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# Buried in the Earth: The Mestizo and the Colonizer in Silvia Moreno-Garcia’s *Mexican Gothic*

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Underneath our feet, buried deep down in the earth, is the legacy of colonization. The blood that has been spilt over centuries has been absorbed into the soil and baked into our culture. The bodies of every native American who were forced to work as slaves, or systematically murdered by European colonizers are right beneath us, and most of the time, we are deaf to their perpetual screams.

It is no secret that Mexico is an area of the Americas that has been the victim of violence and conquest for much of its existence. Hundreds of years ago, and even today, Spanish and English colonizers raided and exploited the natives for their labor and their country’s natural resources. As a result of this coloni-

zation, many European and Spanish colonizers mixed with the Indigenous population of Mexico. This ethnic and racial mixing produced what many ethnographers and anthropologists dubbed the “mestizo”. Ultimately, the mestizo label became yet another way for European colonizers to separate themselves from those of “mixed” race and uphold the racial power structure.

During the seventeenth century, the mestizo population could no longer be ignored by the colonial elite. They had been pushed to the margins of society, much like every sector of the population that could not be considered white. But the colonial powers still needed the mestizo in order to have a functioning economy. As John Chance explains, in his article “On the Mexican Mestizo”, “By now too numerous to ignore and too necessary to the city’s economic functions to be excluded, the mestizos were incorporated into the system and conceptually ranked between the whites and the urban Indian proletariat” (159). The European powers could no longer ignore the massive mestizo population, so they did what colonizers do, they gave them an official spot on their racial hierarchy. Not being considered “black” like the pure Indigenous population, the mestizo people were afforded a status between the two. This allowed the mestizo population marginal social mobility, but they still had to deal with discrimination on a regular basis.

In the novel, *Mexican Gothic*, by Silvia Moreno-Garcia (2020), we are presented with a fresh take on the postcolonial horror story from the mestizo point of view. Set in 1950’s Mexico City and the surrounding countryside, the protagonist, a 20-something-year-old master’s student and socialite from Mexico City named Noemi, receives a letter from her recently mar-

ried cousin. In this letter, Noemi’s cousin, Catalina, begs for her to visit the remote mansion of her new husband’s family to rescue her from them. Catalina is accusing her new husband, Virgil Doyle, of poisoning her. Naturally this alarms Noemi, who rushes to the mansion to rescue her cousin or at least find out what’s going on.

Noemi’s cousin, Catalina, has married into an English family, the Doyles, who made their riches mining for silver in Mexico. Their creepy, sprawling mansion just happens to be built right above a mine that all of their Mexican workers tragically died in many years prior. Noemi is immediately unwelcome due to her mestizo heritage, and what the Doyles consider “nosey” behavior. Throughout the entire novel, we are treated to a claustrophobic study of what, even fading, colonial power is capable of doing to the Indigenous people in the places they colonize. As Noemi’s and Catalina’s situation worsens, we can see clearly that their physical and mental deterioration is a direct result of the insidious hold that colonial powers can still wield over the colonized, and how Noemi and Catalina, as people of mestizo background, find a way to disrupt this power and take some of it for their own.

Throughout her novel, Moreno-Garcia takes the common gothic trope, conflict with the “other”, (generally a darker foreigner), and flips it. In *Mexican Gothic*, the people we’re supposed to fear are the white people. Moreno-Garcia explains in an interview with VOX, “So you find that going on in gothic fiction. The other, the person who is not an Anglo-Saxon Protestant, upstanding, male, white person, is always a source of anxiety in many ways for people. Even if they’re not the outright villain, they’re still a source of

anxiety in some way” (Grady). Virgil and the rest of the Doyle family would traditionally be considered the Protestant, upstanding, white people, but instead they are the source of anxiety. The Doyles are the “other” here; a source of anxiety for both Noemi and Catalina, who are fighting to find a voice and agency in their own country.

Through the characters of Noemi and Catalina, Moreno-Garcia is also criticizing the gothic genre’s tendency to treat its women of color as props or supporting characters. In her essay “The Gothic in Cristina Garcia’s ‘The Aguero Sisters’”, Tanya Gonzalez writes, “these ethnic-racialized subjects are not allowed complexity; they are pinned down by the stereotypes and labels associated with their groups” (120). Garcia is drawing attention to the way that people such as Noemi and Catalina are usually treated in the gothic genre. In *Mexican Gothic*, the two women are far from background characters pinned down by stereotypes. In fact, they end up challenging and destroying the very system that is attempting to pin them down.

