin America. Colonialism is a war against the native inhabitants of the land, and the racial mixture that Vasconcelos writes of originates in an ethnic cleansing mentality. The fear of the vampire lies not just in its ability to drain the body of the blood, but to reproduce through such violation or the exchange of bodily fluids (blood). “Impregnating” thus becomes analogous to “infecting” as the “conquering group” penetrates the bodies of the native population.

For most of the novel, violence rarely occurs in the physical spaces of High Place; instead, this grappling for power primarily occurs in the mushroom’s gloom, as the mushroom’s spores are breathed in by the characters. Because the gloom unites the minds of all those affected, Howard and Virgil can use the gloom to invade Noemí’s dreams to subjugate her. In one such dream, Virgil appears while Noemí is in the bath. He tells her to “be a good girl” as he kisses and gropes her. Noemí is trapped in a frightening silence: “She was able to open her mouth a little, but not to speak. She wanted to tell him to get out and couldn’t, and it made her tremble with fright.”²⁵ As the scene continues, her resistance fades into an eerie desire: “She raised her hands to touch his face, to draw him toward her. He wasn’t an intruder. He wasn’t an enemy.”²⁶ Because the dreamscape shifts our understanding of reality, it’s important to pay

²³ Moreno-Garcia, *Mexican Gothic*, 204.

²⁴ Diana Milillo, “Rape as a Tactic of War: Social and Psychological Perspectives,” *Affilia* 21, no. 2 (May 1, 2006): 196–205, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0886109905285822>.

²⁵ Moreno-Garcia, *Mexican Gothic*, 182.

²⁶ Moreno-Garcia, 183.

attention to how suddenly Noemí's thoughts evolve. Noemí's fear is marked by what she is able to do and what she wants to do, but her desire is marked by what Virgil isn't. The use of a repeated "wasn't" suggests that she — or the gloom — is attempting to convince herself that this is in fact what she wants, reshaping what she sees. In particular, the word "intruder" sticks out. Even as a guest in Virgil's home, she must convince herself that Virgil is not an "intruder," as if it is not just this space (this bathtub, this house) he does not belong in, but rather a larger geographic displacement.

Noemí's sudden desire is reminiscent of the mysterious allure Moreno-Garcia refers to in her analysis of the strange-man. Noemí knows very little about Virgil other than his marriage to Catalina. In marrying Catalina (a Creole-coded character) for her wealth, Virgil steps into a Rochester role, especially when he leaves her to her "madness" in her room. This would-be strange-man, similar to his literary predecessors in the genre, does not produce a genuine desire, but a manufactured feeling he manipulates through the gloom; he masks fear and resistance as desire and ultimately sexually assaults Noemí. The sense of uncanny then draws from the fact that what is unspoken about the Gothic is the illusion of desire and that the appeal of the strange-man manages to excuse violent behavior. When this is put into conversation with Mestizaje, the sense of horror comes from a colonial white power seeing validity in a sexually violent process. The strange-man's desire in the Gothic genre as a whole then can be read as a manufactured expectation which Moreno-Garcia dispels to highlight the sexual violence the genre masks with illusions of desire.

The patriarch's intentions to convert Noemí into a Doyle, however, is not just met by resistance from Noemí but also the Doyle women of the past. As a space where the characters are able to access memories, thoughts, and dreams, the gloom not only provides the Doyles access to Noemí's dreams but also provides a space for the dead Doyle women to give Noemí information. Their stories are buried by the Doyles' refusal to acknowledge the family history and instead maintain a status-quo of reproduction; however, Ruth (Virgil's older sister who was ordered to suicide by Howard) and Agnes Doyle's (Howard's first wife) memories continue to resist Howard's control by retelling their history. When Virgil or Howard tries to rape Noemí, Ruth's voice enters the dream, telling her to "Open your eyes."²⁷ While showing Noemí a version of how she murdered her family, Ruth tells Noemí, "I'm not sorry."²⁸ In both instances, Ruth changes the narrative of the Doyle men, actively disrupting the dreams and confessing to the murders the Doyles' pretend did not happen. Agnes's presence, on the other hand, is a bit more abstract. She appears as a golden woman who either has no mouth or opens a mouth-like crevice in her face to scream a sound like buzzing. Outside of her screaming, she does not speak. Agnes's silence reveals that Howard's attempts to silence Noemí are part of a larger cycle of reproductive violence that has yet to fail for the patriarch. Agnes acts as a reminder that Noemí is not the only one trapped in the house. In fact, both Agnes and Ruth are reminiscent of the tezontle stone that builds Mexico City; they carry and represent memories left unspoken by the Doyle family. As the rest of the house and family members fall to decay, these two women stay standing and persevere in the gloom despite Howard's control.