The Doyles have committed some of the same atrocities that many colonizers have committed on the colonized for generations. Their house and mine happen to be built on a mass grave of native Mexican workers. Marta Duval, the local healer, tells Noemi their story:

The locals, their families took them to the cemetery in town. But there were many people without kin working the mines. When someone didn’t have family in town, they buried them in the English cemetery. The Mexicans didn’t get a headstone, though, not even a cross, which I guess is why people talked about mass graves.

A hole in the ground with no wreath nor proper service might as well be a mass grave. (Moreno-Garcia 127)

When their Mexican workers died, the Doyles did not even bother to give them a proper burial, unlike their English workers, who got your standard headstone and all of the eternal recognition that goes along with it. This type of burial is not one that you would give to a person whom you thought of as equal, or even thought of as a person for that matter. It is clear that the Doyles thought of their workers as disposable resources to plunder.

When Noemi sits down to dinner with her cousin’s new family for the first time, she is confronted by their obsession with race and eugenics. Howard Doyle, the family patriarch, uses his position of power to immediately make Noemi feel uncomfortable and aware of her race. Howard wastes no time in saying, “You are much darker than your cousin, Miss Taboada ... Both your coloration and your hair. They are much darker than Catalina’s. I imagine they reflect your Indian heritage rather than the French. You have some Indian in you, no? Like most of the mestizos here do” (Moreno-Garcia 29). Howard Doyle has literally just met Noemi about fifteen minutes ago, yet he is already using his position as the rich, white, family patriarch to remind Noemi that she is different. He goes out of his way to point out Noemi’s mestizo heritage and highlight his own power within the colonial racial hierarchy. Noemi does not allow this old man to gain the upper hand. Instead, she uses her wits and intelligence to turn Howard’s rhetoric against him when she explains, “I once read a paper by Gamino in which he said that harsh natural selection has allowed the Indig-

enous 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?” (Moreno-Garcia 30). Noemi uses evidence from her own academic research to supply a counterargument to Howard’s racist diatribe. By countering him in this way, Noemi is positioning herself in a place of intellectual power over Howard Doyle, and he does not even fully realize it.

Howard Doyle’s initial reaction to Noemi’s darker complexion compared to her cousin’s illuminates how the colonizers in general saw the mestizo in “their” society. Rafael Perez-Torres explains this process in his article, “Chicano Ethnicity, Cultural Hybridity, and the Mestizo Voice”:

The mestizo ‘species’ is acceptable only insofar as it fits within an overarching authoritative discourse, in this case that of benign pluralism and liberal democracy. Yet the difference in the mestizo body, that which is devalued and undesirable, is simultaneously maintained and erased in a double movement of acceptance and repugnance. (161)

As Torres explains, the mestizo is considered almost as a separate “species” that only fits into their discourse when concerned with cultural pluralism or democracy but is not considered as a desirable trait for individual human beings. The Doyles accept Noemi as something exotic and physically desirable but are still repulsed by her heritage. This will lead them to desire Noemi as their own, but not as a fellow family member, instead as property.

The concept of the mestizo has often been vague and difficult to define. More recently the term

has begun to represent Mexican nationalism as people come to cherish their mestizo heritage. Chance explains this when he states, “Yet it is obviously impossible to dismiss the concept of the mestizo altogether, for it has played an important part in the rise of Mexican nationalism, and the term itself appears frequently in historical documents, particularly those of the colonial period” (154). As a holdover from the colonial period, the term mestizo has been taken back from the colonizer and used to empower the Mexican people who identify as such. Noemi automatically being labeled this way by Howard Doyle is also signaling that Mexican pride, which will make Noemi a force for the Doyles to reckon with.

Virgil Doyle also holds similar racist beliefs as his father. During an exchange with Noemi about eugenics, Virgil makes his disgusting beliefs clear. When Noemi challenges him on those beliefs he states, “I have seen the world, and in seeing it I’ve noticed people seem bound to their vices. Take a walk around any tenement and you’ll recognize the same sort of faces, and the same sort of people. You can’t remove whatever taint they carry with hygiene campaigns. There are fit and unfit people” (Moreno-Garcia 89). The way that Virgil speaks of poor people supports his perceived superiority. He even refers to them as carrying a permanent taint. This family’s clear racist and classist beliefs reflect how European colonizers as a whole thought of the native people in the lands that they colonized.