²⁷ Moreno-Garcia, 81, 183.

²⁸ Moreno-Garcia, 117.

As Ruth and Agnes expose the violence against themselves and others, they reveal that Howard's attempts to control the women in his household have failed. Both Ruth and Agnes were forced into marriages they did not want. Agnes is sacrificed by Howard's hand, and Ruth chooses to murder her family and kill herself rather than be subjected to the same cycle of reproductive violence. In committing sexual and reproductive violence against these two women, Howard's intention was to subjugate, silence, and control them. Milillo writes that the consequence of rape is a cycle of psychological harm which forces women to protect themselves. One such act of self-protection is silence as they fear becoming a victim again.²⁹ Howard's power manifests in who he is able to silence, a tactic he immediately executes against Noemí in his first scene with her. Yet Agnes, Ruth, Catalina, and Noemí all resisted these attempts and rebelled by continuing to speak up. They unveil the violence they endured and warn Noemí when danger approaches, breaking the cycle before Noemí is assimilated into Howard's scheme for eternal life.

3. Burning Liberation: Freeing the Madwoman

Howard, in deciding to set new roots for his family and his own eternal life, begins in the cemetery. The mushrooms are planted in the family tomb, new life begun in a place of death. This new life, however, is not just based on the death of ancestors but also on sacrifice. Agnes Doyle's mummified corpse still stands behind an altar in the tomb. Howard buried her alive with a shroud of mushrooms, condemning her to be an eternal conduit for the gloom, the mind that maintains the generations of memories. By the time Noemí comes into the tomb, the mushrooms, gloom, and Agnes are inseparable as the mind-space through which Howard enacts his violence. Yet, even when Agnes and the gloom are tools for violence, Howard still harms Agnes and the mushrooms, bastardizing their potential and entrapping them to their own forms of suffering. By looking at Agnes and the mushrooms together, we can begin to see how they embody larger questions of freedom, recovery, and the ability to reclaim oneself after violence.

Moreno-Garcia's conclusion to *Mexican Gothic* contains a vital homage to Bertha Mason: the burning of the estate. When Bertha Mason burns down Thornfield, she starts by lighting her curtains and Jane Eyre's bed on fire.³⁰ By starting with her curtains, Bertha moves to first eliminate her prison: the attic to which Rochester confined her. Gilbert and Gubar equate fire, metaphorical and physical, with "rebellion against society." Lighting a bed symbolic of marriage aflame is perhaps one of the greatest rebellions a woman could make, especially when even now marriage is perceived as the primary milestone for a woman. *Mexican Gothic* also reaches its resolution when Noemí lights the mushrooms and Agnes on fire. Noemí from the beginning is characterized through fire. Her most visible vice is her smoking, and she finds solace in flicking her lighter on and off, despite reminders of the rule against smoking. It's foreshadowed early on that fire is a weakness to the household, yet its importance doesn't come to fruition until the protagonists attempt to escape. While Virgil manipulates the gloom to force Francis to submit, Noemí becomes entranced with Agnes's corpse:

²⁹ Milillo, "Rape as a Tactic of War."

³⁰ Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, Reprint edition (London: Penguin Classics, 2006), 492.

“Sleepwalker,” [Noemí] whispered. “Time to open your eyes.”