Noemi’s cousin, Catalina, has already fallen victim to the Doyle’s brand of colonization. Just like they plundered the town of its natural and human resources, the process has already begun on Catalina. At one-point Noemi muses:

It felt like everyone who visited High Place had been stuck in time, but then she imagined in such a small town there would be little need to update one’s wardrobe. Virgil’s clothing, however, seemed fashionable. Either he had bought himself a new wardrobe the last time he’d been in Mexico City, or he considered himself exceptional and his clothes worthy of more expense. Perhaps it was his wife’s money that allowed a certain lavishness. (Moreno-Garcia 51)

Virgil has taken a native Mexican woman and brought her back to his slice of England (they literally brought English soil with them) in Mexico. Now that he has imprisoned her, he uses her own personal resources for his gain. Not once does Virgil seem to consider Catalina as a human being and he, and the rest of the Doyles, continue to exploit Catalina to the detriment of her own physical and mental health.

Marriage and female imprisonment have been an element of Gothic literature for some time. In *Mexican Gothic*, Moreno-Garcia leaves that to Catalina and Noemi. As Sylvia Lopez explains in her essay, ‘The Gothic Tradition in Galdós’s La Sombra’, “resembles the passive victimized wife in Gothic texts, who, oppressed by social institutions and familial demands, leaves her parents’ home only to discover that her new residence is a domestic prison” (510). Both Noemi and Catalina are attempting to find their own ways out of an oppressive and patriarchal Mexican society (women couldn’t even vote yet), but what they find is an even more oppressive distillation of the society that they attempted to leave behind. The cousins will swiftly figure out how to navigate this environment, and how to exploit its weaknesses.

Moreno-Garcia is also doing much to subvert the woman in peril narrative. From the beginning, both Noemi and Catalina recognize the situation they are in and make plans to take action, as opposed to being oblivious of any danger and then falling headlong into horror. Critic Sarah Whitney has this to say about the ubiquity of the narrative:

The popularity of the woman in peril narrative remains strong as evidenced by its repeated iteration in popular culture... What has happened, then, is a rhetorical shift in the heroine’s presentation; she is now less a victim than a survivor... While the term ‘survivor’ has a long history..., its current vogue in post feminism also signals the profound cultural influence of therapeutic discourses. These discourses map a narrative in which a traumatized subject moves from psychological fragmentation to health. The act of naming oneself a survivor symbolically places the subject’s trauma in the past and denies the event the ability to define her. (355)

Moreno-Garcia’s novel is not about “healing” or being a “survivor”. When Noemi and Catalina use their agency, it is simply because they have to. They have both grown up in a colonial society that looks down on them for their mestizo heritage. They have always fought and will continue to fight no matter the situation. Their story is not one of fighting trauma and healing, but one of constantly having to fight due to your race and heritage.

Noemi not only fights against her human colonizers throughout this work, she also must fight against a natural colonizing force: the mushroom. The Doyles are obsessed with mushrooms. In fact, the mushroom

is used heavily throughout the novel as the symbol of the colonizer. At one point, Noemi is discussing mushrooms with Virgil’s younger brother, Francis. Noemi is put off eating the mushrooms because they are a fungus that grows over dead things to which Francis promptly counters with the fact that they’re delicious but, “Mushrooms always grow over dead things in a way” (Moreno-Garcia 98). Francis is comfortable with the fact that mushrooms take over dying organisms but neglects the fact that mushrooms can often be the cause of the organism’s death anyway. This line of thinking reflects the nature of the colonizer. They often justify colonizing others by bringing life to a “dead” or “savage” culture, but just like mushrooms, they do not revitalize but destroy the land they are colonizing.

Mushrooms thrive by exploiting other beings, taking them over and infiltrating the very fabric of their being. Silvia Moreno-Garcia has this to say about mushrooms in that same VOX interview, “The way it does that is there’s a mycelium colony that colonizes all the trees and all the plants and is allowing different species to communicate with each other. It has that central node, the hub tree, the mother tree.” Moreno-Garcia refers to mushrooms as colonizers here, while also giving us the framework to think of English colonizers as a fungus. One that takes over and influences a body, all from one central place of power.

The Doyles are not only a metaphorical fungus that has exploited the land that they settled on, they are also literally in a symbiotic relationship with a fungus. They refer to this fungus as “the gloom”, and it runs throughout the house: in the walls, under the floorboards, and eventually, in the blood of the house’s inhabitants. The gloom has the ability to hold on to



the consciousness of the people it comes into contact with almost storing their memories in an organic hard drive. At one point Francis attempts to explain how this works to a decidedly confused Noemi:

I've told you about the gloom. I haven't told you about the bloodline. We're special. The fungus bonds with us, it's not noxious. It can even make us immortal. Howard has lived many lives, in many different bodies. He transfers his consciousness to the gloom and then from the gloom he can live again, in the body of one of his children. (Moreno-Garcia 212-13)

Howard Doyle has essentially been able to stay alive for a century or two, by uploading his consciousness to the gloom and then depositing himself into the body of one of his lucky kids. This allows the original colonizer to continue his legacy through generations by literally being immortal. This plot device also mimics how the legacy of colonialism can be passed down through generations.

Noemi discovers that the gloom's central hub is actually the body of Howard's first wife Agnes, and it grows from her body, out of the family crypt, and all through the house. Noemi realizes that Agnes's consciousness has been trapped by the gloom for a very long time. Noemi decides to take action:

She tossed the lamp against the corpse's (Agnes's) face. It instantly ignited the mushrooms around Agnes's head, creating a halo of fire... Virgil screamed... Agnes was the gloom and the gloom was part of them, and this sudden damage to Agnes, to the web of mushrooms, must be like neurons igniting. Noemi for her part felt jolted into complete awareness, the

gloom shoving her away. (Moreno-Garcia 290)

Noemi uses the fire to cleanse not only Agnes of the gloom, and ultimately her imprisonment, but also to once and for all cleanse this part of Mexico from the remnants of a colonizing force. Fire is often one of the weapons used against oppression, and it is fitting that someone of mestizo heritage has rid this town of the English colonizer.

Noemi's and Catalina's battle with the gloom, is, in and of itself, thoroughly gothic, which further cements this novel's place in the genre. As Rubenstein writes in her article on the subject, "Gothic narratives pivot upon anxieties about self-hood and entrapment, represented through bizarre or exaggerated events that may or may not be explained as manifestations of the typically female central character's imagination" (311). Generally, in a lot of gothic fiction, the female protagonist and the reader are left wondering whether or not everything happened in the woman's imagination. Moreno-Garcia subverts this trope by making Noemi's and Catalina's experience very real. By choosing this direction, Moreno-Garcia makes every accusation of insanity or illness from the Doyle men even more insidious. By knowing full-well that the men are attempting to gaslight them, they gain the upper hand and the power to prevail.

Noemi and Catalina were not merely victims in this story, and they did far more than just survive. They continued to be themselves and fight, instead of becoming subservient to the will of the colonizer and assimilate into the Doyle family. Noemi used her pride and knowledge of her own cultural history to take away the Doyle's power to marginalize her and Catalina. In doing so, they shed many of the common tropes that

follow female characters in gothic literature. Through denying these stereotypes, Noemi and Catalina not only escaped and survived the colonizing force, they utterly destroyed it.

Noemi and Catalina fully display the ability of mestizos and others of mixed race to infiltrate and dismantle the traditional systems set up by their oppressors. Rafael Perez-Torres concludes her own paper with this rumination, "It (the mestizo) is not simply suspended between two worlds to which it does not belong and into which it cannot dissolve. It moves between those worlds. Chicano culture as a form of mestizaje does not mark a paradigmatic quest for self-definition: it enacts that self-definition in multiple ways" (172). The mestizo people are not "stuck" between two worlds as they and many others of mixed race are often depicted; they move between the two. Once recognized, this mobility gives them the ability to infiltrate areas where the colonizer still holds power and ultimately, destroy those systems, with fire if necessary.

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**Matthew Cutter** is pursuing his master's in English at Bridgewater State University and currently teaches at Abington High School in Abington, Massachusetts. This paper was completed in the fall 2020 under the mentorship of Dr. Kimberly Davis. Matt plans to continue studying English until he is tired of it, whatever the end may be.