She tossed the lamp against the corpse’s face. It instantly ignited the mushrooms around Agnes’s head, creating a halo of fire, and then tongues of fire began to spread quickly down the wall, the organic matter apparently as good as kindling, making the mushrooms blacken and pop.³¹

By calling Agnes the “Sleepwalker,” Noemí draws a parallel between the two women. Prior to this point, “Sleepwalker” was a reference to Noemí’s sleepwalking habits while dreaming in the gloom. Sleepwalking “straddles a border between sleep and wakefulness”³², but in *Mexican Gothic*, the border seems more akin to one between life and death. This is the border that Agnes sits on as a perpetual host for the gloom though deprived of her own, individual consciousness and ability to act, a state of decomposing. When Noemí tells her to “open your eyes,” Noemí urges Agnes to awake from the gloom, allowing her death’s release. Thus, Noemí throws the lamp at Agnes’s face, not at any other part of High Place. As Bertha is the double for Jane, Noemí here acts as the double for Agnes and the other women of the novel. She enacts Agnes’s desire to be free of the gloom, Ruth’s desire to end the horrors of High Place, and Catalina and her own desire to escape the Doyles. High Place’s incineration is not Noemí’s goal but rather a consequence of Noemí liberating the women trapped in the house.

With the women liberated and High Place turned to ash, one question remains: Does the mycelium survive? Noemí makes out the mushroom to be a highly flammable “kindling” in describing how quickly everything catches fire, but in the final chapter, Francis recounts a dream of the house coming back in all its grandeur, before Howard’s negligence. Francis questions if the mushroom lives on in his blood, or if even the mushroom may have somehow survived the fire. The real problem is that the mushroom’s survival is not just in the physical form but in all the mushroom’s forms. Noemí even has to run through a list of its forms to assure herself that the mushroom no longer lives, but even she cannot guarantee the end of all its forms.³³ In reality, of all the forms of the mushrooms, two forms (Agnes’s body and High Place’s estate) are the only two guaranteed to be extinct because they only existed in one place. The mushroom’s propagation outside High Place and beyond even the original tribe which cultivated it cannot be known and what it really means for the mushroom to exist in the Doyle bloodline is vague as much as it is concerning.

The mushroom fits the category of being a monster, but we cannot ignore the fact that the mushroom was a tool that was abused. The mushroom’s lack of a definite end aligns with monstrous behavior. According to Jeffrey Jerome Cohen’s “Monster Culture (Seven Thesis),” a defining characteristic of the monster is the fact that it always escapes.³⁴ Cultures perpetuate fear so that even if dead, the monster returns to fight another fight. The mushroom is an object of fear, as seen with Francis’s anxieties over carrying it into the future, allowing the mushroom

³¹ Moreno-Garcia, *Mexican Gothic*, 290.

³² “Sleepwalking: What Is Somnambulism?,” Sleep Foundation, November 18, 2020, <https://www.sleepfoundation.org/parasomnias/sleepwalking>.

³³ Moreno-Garcia, *Mexican Gothic*, 299.

³⁴ Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, “Monster Culture (Seven Thesis)” in “The Monster Theory Reader: Weinstock, Jeffrey Andrew,” 38, accessed March 23, 2022.

and gloom to survive if not physically at least mentally. We contextualize the mushroom as a monster because of its known atrocities at the hands of the Doyles, but in the hands of the indigenous tribe in the dream, it was seen as a deity for its healing capabilities. The mushroom is able to enact both unforgivable evil as well as unimaginable good, but its use is dependent on those who wield it. Francis fears that the mushroom may live on, but some would argue that if it did, perhaps Noemí who has lived through the mushroom's violence and carried indigenous blood would be able to reclaim it for the better. I'm more inclined to lean into Francis and Noemí's anxieties. The mushroom in its current state is now a colonized artifact, a corrupted organism that bears the reputation given to it by the colonizer's exploitation. You cannot make a vampire human again, and I wonder if the mushroom has been drained to the point of undeath or is simply in need of a recovery period. I don't intend to answer this — and the text certainly doesn't give a clear answer — but I am skeptical that something so thoroughly manipulated can find new life. Perhaps it's better if the mushroom remains dead and undisturbed, or at least dead enough that we think it truly so.

Just as we question whether the mushroom can be salvaged, we must also question if the Gothic genre can be as well. The mushroom's symbolism is parallel to the Gothic genre and reading the ambiguity of the mushroom's end allows us to also understand how we read the Gothic and its opportunities or limitations. "What if it's never gone," Francis says. "What if it's in me?"³⁵ This question does not just apply to the survival of the mushroom, but to the genre itself. Liberation for all the madwomen in this text came through exposing the violence lying under the layers of decomposing colonialism, but is exposing the violence enough?

Conclusion: "What if it's in Me?"

As the mushrooms are parallel to the Gothic genre, we must recognize the genre, too, as a tool that has enacted innumerable cases of violence against women and people of color in the European context. Through its Latina address of the Gothic, *Mexican Gothic* has utilized decay to decompose the structures of power which aimed to hide the violence it enacted against marginalized bodies. In the process, this paper has revealed that the genre itself is a mode of such violence and despite its attempts to reclaim the genre and recenter those previously excluded and victimized, the violence of the past seems to still carry forward a particular draw that's inevitable for contemporary authors to follow.

Challenging a genre is not so simple as burning everything down, and Francis's question of whether or not the mushroom — and its violence — lives on in him is still pertinent to understanding the Gothic's path forward. The Gothic as a Eurocentric genre is still very much in *Mexican Gothic*. It's in its very title. The tropes that Moreno-Garcia attempted to expose and subvert in her novel carry forward their original existence, and in execution still leave some tensions that neither the book nor this paper can answer. One such example is through Francis himself. The synopsis on the back of the book categorizes him as the same "dangerous-exciting" love interest who existed in the genre beforehand and was excused from all their criminal actions: "Noemí's only ally in this inhospitable place is the family's youngest son. But he too

³⁵ Moreno-Garcia, *Mexican Gothic*, 299.

may be hiding a dark secret.”³⁶ As her “only ally,” Francis is coded as the love interest, but the “dark secret” is not just an enticing personal mystery but also the very thing that marks Francis as complicit in the Doyle’s colonial practices. Francis is not only the romantic partner Noemí chose in the end, but the romantic partner the Doyles had chosen for her in the first place. She is forced into a marriage with Francis before she ever gets to her closing line, “and the third time she kissed him it was for love.”³⁷ This “love” is an add-on to the plot but is still the closing image we get in the entire story. Even after exposing the violence of the strange-man, we still have a moment akin to Jane Eyre’s “Reader, I married him.” Francis’s complacency in the crimes is excused, and he is assumed to live happily ever after with Noemí. When High Place goes up in flames, Francis survives, and so does the allure of the strange-man and the Gothic marriage plot.

Although Moreno-Garcia attempts to decay the Gothic and the lasting colonialism that exists in Mexico, we still have to reckon with the stones that remain above ground and unable to decompose. As the characters enter their mostly happy endings, we cannot forget that they are still traumatized by the events in the book and carry with them nightmares of mushrooms and fears of returning to the decomposing cage of High Place. The mushrooms are forever shaped by the violence they caused for Francis, Catalina, and Noemí, regardless of the potential they may have in the ashes of Howard's reign. Likewise, because the genre will still be haunted by the violence of its origins, its ability to be fully reclaimed by women of color will be limited. The Gothic tropes are now clichés that permeate contemporary horror culture. So long as the cliché is the default expectation, the genre will not provide a space for women of color to completely reimagine. The scaffolding of the Gothic remains as broken foundational stones, decomposed as it is, and until a writer is able to fully break from the tropes, the threat of the mushrooms blooming again will remain an all too real concern.

³⁶ Moreno-Garcia, *Mexican Gothic*.

³⁷ Moreno-Garcia, 301.

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